



### Preparing Kids In Your Home for Fostering

**N**ot only do parents make adjustments in their lives when a child in care enters their home, the children in the house are in for changes too... big changes! It doesn't matter if they are born or adopted into the family or are currently in foster care. Adjustments come easily for some—they move over at the table, know they will have to share your time and smile— while others are still processing the changes they had to make well into adulthood.

One Wisconsin dad, with humor and insight, tells a story about his 9-year-old son. On the evening that he and his wife were going to foster parenting classes, his son said. "Dad, so you and Mom are going to be gone all night and neglecting me all evening so that you can learn how to care for other kids you're going to bring into our house?"

This wise father knows that his son anticipates making some big changes and is probably fearing it. It's the savvy parent who knows that the whole family will be making changes.

On the other hand, some birth children take fostering and adopting for granted. They are in a position to appreciate what their parents are doing and feel part of it. They learn their new dances in the family circle.

One woman who grew up with biological, adopted and foster siblings says, "I think I lived in my own bubble all my life. The kids who came were almost all younger than me, so I didn't have to compete with them for anything, other than the bathroom. But that was just normal."

She goes on to say, "I was old enough to understand the basics of foster care, so the

comings and goings weren't a big deal either. Growing up in a foster home is what it is—it's hard to describe unless you have lived another way to compare it to something."

Both reactions are valid. Be open to any reactions your kids may have and have some tools ready to help the family expand.

*So you and Mom are going to be gone all night and neglecting me all evening so that you can learn how to care for other kids you're going to bring into our house?*

#### **Educating Your Family**

Long before the first child arrive in your home, prepare your family for the changes that will occur. Here are some suggestions from Wisconsin foster parents to help you.

*Discuss what you learn in foster care training* and discuss this decision to foster as soon as you can.

*Talk to your kids.* When a mom is pregnant, the parents tell their children to expect a sibling. People talk to them for months to prepare for the upcoming event. Do the same when preparing your family to foster.

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*Anticipate how you're going to answer some of the tough questions*, like, "Why can't she live with her real mom?" Or "Why does he do that?" When answering tough questions, it helps to talk in generalities by talking about why some kids are in care or why some kids might act out because of past trauma.

*Teach your kids about confidentiality* and remind them frequently about how they are expected to honor it. Tell them what they can and can't talk about and how to answer questions. Teach them to tell others, "That's not something I can share, but feel free to ask him directly."

*Show your kids how to be empathetic.* The child coming in has just been through a huge change and he or she is probably having a hard time with a lot of things. Talk about how this new household member needs some time to adjust.

Suggest that they put themselves in his or her shoes. Most kids can understand how challenging it would be to adjust to a whole new family, school, foods, friends, teachers, and neighbors all at once.

*Remind your children that they can be good teachers* for the new kids in their home. Remind them that their behavior can strongly influence the new children in the home.

*Consider making Welcome Home Books and Life Books* for the children who come into your care and enlist the help of your *whole* family. Read our tipsheet about Welcome Home Books at: <http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/964/welcomehome.pdf>, and the one about *Life Books* at: <http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/650/lifebooks-parents.pdf>.

*Be realistic with your children about sharing your time and energy with other children.* Acknowledge that this new child may require more than might seem to be his or her fair portion of attention. Remind them how much you love them, and let them know how special they are for being part of a family that cares about people.

*Learn a little about the history of orphans and children whose parents have not been able to care for them.* Some movies and books to look into include: The Orphan Trains, Evelyn, The Martian Child, Antoine Fischer, Annie, Lilo & Stitch, The Blind Side, Meet the Robinsons, Hotel for Stray Dogs, Anne of Green Gables and The Lost Boy and many more.

*Prepare your family for the inevitability of children leaving your home.* Talk about it and let them grieve in their own ways. Some may not seem touched by the change and another child might feel the separation and loss deeply. Read *A Brother's Point of View* in Chapter 5 of the Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook (<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/513/chapter5.pdf>).

### **Stress and Support**

If you find yourself or your children having a hard time with fostering, talk to your workers.

You can also find tremendous support from other foster parents. Contact the Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parents Association at <http://wfapa.org>. Other foster parents are often an invaluable resource—they listen to your concerns, offer tremendous support, and they may have ideas to help your family adjust.

It's likely you will be part of family therapy with the child in care. The therapist may also have some ideas to help with your family, marriage

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and other relationships. Sometimes, periodic check-ins with therapists can help prevent crises in foster care and families.

Your children might also be involved in some of the sessions with one of the children in care—especially if there’s some kind of ongoing conflict. Honor their feelings and step back to look at the whole scene, even when you may want to judge a child’s reactions.

### Safety

Tell *all* of the children in your home that they can come to you any time if they don’t feel safe—for whatever reason. Make that a primary household rule and repeat it often.

Children who have been traumatized may have experienced sexual or physical violence may act out. You must teach all the children to say “no” and tell you if something happens.

### Adjusting

Make household tasks and jobs part of the new routine of the child who comes into your family, and do so in the first weeks. The new child may have to learn how dishes are washed in your home but that should start soon after they come.

Children learn to adjust to changes in a family, and fostering *does* change the family dynamics. As your children navigate the waters of fostering with you, they learn a tremendous amount about the world and how to live when they become adults.

As a parent who opens their arms to embrace children needing the fundamental love and care required by fostering, you are teaching your children the truest kindness of the human heart. Teach them well.



### FCARC Resources

***A Voice From Within, Growing Up As a Birth Child in a Foster and Adoptive Home***

<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/949/voicefromwithin.pdf>

***Brothers and Sisters in Adoption, Helping Children Navigate Relationships When New Kids Join the Family.*** James, Arleta M..

Perspective Press, Inc. 2009

<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/viewmaterial.asp?aid=5598>

Orphan Train, Kay, Verla. Illustrations by Ken Stark. G.P. Putman’s Sons.

<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/viewmaterial.asp?aid=4525>

***WI Foster Care and Adoption Handbook,***

<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/snnav/284/page.htm>

### Other Resources

***American Experience: The Orphan Trains*** DVD from National Public Television.

<http://www.shoppbs.org>

***Preparing Your Children for Foster Care or Adoption*** By Carrie Craft

<http://adoption.about.com/od/parenting/a/introducechild.htm>

For a list of books and movies about foster care and adoption, go to:

<http://www.amazon.com/foster-care-adoption-books-movies/lm/R3AOIKFBRDIU5A>