

Helping Teens in Care Transition to Adulthood

The potential for teens in foster care is limitless. Many former foster youth have accomplished amazing things and achieved great success as valued members of their community. Like most successful adults, these teens owe their success to the caring and concerned adults in their life, especially foster parents, who helped shepherd them along the path to successful adulthood.

For some children and youth, the time they spend in out-of-home care happens to be during years that are critical to a person's development. This is especially true for teenagers. The teenage years are essential for developing skills and gaining experience that will be the foundation for self-sufficient living as an adult.

However, many teens who leave the foster care system are not fully prepared to live on their own. The challenges of finding a job and a safe place to live, while performing the basic living skills of cooking, cleaning, managing money, and taking care of their health, can be daunting for teens who have little practical experience in providing for themselves and who are unsure of who they can turn for ongoing support. This makes the role of foster parents all the more critical, as they address the challenge of preparing teens for their first successful steps into adulthood.

Practical Tips for Increasing Independent Living Skills

Many former foster youth who age out of care face negative outcomes as adults, but foster parents can help the teens in their care reach their full potential and avoid those negative outcomes. With the help, care, and guidance of foster parents, teens can learn the skills they need to make it on their own.

Following are some tips to help foster parents develop those strategies.



Start early

The process of helping teens build independent living skills should start as early as possible. Even if a youth in care exits the system through reunification with his birth family or through adoption, the time he spends with his foster family(ies) is critical

to his development. Actively looking for ways to build independent living skills from the day a child joins their family, will help foster parents ensure that he has the foundation to build on as he moves through his teen years into adulthood.

Offer opportunities to make decisions

Decisions regarding teens in foster care are often made for them, or with only limited input from the youth herself. Foster parents have a unique opportunity to help build decision-making skills by giving teens choices whenever possible, and allow the youth to learn from the consequences – good or bad – of their choices. A small example might include giving the teen a choice as to what time she is expected to go to bed, while helping her

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understand that she is required to wake up at a certain time the next morning for school. Another example might be allowing the teen to have flexibility in how he spends his free time after school, while helping him understand that he has to also take care of any chores and finish his homework. As the teen grows older, try to increase the complexity of choices and flexibility, while still maintaining safe and appropriate boundaries. Giving teens choices whenever possible will increase their decision-making skills and equip them to make healthy and appropriate choices in the future – even if there is no one there to guide them.

Increase expectations and responsibilities

It is often said that children rise to meet expectations, and, far too often, teens in foster care hear more about their limitations than their potential. However, foster parents can help increase a teen’s confidence level by raising expectations and increasing responsibilities. An example might be to give the teen the responsibility of planning a family meal one night a week. Next, she can go along with her foster parent to the grocery store to pick out ingredients, then help prepare the meal until, eventually, she can complete the whole process on her own. Another example might be helping a teen establish a budget for things she might want, such as going out with friends or a new app for her phone. Then helping her complete the steps needed to earn the funds for her budget, whether it be by completing extra chores for an increased allowance or getting a work permit and part-time job. Foster parents might also help a youth in their care



set goals for academic achievement, behavior, and conduct in the community. Over time, use consistency and gentle reminders to help encourage her to meet – and exceed – her goals. With proper guidance, teens can achieve goals, exceed expectations, and build the sense of personal empowerment that will allow them to face future challenges.

Look for every day teachable moments

There are many tasks in our day-to-day adult lives that we take for granted but that are, nonetheless, essential. We typically learn these skills from our parents or through experience. From doing laundry to balancing a check book, navigating public transportation or maintaining a home, some teens exit foster care with very little practical experience with these

essential skills. As a result, they may struggle to navigate the daily realities of being a responsible adult. Foster parents can look for ways to include teens in these day to day tasks, as a means to build these independent living skills. For example, include the youth in reviewing the various monthly household bills and show him how to write and mail the checks in a timely manner. Other examples can include taking him on a tour of the city or town using public transportation, inviting him to your local bank to talk with to an account manager about the various types of banking accounts, and making sure he participates in chores and home maintenance projects.

Celebrate successes, learn from shortcomings

Although teens often

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don't show it, they crave approval and recognition from the adults in their lives. It's important for foster parents, as role models, to look for opportunities to celebrate successes – both big and small – with the youth in their care. Even if those accomplishments start out small, it's important to show children and youth that there are adults in their lives who care about their achievements and are invested in them doing well. Foster parents should look for ways to celebrate successes in ways that are meaningful to the teen. This can include going out to her favorite restaurant, or participating in an activity together, like going to the movies, playing sports, or working on a craft. On the other hand, it is also important for foster parents to acknowledge when a youth in their care falls short of expectations. When this happens, it is helpful to respond with compassion and guidance that will teach teens coping skills and resiliency. Finding time to talk daily about experiences, successes, and challenges can be beneficial.

The Importance of Co-Parenting

When reunification with the birth family is a permanency goal, co-parenting with the birth parents is an essential component to successfully parenting a teen in foster care. Whenever possible, try to seek feedback from birth parents on the strategies being used in the foster home and at the birth parent's home to parent the teen and teach the essential skills of successful daily living. Sharing the teen's challenges and successes with the birth parents will help them stay connected with their child and may even shed some light on factors and family conditions that could be influencing the teen's behavior. This kind of communication can also be a means of modeling effective parenting practices for birth parents that will help grow their parenting skills, reduce the

likelihood of the teen re-entering out-of-home care, and minimize some of the anxiety foster parents feel when a child leaves their home. Additionally, when teens are able to see a healthy partnership between their birth parents and foster parents, it can have a profound impact on their sense of wellbeing and security.

Foster Parents Are the Key

The task of preparing teens to leave the foster system is a challenging one. However, seeing a teen learn and grow and take those first successful steps into adulthood is very rewarding. Foster parents, you are the key to that teen's success! The Coalition is here to support you for rising to the challenge of parenting successful teens.

Resources

Coalition/FCARC Tip Sheets

- [Fostering Older Youth](#)
- [The 411 on Social Media, Networking and Texting](#)
- [What do These Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [Effective Management of Crisis Behaviors](#)

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Parenting at the Speed of Teens: Positive Tips on Everyday Issues*, by Peter Benson
- *Sex, Drugs 'n Facebook—A Parent Toolkit for Promoting Healthy Internet Use*, by Megan A. Moreno
- *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, by David Walsh
- *For When I'm Famous: A Teen Foster/Adopt Lifebook*, by Adoption Works



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