

PEER SUPPORT

A GAME CHANGER FOR FOSTER PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Stable, quality foster parenting is one of the most powerful ways to help children and youth in foster care. It's a key factor in driving better outcomes for children's health, education, and permanency. We rely on foster parents and relative caregivers, but being a foster parent isn't easy. Foster parents commonly report that the single most important factor to their ability to care for children — and their desire to continue fostering — is having access to someone they trust to discuss the needs of the children and teens in their care. Experienced foster parents are often best suited to provide that trusted support and guidance. Peer support is a game changer for foster parents and yields measurable results for children and youth in foster care.

Benefits of peer support

FOR FOSTER PARENTS AND RELATIVE CAREGIVERS

- Emotional support from families with similar experiences
- Effective, tested tips and techniques for caregiving
- Help with navigating child welfare, the courts and other systems (education, mental health, disability, etc.) to get needed supports for the children in their care
- Advice on partnering with birth parents, addressing educational challenges, and more
- Concrete assistance, such as respite care or help with childcare and transportation
- Encouragement to hang in there when times get tough

FOR CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

- Improved foster parent retention and better placement stability
- More skilled foster parents who better understand children's needs and who better support relationships with birth families
- Trusted partners to share accurate and helpful information with other foster parents
- Decreased reliance on caseworkers due to foster parents having a network of support
- Improved recruitment because families know they will have support, including for children and youth with special needs or challenges

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- More stable family-based placements
- Better trained and supported caregivers who can address their unique needs and help them heal
- Foster parents who understand the impact of trauma and loss and other key issues facing children and teens in care
- Better access to services due to help navigating systems
- Opportunities to connect with other children or teens in foster care

Types of peer support

Most peer support strategies are low or moderate cost. For example, child welfare agencies can...

- Develop mentor or coaching programs for new or struggling foster families;
- Hire foster parents to staff help lines and serve as advocates or navigators;
- Create or support in-person or online foster parent peer support groups organized by geographic areas or family or child circumstances;
- Add peer support as a component of the agencies' crisis response when families are struggling; and
- Build/support foster parent associations that can advocate on behalf of foster families and the children in their care.

For more information about peer support for foster, adoptive and kinship families, go to: https://www.adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/AUSK/Publications/Peer-support-for-families-web508.pdf

Foster Parent Peer Support Examples

CLARK COUNTY FOSTER PARENT CHAMPIONS (NV): This program employs ten part-time champions who work about 20 hours a week. Each champion has a unique set of skills, interests and experience, and so the program is able to support families with teens, infants, medically fragile children and sibling groups. A champion will call a foster parent within 24 hours of placement to ask if they need help or support. Champions also intervene when a foster parent gives a 10-day notice to have the child removed.

CHILDREN'S HOME AND AID FOSTER PARENT MENTORS (IL): The foster parent mentoring program was begun after a series of focus groups revealed that foster parents were supporting one another informally but sometimes exchanging inaccurate information about state policy and procedure. The program has between 160 and 170 currently active mentors. Mentors receive seven hours of training over two days on topics such as licensing criteria and DCFS policy. A newly licensed foster parent is assigned a mentor for six to 12 months. Mentors meet monthly with their mentees and maintain ongoing contact through emails, texts and phone calls. Ninety-three percent of 14-day notices submitted by foster parents have been retracted or extended after a mentor became involved.

ADVOCACY AND MENTORSHIP PROGRAM (TN): Advocates are experienced foster parents who receive training to provide assistance, support and representation in grievances and appeals with DCS. Advocates support the foster parent through the process while promoting the safety and well-being of the child above all else. Each of the twelve DCS regions has an assigned advocate. The advocates are volunteers who receive a \$400 monthly stipend and reimbursement for travel expenses. In 2007, foster parent mentors, who are separate from advocates, were added to the program. Mentors are volunteers that provide support, understanding, and knowledge to foster parents, and help families through crisis.

STARTING A FOSTER PARENT PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM: *Advice from the Field*

- **ASSESS NEEDS:** Determine through surveys, focus groups and informal communications what foster families need in the way of support. Be sure to include new and experienced foster parents and a diverse group of respondents. Decide if peer mentors or workers are best suited to provide such support.
- **OBTAIN BUY-IN FROM FRONT-LINE STAFF AND SUPERVISORS:** Ensure that caseworkers understand the role of peer support workers or mentors and how they can support caseworkers as well as foster parents.
- **DETERMINE QUALIFICATIONS, DUTIES AND TRAINING:** Determine what kinds of experience, knowledge and skills are required of peer support workers, what they will be expected to do and the type of upfront and ongoing training they will receive.
- **INTENTIONALLY RECRUIT:** Similar to agencies' goals of recruiting foster families that reflect the racial and ethnic backgrounds of children in care, peer support should also represent diversity of families so that the needs of families and children of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are addressed.
- **PLAN FOR ADMINISTRATION AND FUNDING:** Assess agency capacity to administer, oversee and fund an ongoing program of peer support. Peer supporters should be compensated so they do not feel taken advantage of or burn out.
- **DESIGN EVALUATION PLAN:** Decide on the outcomes the program is intended to achieve, how they will be measured and what data will need to be collected and analyzed.

For more information on peer support and examples, go to <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/provide-timely-access-to-trusted-dedicated-staff-and-peer-support/>