



Finding the Right Fit: Contemplating a Change in Foster Care Agencies

As foster parents from county or private agencies, you may face day-to-day frustrations with an agency or worker, which prompt some to consider a change to a different licensing agency.

Maybe you've heard some of the following:

- *"The agency has a different philosophy about working with parents of kids in our care."*
- *"Our social worker keeps placing teens with us and we tell him that we can't handle them!"*
- *"We don't hear back from our worker or other agency staff."*
- *"We were not prepared or trained to deal with the child placed in our home."*
- *"As foster parents, we don't feel a part of the child's team."*

These issues can prompt foster families to be frustrated with their current licensing agency and consider changing agencies.

Some Key Questions to Consider

Questions that you might want to discuss include:

- Will a new foster care agency be a better fit for your parenting philosophy?
- Will a new agency offer more education?
- Will a new agency provide additional resources?
- How will you be better equipped to provide

the necessary support for the children in your care through a different agency?

- If you are experiencing communication issues or concerns, will those concerns carry over to a new foster care agency?
- Is fostering a good fit for your family? Also see the FCARC tipsheet *Is Fostering a Good Fit For You?* at:

<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/library/679/fcprep.pdf>

Challenge yourself to see both sides of the issue.

What Are Your Options?

Before making a final decision to leave an agency, whether it is a county, state, tribal, or a private child placing agency, schedule a meeting with

your worker and her supervisor and have an honest discussion about any issues you have.

Prepare for the meeting ahead of time by writing down your comments. Be willing to ask open-ended questions and listen to the responses. Sometimes people are more receptive if you also offer potential solutions. Keep an open mind—sometimes we (as parents and workers) all miss solutions because we are unwilling to listen or compromise. Sometimes we're too focused on being "right."

Consider asking your worker if a (neutral) family in the agency can be with you when you have your meeting to go over concerns. Another

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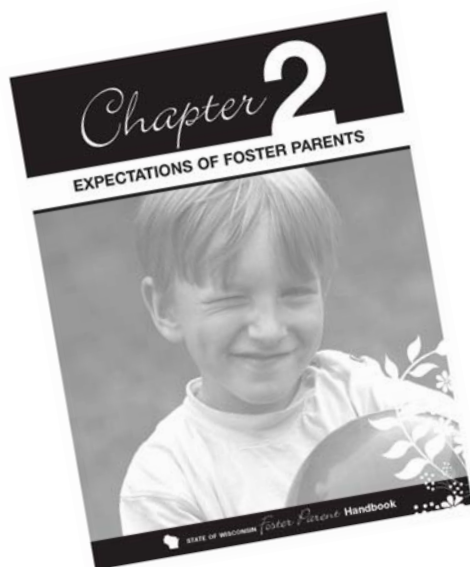
foster family may have ideas that you and the agency staff haven't yet considered. Occasionally agencies have even brought in a neutral expert to help with disagreements.

Expectations

Whether you are a new or experienced foster parent, you might not see eye-to-eye with the licensing agency about expectations—both what you as foster parents expect of the agency and what an agency may expect of you. As a result, the relationship may become strained and you may feel as if you are not working as part of a team.

Consider looking at the expectations you have of the agency as they relate to your support, communication, education, and reimbursement. Are you and the agency a good fit for each other? Do you share common goals and ideals for the children in your care?

Look at the official agency policies to determine the roles and expectations of foster parents, the social worker and agency. These are often found in the licensing agency foster parent handbook or policy guide.



You can review the Wisconsin guidelines for expectations of foster parents and other team members in the *Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook*, Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 at:

<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/snnav/284/page.htm> or ask your worker for a copy.

After reviewing these, do you have a good understanding of everyone's role? Will other licensing agencies have the same requirements and expectations?

Pros and Cons

Consider making a list of pros and cons about changing agencies. How do you and your current agency work together? What do you like and appreciate about your relationship with the current licensing agency? What can you and the agency improve?

Be detailed and challenge yourself to see both sides of the issue. Five areas to consider when making a list are: philosophy, potential children in care, support, communication and rights.

Agency Philosophy

Determine the mission, vision values of the agency. View agency websites, brochures or have a discussion with agency worker, supervisor or director.

- What is their purpose and goal in providing foster care? How has the agency and staff demonstrated their mission and goals?
- What is the professional and ethical reputation of the agency? Check with State licensing regulators to determine licensing violations, their seriousness and outcome.

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- Is the agency affiliated with other organizations to keep up to date on child welfare treatment models, training and support?

Potential Children

In general, there aren't a lot of differences about the kinds of kids in care. In addition to the children who are referred, it's crucial to know how the agency matches a child with a family.

- What types of children are available?
- How does the agency staff choose families for children who need families?
- How do they determine reimbursement rates?
- Do the children who are placed with you fit your interests, abilities and strengths?

Support

One of the top reasons that foster parents quit fostering isn't because of the kids in their care, but because of the system as a whole. Some questions to consider include:

- Is the agency sensitive to the kind and amount of resources (therapists, specialized physicians, and specialized transportation, mentors, etc) in your area who may or may not fit the needs of the children placed?
- Are the workers knowledgeable and/or willing to learn about agency and community resources so they can effectively support you and the child in placement?
- How often can staff and foster parents expect to have contact and communication with each other? How and when is agency staff accessible?
- How should foster families deal with



emergencies? What agency supports are in place? Is there an on-call emergency system?

- What is the education or training policy? Is the training accessible, reasonably priced and pertinent? Are agency training funds available?
- What is the agency policy to handle licensing rule violations by foster parents? How are they handled? What are possible outcomes? How are families supported during this time?
- How are abuse and neglect allegations against foster families handled? What can you expect in regard to the role of the agency, foster family and the worker? What kind of support do you have during this time?
- Is respite available and how is it arranged?
- Does the agency philosophy include the importance of having opportunities for you and the other foster families to support each other through regular meetings? Does the agency provide a directory of other parents and encourage communication openly?

Communication

Communication issues are often at the root of a lot of disagreements—often as much as by

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what's assumed or not as what *is* said.

- Are foster parents and workers able to honestly share ideas and concerns? Are these ideas considered and valued? Can the agency give some examples of some of the give and take?
- Does your personality and that of the worker's fit well together? Does it promote or interfere with the serving of children?
- Are foster parents, workers and agency staff available to each other? Do they respond to calls and requests for contact within a reasonable time frame?
- How do the agency, worker, foster family and birth family communicate with each other? Is it clear who everyone is supposed to share concerns with, or is there a potential for "splitting?"
- How is pertinent information about the child and their family shared with all the team, before and during placement?
- What is the expectation of how often workers and foster families will see each other?

If You Decide to Switch Agencies

Once you have completely thought through the pros and cons of changing agencies, you may begin searching for an agency that you think might be a better match for you. Talk with licensed families from agencies that you are considering, and ask them some of the questions in this tipsheet.

If you decide to change agencies, let your current worker know. The new agency worker will ask you to sign a release of information form so that he or she can talk to your current agency. The State of Wisconsin foster care licensing code requires that the new licensing agency request the foster family's file from the former agency.

Meeting the needs of your family and the needs of the children you serve is of greatest importance. Through thoughtful consideration, education and discussion, you can determine if your agency is the best fit for you and the children you serve.

