

Respecting the Confidentiality of Children in Care and Their Families

Imagine you are standing in line at a grocery store and a stranger asks you a question about one of the children in your care. Before you answer, think about how you would feel if a friend told a stranger something personal about you or your family.

We all deserve privacy, even in these days of various social media. (For more about that, see our tip sheet, [The 411 on Social Media, Networking and Texting!](#))

To maintain confidentiality, Wisconsin has laws to protect the private information of children and families involved in the child welfare system. These laws pertain to foster parents and specify what can and cannot be said, as well as what the consequences could be if confidentiality is broken.

Respecting confidentiality helps build relationships with the child and the child's birth family by showing respect for all of the family members and their personal stories.

What are Some of the Key Points?

- Foster parents cannot provide information to people who are not authorized to receive it. If you have any questions about if a person has the authority to receive the information or how to answer a particular question, refer the person to the child's case worker.
- Foster children cannot be photographed

or interviewed by the media without written permission from their parents or legal guardian. (Foster parents are *not* the legal guardians, but kids in care are placed with foster families by a legal court order.)

- Foster parents cannot speak to media about children placed in their home.
- If there's no need to specify that a child is in the foster care system when introducing him or her, don't identify him as such.

For example, if you're at a church or a social event and shaking hands with greeters, you can simply say, "Hi I'm Chris Smith and these are my kids, Ty, Rose, and Jay."

But if you're meeting a doctor or dentist for the first time, it might be helpful for you to let him or her know that you might not know the full history of the children in your care because they're in foster care.

What Can I Say?

There will be many occasions when someone asks you a

question about your children in care and the foster care system. Many people are curious about foster care, especially children.

Instead of talking about your situation, specifically, try sharing something about why you became a foster parent.

Or you can educate others about foster care, by telling them an interesting fact about foster care in the United States—such as 12 million people have



Continued on page 2

grown up in foster families.

A good rule is to keep conversations about foster kids general and positive in nature. Talk about activities the children in your home are involved in or talk about some of the current issues with the child welfare system in general.

If someone asks you something particularly uncomfortable, you can always just walk away, change the subject, ignore the question or tell the person that it's confidential and you can't answer those questions.

Here Are Some Other Guidelines You Might Find Helpful

- Introduce the children in your home—but by first name only.
- Don't mention the child's birth parents' names or reasons why a child is in care. Most experienced families find a clever way to change the subject or focus on something else about the child. It's better to talk generally why you are a foster parent or why kids come into care.
- Keep school information, medical files, treatment plans, and referral materials in a locked cabinet.
- Promote self esteem in the child, by talking about interests and strengths, saying, "This is Rose and she likes to play soccer and help me cook. She says she doesn't like school, but her teachers speak highly of her."
- Don't post pictures and stories of children in care on Facebook and other sites and identify them as children in foster care. It is also a good idea to check with



birth parents and the case worker before posting, too. If the child is old enough, you might also consider asking their permission to post their photo, as well.

- Gently redirect your children if they start to disclose too much information.

- Teach birth, adoptive and foster children in your home to also follow confidentiality guidelines. It's natural for siblings to fight dirty when they're mad, but stress that it's never okay for them to share anyone else's personal information.

Individual county agencies and foster care agencies often have written guidelines regarding the use of social media. You may want to check

with your agency to see if they have a policy you need to be aware of.

Setting boundaries around who you talk to and what you talk about with others regarding your foster children will help to maintain confidentiality. It also helps to think about these situations before they arise.

How Does Confidentiality Impact You?

You may not think that maintaining confidentiality will impact you one way or the other. However, it can greatly impact your license and your current placements. The following are some things that could happen to you—and have happened to other families in Wisconsin—after breaching confidentiality.

- Your foster child may be removed from your care.
- Your family may have to comply with a corrective action

Continued on page 3



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plan to maintain your license.

- Your placing agency (your county or the private agency you are licensed by) may revoke your foster license, with the potential to not have one issued in the future.
- You open yourself and your agency up to a lawsuit.

While it's natural to want to share stories and experiences with friends and family, one of your responsibilities as a foster parent is to not divulge specific and identifying information about your foster children and their birth families.

The good news is that once your relatives and people in the community get to know your kids for who they are, they'll stop asking about their past and instead you'll be sharing the stories that all of us parents share: the time your child missed the bus and had to walk the three miles to school, the time he got the lead in the school play, the vacations you took together as a family.

In addition to the information you received about confidentiality throughout the licensing process, there are also some good resources on our website, www.wifostercareandadoption.org, including:

- *The Foster Parent Handbook*
- *The LaCrosse County's Confidentiality Foster Parents Guide: Putting the Pieces Together*

If you have any questions regarding confidentiality and foster care please contact your social worker or call us at 800-762-8063.

Resources

From [our library](#):

- *WISE UP Powerbook for Children in Foster Care*, by the Center for Adoption Support and Education

Tip Sheet:

- [The 411 on Social Media, Networking and Texting!](#)



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