

Circles of Support: Caregivers Need Care, Too

When you think of why you became a foster parent, and the traits that you possess that help you on your journey, what comes to mind? Dedication? Compassion? Nurturing? Those and other strengths are the qualities that make you the great foster parent you are! However, these same attributes, if not used thoughtfully and if left unrefreshed, can lead you down a path of feeling overwhelmed and burned out.

We all know fostering is tough. Balancing the needs of children who have been traumatized with the complex needs of birth families, along with the demands of your own family, is a bit like walking a tightrope. Add in all the challenging demands from the court system, as well as requests from your own caseworker and agency, and you are on a very demanding journey!

The emotional aspect of fostering can also take a toll on you. As a parent, you have a special awareness of children and their vulnerability. Their innocence makes the suffering that happens to them all the more heart-wrenching for you. Knowing how little control you have over what kids experience in their homes is difficult. The hard stories of children in care can expose you to intense feelings of grief and loss.

Some of you have had trauma and loss in your own lives, and learning about the heartache of a child in your care may be a trigger for you. If you haven't taken steps to heal, you may find yourself experiencing trauma all over again. If being around

the children in your care creates anxiety or complex emotions for you personally, you may want to seek professional help.



Finally, the process of reunification is something most foster parents find exceptionally emotional. You've likely grown attached to the child you've so tenderly cared for. Letting go can feel like a test of epic proportions—even when you know it's in the best interest of the child.

Your job, your personal attributes of caring, and exposure to secondary trauma can all add up to a high level of stress. If you try to continually cope with that stress without caring for and rejuvenating yourself, you may find that you're acting and feeling in ways that don't feel normal to you. Pause for a moment and check in with yourself. Is your resolve showing signs of wear and tear? Are you waking up each day feeling defeated before you even get out of bed? If so, you may need to seek outside support.

For caregivers, support can come in many forms. The important thing is to find something that works for you. Some find support in a regular meeting with a friend to take a walk or get a cup of coffee. Others find their most supportive community in an online group. You'll know what's right for you when you can leave feeling refreshed, renewed, validated, and understood. And, if you need some ideas on where to find support, give us a call at the Coalition or check out our website. We are here to make this journey with you.

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Missing Link: When Your Circle of Support Falls Apart

One of the lessons you probably learned very early in your fostering journey is the importance of having a strong support network. We all have those key people in our lives who we know, without a doubt, we can turn to when we are feeling overwhelmed or when we want to share successes and joys. Yet we also know that not everyone in our circle of support “gets” the journey or the life of a foster parent.

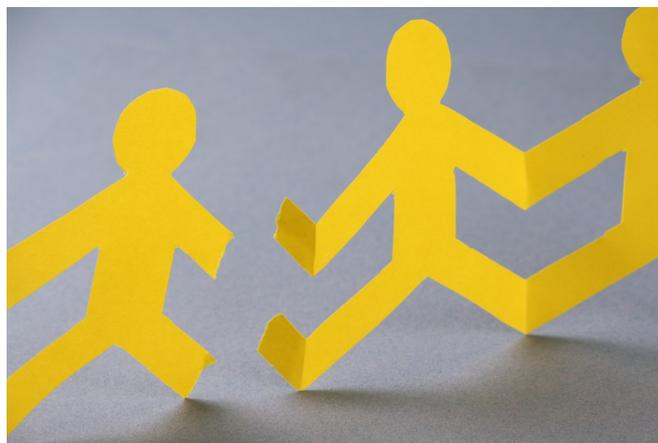
Unfortunately, sometimes those around us may try to discourage or undermine our choices – or fade from our lives altogether.

Those people who make up your “regular” circle of support – friends and extended family members – may not understand why you continue to foster when they see the stress, challenges, and frustrations you face. Fostering is a “calling” for many foster parents, and it can be difficult for those who don’t feel that pull to understand why you choose to do what you do, and why you don’t just quit when things get tough. They may not see, and it can be difficult to explain, the fulfillment you experience when you see a child succeed or a family reunited. We all have things we feel passionate about; for you, that probably includes foster care, but others may not share that passion.

They may not know what to do or say or how to help, and may be experiencing their own feelings of helplessness in how to support you and your family. The problem may feel too big to them and, as a result, they might choose to avoid the topic or you, as a foster parent. It is also possible that some may avoid you because

of feelings of inadequacy when they compare themselves to the contributions you and your family are making to children and families in your communities.

Some people may feel uncomfortable or fearful about what foster care is. Perhaps the images they think of when they think about the children and youth who come from abusive



and/or neglectful backgrounds are uncertain. Or perhaps they are afraid that they could see a negative impact on their own family or children instead of viewing it as you do: an opportunity to grow individually, as well as a family, and to help make an impact on others’ lives for the

better.

You, as a foster parent, are bound by confidentiality and may not be able to share as much as you’d like, which could be another source of misunderstanding from your support circle. They may feel you are holding back, when you are actually protecting a child’s story, just as you were trained to do.

You might also face a situation when a well-intentioned person in your life does or says something that could be hurtful to or inappropriate to a child in your care. This might leave you feeling rejected by or isolated from those closest to you. This is a situation that can feel really yucky. People who are unfamiliar with foster care often just don’t know all the ins and outs of how the system works. You might choose to engage with that person, and explain more

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about foster care, or you might choose to step away. Choosing to educate others is an individual choice and you should only do what feels right for you.

Fortunately, many foster parents can find connections to other foster parents through their agencies or through support groups. There is nothing like sharing an experience with someone who really “gets it.” The feeling of being understood and validated in your frustrations as well as your triumphs. But, what can we do with those in our lives who may not understand – or who may not be willing to support you through this particular journey?

- **Set clear boundaries with those around you, and ask for what you need.** Foster parents are excellent advocates for the children they care for—don’t be afraid to advocate for yourself! There are ways to do this in a non-confrontational manner. For example, you might say, “Thanks for your concern; however, Billy’s story and information is private. But, if you want to help out my family, transporting kids from school occasionally would really be great.” Or perhaps, “What I really need is some time to decompress. Would you be available for a regular walk on Monday evenings?” Sometimes all it takes is to let someone know how she can best support you.

- **Explore other opportunities to get support.** Wisconsin is a big state, and some foster parents may not have supportive peers nearby. Fortunately, there are places you can go for support from other foster parents:

- The [Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association](#) (WFAPA) has

other foster parents available to call to talk to about all things foster care.

- Contact the [Coalition for Children, Youth & Families](#) for a list of support groups in Wisconsin, many that are open to both foster and adoptive families – there might be one in your area.
- There are also national resources available, like the [National Foster Parent Association](#), as well as other foster parent forums and websites out there with other foster parents dealing with similar situations like you.

Unfortunately, there may still be times when you have to make the choice to cut off or limit someone’s involvement in your life. Even so, please know that you are never alone. There are people here to support you, to offer a lending hand, or to simply listen. Fostering is a series of joys and sorrows and everything in between. Your journey may feel messy at times, but it is also a beautiful one.

Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)



WFAPA provides great opportunities to network with other foster and adoptive parents. They also have an extensive website, [wfapa.org](#), a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.



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Seeking Connections: Helping Youth in Care Build Their Circles of Support

Youth in out-of-home care often experience many losses—family, friends, neighborhoods, relatives—when they are placed with a foster family. For some youth, the result of so many losses may make it very tempting to look for and latch on to *any* type of peer group, to seek acceptance and not feel like the odd kid out no matter the cost or consequence. Those strong feelings of needing to belong and be accepted may sometimes result in youth seeking out an unhealthy peer group—those involved in alcohol or drug use, delinquent or unlawful behavior, or a boyfriend/girlfriend who may be verbally or physically abusive, among other less-than-ideal connections.

As a foster parent, you have more influence over the peer groups a youth in your care might get involved with than you may think. Here are a few ideas that you might try to positively influence their choices:

- **Natural Supports.** Consider the youth's support system before they entered the foster care system—who are they connected to? Is it an aunt or uncle, an adult sibling, grandparent, neighbor, or close friend? How can you help them keep that connection, even if you don't live in the same community? Perhaps regular phone calls, respite weekends, or other kinds of in-person visits could be planned. Helping a youth keep those natural connections and supports can help minimize the loss they may be experiencing by having entered care.
- **Encouraging Interests.** What groups or activities was the youth involved in before coming to your care? How can you, as the

foster parent, help keep them connected to these activities or groups? Do they have an interest you can help nurture to connect with other like-minded youth? What

extracurricular groups or activities are available through the school? Are there other community organizations or programs that fit the bill?

- **Faith Communities.** Are you or the youth in your home connected to a faith community? Many congregations have youth and volunteer groups he or she may find appealing. Engaging in

volunteer work can also boost self-esteem and combat depression.

- **Foster-Peer Support Groups.** What youth support groups, if any, are available in your area? Are there other current or former foster youth to connect with? Check with your licensing agency to see if they have any foster-peer supports available.
- **Online Support.** There are online supports available like Foster Club that are just for youth who are in or have been in out-of-home care. These supports can help youth who may feel isolated, feel not so alone.

As with so many factors of building a relationship with the children and youth in your care, keeping open lines of conversation can be immensely helping in navigating unknown waters. In addition, modeling ways of asking for help and support when needed, as well as methods of caring for and nurturing your own interests and passions, can be quite impactful. As a foster parent, you have the privilege of guiding youth while also teaching them independence—a gift that can last them a lifetime.



Making Their Voices Heard: Connecting Older Youth to One Another

by LoriAnn D'Acquisto

I recently attended a panel discussion of young adults touched by foster care and adoption. Although they were from varied cultures and circumstances, as each told his or her heart-wrenching story, a common theme emerged. As teenagers, they all felt isolated and longed for a connection to an understanding peer. Many expressed that it wasn't until they met *other foster youth*, as young adults, that the real healing began.

As one young woman put it, "I felt so alone. I just wanted to be normal, but there's nothing normal about being in foster care or the reasons you're there. You're embarrassed and



ashamed. With the other youth panel members, I could talk about the messed up stuff I've been through with people who had similar experiences. And even though that's sad, having someone to cry with felt great."

We know that a sense of belonging is a human need as real as that for food and shelter. We also know that adolescence is a time when this need is most intense. That belonging generally comes from having shared interests or experiences. For some youth, sports teams and other extracurricular activities provide an avenue for making those needed connections. For youth in foster care, who lack stability and normalcy in their lives, finding that common ground with peers may not be so easy.

Connecting youth in foster care with one another – or with young adults who have walked a similar journey – can provide them with an invaluable lifeline, yet there are so few opportunities available. An Internet search for "foster care support groups" will bring up a variety of groups for parents, but not youth. I asked the youth panel members why they thought that was. Here are the suggestions they offered in providing the support youth touched by foster care and adoption need to connect with one another:

- **"Don't call it a support group!"** Panel members feel "support group" smacks of "group therapy" and said they've had enough of talking about their trauma in a therapeutic setting.
- **Ask and Listen.** Give youth opportunities to tell you what kinds of supports or activities they're interested in. Then follow through.
- **Encourage youth-led groups and activities.** Provide youth with the guidance and tools to organize and support their peers on their own.
- **Get them through the door with an incentive,** and let them build from there. For example, offer a \$25 gift card for attendance at a Foster

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Youth Leadership Group meeting. Once you have their attention, make them feel heard and valued so they'll want to stay involved. Too many of our youth have never had a voice.

- **Offer opportunities for fun** social outings or conferences, not just “support group” or “programming” type events.
- **Create an event that benefits the community**, then ask youth touched by foster care or adoption to volunteer. Serving others is a great way to empower youth while bringing them together.

As parents, we know the value of connecting with other foster and adoptive parents. Sometimes it's just for the comfort of knowing we're not alone in the special parenting challenges we face that “other parents” just don't get. Sometimes it just helps to feel “heard.” The young adults of the youth panel who so bravely shared their stories asked that we remember they need the same. If those opportunities are scarce, perhaps you can help your youth create them.

Where to Find Us on Social Media

facebook.com/coalitionforfcy
twitter.com/coalitionforfcy
instagram.com/coalitionforfcy

We are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at **info@wifostercareandadoption.org**.

Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Somebody to Lean On: Connecting With or Creating a Support Group](#)
- [The Balance Beam: Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Kids](#)
- [Stressed Out!](#)

Library

- *Swings Hanging from Every Tree – Daily Inspirations for Foster & Adoptive Parents*, by Susan Stone
- *The Kinship Parenting Toolbox*, Edited by Kim Phagan Hansel
- *The Foster Parenting Toolbox*, Edited by Kim Phagan Hansel

Additional Information

- [Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, Inc.](#)
- [National Foster Parent Association](#)
- [Why Friends Disappear When Crisis Turns Chronic](#)
- [Loneliness in Foster Parenting](#)
- [6 Struggles Every Foster Parent Faces](#)
- [The Importance of Setting Up a Support Network](#)
- [Secondary Trauma and Foster Parents: Understanding its Impact and Taking Steps to Protect Them](#)
- [Wisconsin's Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard](#)
- [Training Opportunities from the Coalition](#)
- [Foster Parent College](#)
- [4 Ways to Help Your Child Build a Support Network](#)
- [Foster Club](#)



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