

Considering Becoming a Foster Parent? Frequently Asked Questions

What is foster care?

Foster care is a temporary safe haven for children who are at serious risk of harm. When possible, the Department of Children and Family Services and other agencies work with families to reunite them. When that simply is not possible, DCFS works to find children a permanent, loving home through adoption or guardianship.

What kinds of children need foster homes the most?

Every child is special, and all children have special needs in addition to the need to feel safe, secure and loved. DCFS is always in need of foster families to meet the needs of:

- Babies born with the HIV (AIDS) virus or with cocaine in their system
- Latino children
- Children with special medical needs
- Brothers and sisters who need to stay together
- Teenage mothers and their babies
- Adolescents
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth
- African-American infants

How will a child be matched with my family?

You can express a preference on the age, race, and sex of the child that you think would best match your family circumstances, skills and priorities. Agencies do their best to find placements for children that are a good fit for both the child and the foster family. However, it is important to be willing to get to know a child as an individual and to keep an open mind about the parenting you can do.

How many foster children can we welcome into our home?

That depends on factors such as your ability, your enthusiasm, how many biological children you have, and how much room you have in your home. The maximum number, including biological children, is set out by DCFS licensing standards.

What kinds of issues do children in foster care need help overcoming?

All children that have experienced the trauma that comes from being separated from their family on top of the circumstances that brought them into care will have a variety of issues that they will need help with. Many are frightened and confused at the sudden separation from their parents. Some are angry. Others may think they are being sent to a foster home as punishment. Even babies may be extremely fretful and irritable at first. These problems gradually lessen, though, as a child comes to know that you care for him or her. Foster caregivers also receive training and get connected to services to help the children adjust and eventually thrive while in their home.

What kind of support will we receive?

Financial Assistance

Foster parents in "regular" foster care programs receive a monthly check to cover the child's food, clothing and personal allowance. The amount of the check is based on the child's age.

Medical Care

Each foster child gets a medical card from the state which guarantees payment for all necessary medical care and preventive medicine. You will be given a number to call to get help in selecting a physician for a child placed with you. The medical card is also accepted by many hospitals and for approved prescriptions. You should not pay any medical bill directly.

Education Services

Foster children go to regular public schools, unless they need special education, for which the state can pay. Private or parochial school tuition cannot be paid by the State. Foster children may attend private or parochial schools, but only if the tuition is paid by some other source.

Personal Support

Your supervising child welfare agency and your child's caseworker are responsible for supporting your family on a daily basis. Each agency, including DCFS, has developed internal supports, which include foster parent support groups, newsletters, after hours telephone numbers, and community resources.

Support from DCFS

The Department of Children and Family Services provides overall support to licensed private child welfare agencies with foster care programs, while maintaining its own foster care program. DCFS also directly provides universal foster care information and impartial advocacy for all foster families statewide.

Are there different types of foster care or foster parents?

Foster parenting typically begins with children who have the legal goal to be reunited with their birth parents or other family members as soon as possible as part of the juvenile court process. Foster care for reunification means the foster caregiver is involved in and willing to support visits and to work cooperatively with the caseworker and the parents toward a reunification goal. If the court determines that reunification is not the goal, foster families will be looked at to be a permanent family through adoption, or to create a life-long connection for an older youth whose goal is independence.

Sometimes abused or neglected children need more intense services and the foster family must possess additional skills to meet the individual needs of that child. DCFS has contracts with agencies for "specialized" or "treatment" foster care programs. Foster parents who either already have necessary skills, or are willing to be trained to meet the special needs of these foster children, may become part of a specialized program. These foster families also receive additional payments, resources and training than in what is considered "traditional" foster care programs.

How long does the licensing and training process take?

The licensing and training process takes from four to six months. After that process and your training are completed, you will be ready to accept children into your home. However, the actual timing depends on the specific children who come into care, their needs and the appropriate fit with your home.

How will our children react to children in foster care living with us?

If you've prepared them well for the coming of a new child and they understand the temporary nature of foster care, there should be few problems. It's not unusual for your children to be a bit jealous at first -- just as they might be jealous of a new baby in the family.

Do children in foster care need individual bedrooms?

No. A child in foster care can share a room with your children by birth or other children in the care of DCFS of the same sex. The child must have a bed of his or her own. A child in foster care may not share a bedroom with an adult. The caseworker or licensing representative can help determine whether a child has any specific needs that would impact the sleeping arrangements.

Can we take a child in foster care on vacation with us?

In most cases, yes. It is important to wrap children into the full family experience. But if it involves out-of-state travel, you must call your child's caseworker in advance for approval.

Can the children go to church with us?

Yes. Usually, you will have children placed with you whose religious background is similar to your own. But if a child is of a different faith, he or she must be allowed to attend worship in that faith. The child's parents still have the right grant their permission for religious involvement even while their children are in a foster home.

Do a child's birth parents visit him or her?

In most cases, yes. In fact, visits between parents and children are an essential part of the efforts to reunite families. Visits go a long way in helping the child work through the emotional trauma of being separated from his or her family. The child's caseworker has the primary responsibility for planning visits and arranging supervision, if required. The caseworker will talk with you and the child's parents to work out the time and location of the visits.

Can we ever adopt a child through foster care?

The first goal is to reunite children in foster care with their families when that is possible. However, if a child who has been in your home for some time becomes available for adoption, you can discuss your interest in adopting him or her with the caseworker. At that time, you will have to meet all of the regular requirements for becoming an adoptive parent. For information on adoption in general, call the Adoption Information Center of Illinois at 1-800-572-2390.

Won't it be hard on us when the child is reunited with his or her family or is adopted?

Yes. That is, in fact, the one of the hardest parts of being a foster parent, but it can also be rewarding to know that a child has a solid home. You will certainly feel sad for a time. It's only natural -- just as it's natural for the child to want a family of his own. Many caregivers stay connected to children after they are adopted or even after they become adults. It is important to remember that foster care is a way to build connections and positive experiences that will stay with a child no matter where he or she goes. This topic gets addressed in training to become licensed for foster care.