

## Fostering Older Youth

***“I need hope that things will be better.”***

Hope is something that older youth in foster care are looking for, and foster parents play a huge role in providing that hope. In fact, that’s one of the most rewarding aspects of fostering teens and older youth.

People are often intimidated by the idea of fostering teens and older youth. Those years, after all, are the years of raging hormones! However, as one foster mom who enjoys fostering older youth put it, "Teenagers come home and close the door. They're a lot more independent!"



Sometimes people think, *“why does it matter, that youth is almost a legal adult?”* While it’s true that these youth will be 18 shortly, think back to the years just before you became an adult. You probably still relied on your parents for a lot emotionally, and they helped you move forward with advice and support.

One advantage of fostering older youth is that they tend to make transitions more easily. Younger children have a much harder time processing what is going on. Older youth may still struggle with feelings of rejection and abandonment, but many are able to understand what is happening and

why, meaning that they may not act out in ways younger children might. With no worries about potty training or nap times, older foster children can jump into family activities such as camping, walks, and sports outings. Foster parents have also found it helpful that, many times, older children know their history and can help tell that story if any special needs come up.

***The truth is everybody needs somebody, especially older youth in foster care.***

“So here are some reasons to take in foster teens:

- ◆ You may become the only family they have.
- ◆ You may be able to make that hard time a little easier.
- ◆ You may be able to show them what a real home is supposed to be like.
- ◆ You may be able to teach them how not to run when they get scared.
- ◆ You may be able to show them what is important in life.
- ◆ You may be the only person they will ever be able to trust.
- ◆ Or just maybe you can show them that someone out there will love them for just being them!”

*\*Source*

**I have a teen foster youth in my home—now what?**

Just as with

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parenting any other teenager, things will not necessarily be great all of the time. The teenage years are ones of enormous growth and development. Many youth react better to parents and may grow more when they are allowed to make and learn from their mistakes. As a foster parent, this can be difficult, especially if these mistakes involve school officials or law enforcement. One foster parent recognized, “You have to just kind of let go. I’m not saying don’t have rules and enforce them. I’m saying these kids deserve to live as ‘normal’ of a teenage life as their peers do; to really thrive, and sometimes that means messing up!”

You can help a youth in foster care learn the life lessons it takes to becoming a positive, functioning adult by setting concrete rules and boundaries, as well as establishing consequences for breaking these, from the start of your relationship.

Some of the skills that can be helpful for fostering this population include:

- ⇒ strong active listening skills
- ⇒ healthy boundary setting
- ⇒ openness to exploring the youth’s interests
- ⇒ being able to advocate for youth, and
- ⇒ having patience.

Some of these skills are inherent. Others you may have to learn, develop, and improve. *(The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families offers ongoing training opportunities to help you with these and many other skills.)*

### Beyond the teen years

Every year, many youth age out of the foster care system in Wisconsin. These young adults have no permanency, no bonds or connections to family or a support system. They are simply on their own at 18.

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### Rita’s Story

“When James came into our lives he was almost 16. We were to be his third placement after two years of being involved in out-of-home care. He was one of three boys living in our home that summer.

James was an angry teenager. He refused to even talk to the other boys, both much younger than him, for the first two weeks. Spending a lot of time alone and in his room, I tried to give him space to adjust. After a month of very little contact, I approached him to see if he would like to go to the movies, just the two of us. He shyly agreed. At the movies, we were talking, just small talk, before the show. He suddenly got anxious and demanded we leave. When I told him to wait it out, he yelled at me and stormed out. That would be typical of our interactions for the first six months.

I didn’t know it at the time, but James was just protecting himself. As time went on, he opened up, willingly spent time with the rest of the family and even wrote a song for the other boys, who always looked up to him. On the day James left our home, he asked if we could go to the movies sometime. He said he always regretted not giving me a chance at first. I assured him I never held that night against him and was proud of the man he was becoming. We had our movie night a few months later where he told me he had been accepted into college. If anything was worth those first six months of being unsure and a little uncomfortable, that moment was.”



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Establishing connections to supportive adults is important for all youth, but it is *essential* for older youth in foster care. This attachment, even for a brief period, can lead to a lifetime of positive outcomes. The more positive adults in a youth's life, the less likely the youth is to have police involvement or abuse drugs and alcohol, and the better the youth will perform in school. Once you help to create these bonds they will likely never be forgotten.

There are many older youth in need of a strong and secure home right here in Wisconsin, right now. And if you are looking to help right now, you may have a shorter wait if you're open to having an older child placed with you.

When you foster an older youth, you can help nurture hope that lets a young person get through today and look forward to tomorrow. You may not see their first steps, but you might watch them walk into adulthood with positive memories and hope for tomorrow.



## Resources

### Tip Sheets:

- ♦ [Supporting Teens Leaving Care: Resources & Guidance for Foster Parents](#)
- ♦ [Help! My Child Runs Away](#)
- ♦ [Establishing Household Rules](#)
- ♦ [Foster Parents and Social Workers: Allies and Advocates for Youth in Care](#)
- ♦ [Not Too Old for Forever: Adopting an Older Youth](#)
- ♦ [Advocating for LGBTQ Youth](#)

### Library Resources:

- ♦ *I Will Never Give Up*, by Derek Clark
- ♦ *From Foster Care to College*, by Youth Communication

### Web Resources:

- [Teens Need Families](#)
- [Stories from a former youth in care](#)
- [The Coalition's Wisconsin Therapist List](#)



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