

## **INTRODUCTION TO FOSTER CARE**

Thank you for your interest in foster care!

There are many different reasons that one may be interested in foster care. You may know a particular child that you would like to foster; you may know generally of the need for temporary homes for children; or your own children may have left home and you want to share your home and family with another child or children. But whatever your reason, we're glad you have come to us about becoming a resource/foster parent.

But, even though you are interested in foster care, you may not be sure that you really want to take a foster child into your home. That's a big decision and should be a heartfelt calling. You will want to know a lot more about foster care before you commit yourself. Good!

**The better informed you are and the more you know about what to expect, the better the decision you'll be able to make.**

### **WHAT IS FOSTER CARE?**

**Foster Care is defined as the planned, time limited (temporary) placement of a minor with a licensed resource/foster family, when the needed care cannot be provided in the child's own family or by appropriate relatives.**

**Foster care is planned.** When a child is placed in a foster home, that placement is part of a larger plan to protect the child and to make the child's life better. There are special things that are supposed to happen as a result of the child's being there. We'll talk more about that later.

**Foster care is temporary.** Even though some children stay in foster care for a longer period of time, the intent is for foster care to be short-term. We want the child to get back to his/her own home or another permanent home as soon as possible. The resource/foster parent is asked to work with the biological family, along with the agency (DSS) to encourage and promote reunification for the child and family.

### **HOW IS FOSTER CARE DIFFERENT FROM ADOPTION?**

Sometimes people are confused about the differences between foster care and adoption. They may not be sure in which they are really interested: foster care or adoption.

There are two big differences.

First, while foster care is intended to be **temporary**, adoption is **permanent**. That means that if you take a foster child into your home, you can expect him/her to leave you soon. If you adopt a child, though, you can expect that child to stay with you until he/she is ready to go out on his/her own. And even then, the child is still yours!

Second, your **legal relationship** to a foster child and an adopted child is different. Though you have some legal rights and responsibilities to a foster child, you don't have legal custody of the child.

Sometimes we can't reach our first goal of getting the child back home. In such cases, **the second goal of foster care becomes important; to get the child another permanent place to live.** This may be with relatives. It may be with adoptive parents. In any case, the goal would be to go as quickly as possible from a temporary home to a permanent home.

**If you remember that foster care is a short-term (temporary) arrangement with a purpose of working toward a long-term (permanent) home for a child, you will understand the most important thing about foster care.**

### **WHY CHILDREN ENTER FOSTER CARE**

Children come into foster care when, for some reason, they cannot be safely cared for in their own families. Let's look at some of those reasons.

- 1. Some parents are not able to give the care or supervision that is necessary for a child's safety and protection.** Because of problems in their own lives, they are not able to parent adequately.

For instance, a woman may have been deserted by her husband, left with four children and no income. If there are no relatives able or willing to help, she may be evicted from her home and have no means of caring for her children. Foster care may be her only alternative.

- 2. Some parents have abused their children emotionally, physically, or sexually.** Because of their own serious problems, they are seriously mistreating their children, and the children need to be protected from them.

A woman, perhaps abused herself as a child, may marry a man who mistreats her and their children. She probably has very low self-esteem and doesn't have the strength or doesn't know how to protect herself and her children from him. Her children may have to be taken into foster care for protection until the family problems can somehow be handled at least to the point that the children may safely return home.

- 3. Sometimes parents and their children just can't get along.** All families have conflicts, but if those are so bad that a child's safety is threatened, foster care may be necessary.

This may be a particular problem with adolescent children. Fighting about rules, clothes, dating, and grades may be ongoing. Parents and child may physically fight, or the child may run away from home repeatedly. Time apart may be needed for the family to work on finding a way they can live together.

4. **A child may enter foster care after parents have voluntarily given up the child.**

Sometimes parents may love their child very much but realize that they cannot, for whatever reason, raise a child. Maybe the mother is very young and unmarried, her parents can't help her, and she and the father don't really see how they can provide a home for the child. They may choose to give the child up for adoption. The baby may then be placed into foster care until he/she is placed with an adoptive family.

### **THE PROCESS OF ENTERING FOSTER CARE**

For a child to be removed from his/her home and placed into foster care, the Department of Social Services must be given legal authority to make that placement. This legal authority is called custody. Custody gives the agency the legal power to provide care for the child while letting the parents keep their legal rights as parents. (Remember, this is different from adoption, in which parents lose their legal rights to a child.)

There are two main ways DSS can get custody of a child.

1. Parent(s) may **voluntarily** give DSS custody. In such a voluntary placement, the parent agrees for the child to be placed and gives the agency the authority to provide foster care for the child. Reasons 1, 4, and 5 for entering foster care are examples of voluntary placements. Only a small percentage of placements with DSS are voluntary.
2. DSS may be granted custody by **family court**. In a court-ordered placement, the decision to place a child in foster care is made by the family court in order to protect the child. This is the method when abuse or neglect is involved and this is the most common method.

Miracle Hill Ministries, Inc. does not obtain custody of children. The Department of Social Services places children through the Miracle Hill foster home program. Foster parents will deal directly with Miracle Hill foster home licensing staff for child placement and licensing issues. However, a foster child will have a DSS caseworker who will visit the child once a month. The DSS caseworker may also share pertinent information, appointments, and transportation issues with you.

### **WHY CHILDREN LEAVE FOSTER CARE**

We have said that foster care is temporary. That means that the child or children you take into your home probably won't be there very long. But where will the child go when he/she leaves you?

Most children leaving foster care do so for one of the following reasons:

**1. They return to their own homes and birth parents.**

We said earlier that the agency would try to help the parents while their children were in foster care, and we said that the first goal of foster care is to return children to their own homes. If we're successful, that is exactly what will happen. We will have been able to help the parents improve enough that their children can safely return home.

**2. They are placed permanently with relatives.**

If within a reasonable period of time the parents haven't been able to change enough to make their home safe for their child(ren), we will see if there is a suitable relative who would like to take the child. If so, the child will leave foster care and go to live with this relative.

**3. They are placed for adoption.**

Sometime the court will decide that it is unlikely that the parents will ever be able to provide a safe home for a particular child. In such cases, the child will be legally freed for adoption and moved to an adoptive home. (You may have heard that sometimes foster parents are able to adopt the foster child placed with them. That is true, but you can't count on it. If you take a foster child, you must always be prepared to give up the child.)

Though there are other ways a child may leave a foster home, these are the main ones.

### **IDEAS BEHIND FOSTER CARE**

The resource/foster care program is based on some ideas or beliefs about children and families. The policies and practices in the program are all there for a reason. They are there because of things we believe about what children and families are like or what is good for them. Understanding these is important for understanding the resource/foster care program.

Here are some of those beliefs. As you read them, think about whether you agree or disagree.

**1. The family is the main force in a child's life.**

Infants are totally dependent upon the family for their survival, but even older children need the family for security, support, development, and learning.

**2. Children become attached to their families.**

The longer a child has lived with his/her family during the first few years of life, the more they become a part of that child's world and his/her identity.

**3. Usually, children grow and develop best when they stay with their own families.**

That is why we don't move a child from his/her home into foster care unless it is really necessary.

4. **Children need permanent, stable homes and relationships with parents.**  
Again, that's why we try so hard to keep children with their birth parents. It is also why, if we do have to move children, we try to get them back home or into another permanent place as soon as possible.
5. **A child's sense of time is different from an adult's.**  
A week, even a month, might seem like a short time to you. But for a child, it can be a very long time. That is another reason we want to get children back with their birth parents or to another permanent place as soon as possible.
6. **Families, not just children, need services.**  
Though our main responsibility is toward the children who need protection, one way to help protect children is to help their families. Thus, when children are in foster care, we will usually be working with their families also to help them provide a better place for a child.

## **GOALS OF FOSTER CARE**

Because of what we believe about children and families, the first goal of foster care is to get a child back home as soon as possible. This means getting the child back where he/she has ties, attachments, and doing it before his/her sense of identity with the family is seriously threatened.

## **THE RESOURCE/FOSTER PARENT ROLE**

What is a resource/foster parent? Is he/she a substitute parent? A babysitter? A full-time counselor? If you're a little uncertain, it's no wonder. Our ideas about foster parenting have changed over the years. What you heard or thought ten years ago may no longer be true.

**We see the role of the resource/foster parent as providing daily parenting to enhance a foster child's total development, while at the same time working toward a permanent plan for the child.**

Resource/Foster parents are now seen as a part of a **team** that focuses on preserving the birth family (including the child as a part of it) unless dire circumstances make that impossible. Resource parents work with the family, the agency, and the child as just that—a resource. Resource parents are partners in parenting, helping the birth parents stay involved in the child's life and helping parents and child avoid the jolt that is likely to occur with their reunification after out-of-home care. As such, the resource/foster parent is involved in **planning** for a child and helping achieve that plan, even when it means (as it usually does) helping the child leave the foster home. **You may share in decision-making.**

Many people are involved when a child enters foster care. Perhaps several caseworkers will have worked with him/her; family court is involved; birth parents are involved; the child is certainly involved; and the resource/foster parents are involved. Each of you has something to give to decision-making for the child. Each has different knowledge of and experiences with the child. Because we know how important decisions for a foster child are and because no one person has all the information needed for making those decisions, decision-making is shared.

## **You may be asked to contribute to the case plan.**

This is a specific way you share in decision making. For every child in foster care, the agency must have a case plan. This is a document in the case record that tells why the child cannot live with his/her birth parents; what kind of contact he/she should have with the birth parents; what services the child is to receive; and what needs to happen next for the child. The agency may ask you, the child, birth parents, and perhaps others to help make this plan. **You help with case reviews.**

Because we want to be very sure that no child in foster care is forgotten and because we know that things change, we regularly review the case plan. We want to know if the goals in the plan have been met or if they might need to be changed. Some of the reviews are before the **Foster Care Review Board**. This is a small team of people who review the case plan for all foster children every six months.

As you can see, as a resource/foster parent you will be expected to do your part to see that your foster child moves into a permanent home--either that of his/her birth parents or another--as soon as possible. The agency assumes that you will have special knowledge and ability to help make decisions and plans for the child. **Resource/Foster parenting is a very responsible and demanding job! It requires 100% commitment—foster children do not come to resource/foster parents with a receipt.**

## **SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES**

As with any job, foster parenting has specific tasks and responsibilities. These will vary according to the particular child and that child's plan. Here is a sample of what may be expected of you.

1. Evaluate how **suitable** your home is for a particular child.
2. Provide **daily care** for the child.
3. Meet the basic **emotional needs** of the child, giving guidance, acceptance, security, and structure.
4. Be sure the child's **educational needs** are met.
5. Be sure **medical needs** are met.
6. Keep certain **records** on a child.
7. Provide **transportation** for the child's appointments.
8. Keep the agency informed of any **problems, concerns, or emergencies** regarding the child.
9. Keep the agency informed of **changes** in you and your family's lives if these may affect the foster child.
10. Participate in **decision-making**, attending court and Foster Care Review Board hearings when needed.
11. Help the child understand his/her **past and present** situation.
12. Help the child understand and deal with **leaving** the foster home.
13. Support the child's relationship with the **birth family**.

This list of responsibilities is not complete, but it is enough to give you some idea of what is expected of resource/foster parents.

## **FOSTER CARE BOARD PAYMENTS**

What are resource/foster parents expected to use the board payment for?

Payment is to be used for the additional expenses resource/foster parents have because the foster child is in their family. These expenses are **food, clothing, shelter, utilities, and incidentals.**

As you can see the foster care board payments will only barely cover your expenses in fostering a child. You are **not reimbursed** for your **time**--24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You are not reimbursed for your level of **experience** in parenting children. You are not reimbursed for your **love**, your **concern**, and the **advocacy** you do on behalf of a child in your care.

Only you can decide if you can take on this job that really doesn't give you a salary. Periodically there are increases in foster care board payment rates. You should know, however, that **resource/foster parenting will not increase your family's income.** In fact, most resource/foster parents tell us that fostering actually costs them money.

The foster care board payments for DSS placements are broken down as follows:

<u>Day Age of Child</u>	<u>Amount of Board Payment</u>	<u>Rate Per Day For 30 Days</u>
Birth-5yrs.	\$332/month	\$11.06
6-12yrs.	\$359/month	\$11.96
13-21yrs.	\$425/month	\$14.16

You will receive a foster care board payment on a debit card (provided by Chase Bank) once a month or by direct deposit, for as long as a foster child is in your care. It may take from six to eight weeks after a child is placed with you for you to receive the first board payment. All board payment checks should come to you by the middle of the month. What this means is that you are always getting paid back for the money you have already spent for the child.

If you do not receive your board payment when you expect it or if it is not in the amount you expected, contact the Miracle Hill Foster Home Coordinator.

## **MEDICAL CARE**

Do foster parents receive medical information about children placed in their care?

When the foster care licensing specialist is discussing placing a child with you, you should be given basic information about the child's health. If this is not possible, as may be the case with

emergency placements, the DSS caseworker should give you the information as soon as possible. Part of the child's case plan should address meeting his/her health needs, so this is important. This includes routine medical and dental check-ups and any special physical and emotional care the child must have.

What about the child's medical records?

The DSS caseworker should provide you with copies of the child's medical records if they are available. You will share these with doctors, hospitals, clinics, county health departments, dentists, or others who provide services to the child.

**You will be responsible for keeping written records** of the health services received by the child in your care. This is a very important part of fostering. You are responsible for being sure that the child, his/her birth family, or maybe future adoptive parents have as complete information as possible about the child's medical history. If you aren't quite sure what records you should keep, a good rule to follow is to write it down. **It is better to have too much than too little when it comes to a child's history.**

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

What does confidentiality mean to resource/foster parents?

First, it is a **protection for you**. You share a lot of information about yourself with the agency, and it is kept confidential. That means that only people who need to know the information about you may have it. Nobody else may have that information without your written permission.

Second, it is a **protection for your foster child(ren) and families**. You are given certain information about your foster child and his/her family that you need to know to properly care for the child. Neighbors, friends, relatives, school personnel, and others may ask you questions about the child, and you may be uncertain what to tell or how to respond. But there are **guidelines** you can follow to help you protect a child's and his/her family's privacy.

1. Don't discuss the child's background, such as family history, location of relatives, medical facts, or plans, with others unless they are directly involved in providing services to the child or his/her foster family.
2. If neighbors are curious, present a positive image of being a resource/foster parent without giving specific information about the child. Tell how meaningful being a resource/foster parent has been to you and your family rather than dwelling on the foster child's problems.
3. Help correct misconceptions about foster care. Educate others about foster care instead of answering questions about why a child is with you.

**It is very important to protect the confidentiality of the child and his family. It will be difficult when your neighbors want to know about the child and why he is in foster care; but, you must be very careful about what you say. A good statement is that the foster child's family is having some problems that they are trying to work out. Do not give any**

details about the problems. This could also be a good opportunity for you to explain how foster care works and why you decided to become a resource/foster parent.

**DSS confidentiality policy:** No resource/foster family shall directly or indirectly disclose any information regarding foster children, their biological families/relatives or other individual who have had control of the foster children, other than to professionals treating, caring and providing services for the child or others as DSS deems appropriate and that information disclosed shall be limited to information that is necessary to provide for the child's needs and in their best interest.

## **LICENSING STUDY**

Though it may seem to take a lot of time, and you may wonder why we ask so many questions, the licensing study is very important. Here are some of the reasons.

**1. It's the law!**

The SC Code of Law licensing regulations forms the basis of the licensing study and gives to the Department of Social Services the authority and responsibility to complete the study. Under DSS authority, Miracle Hill is able to complete the study.

**2. You need to be able to evaluate whether or not you want to be a foster parent.**

Through the licensing study not only do we get information about you, but you get information about foster parenting. This helps you decide if this is really what you want for yourself and your family.

**3. You and we need to know what kind of child you can best foster or what type child, if any, you can't handle.**

All children are different. All families are different. Not every resource/foster parent can be expected to work well with every child. Thus it is important that you and we find out as much as possible about what type child would fit best with your family, and what child you are best able to care for. Finding this "best fit" will help ensure you and your foster child a successful experience together. Remember that the licensing study is a mutual process. That means we are assessing your potential as a resource/foster parent, but you are also assessing whether or not you want to become a resource/foster parent. Each party—you and the agency—gives and receives information. Each asks questions of the other. We believe that with enough information both you and the agency will be able to make the best decision about resource/foster parenting. **The more open you can be about your fears and concerns, as well as about your strengths, the better the decision we both will be able to make about you as a resource/foster parent.**

## **TRAINING REQUIREMENTS**

Do resource/foster parents have to receive training before they are licensed?

Yes, prospective resource/foster parents must receive **fourteen hours of training** before they may be licensed. The group licensing study is the way you will meet this requirement.

Are there additional training requirements?

Yes, once you are licensed you must receive **fourteen hours of training** each year to keep your license. You will be able to discuss your own learning needs with your foster home licensing specialist and decide what training is needed and where you can get it. There are many different training opportunities in the state, and we feel sure you and your foster home licensing specialist can locate the training you want and need.