

How to Become a Foster Parent: A Step-by-Step Guide

There is a huge need for foster families today. [More than 425,000 youths](#) are in the foster care system, and close to half of them rely on non-relatives for a stable and loving home. Are you willing and able to lend them a helping hand and become a foster parent?

But, becoming a foster parent doesn't happen overnight. In this guide, we will walk you through the core steps you should take and consider before starting the journey, and review the processes in place before children are placed in your care.

Step 1: Decide it's right for you

Being a foster parent is not right for everyone. Taking in children, even if they are related to you, can sometimes be a daunting task. But, it can be an extremely rewarding experience for both the adults and children involved. In particular, loving and stable foster families can go a long way towards ensuring that [youth in the foster care system succeed later in life](#).

But, before taking the first steps, it's critical to understand the unique needs of children who find themselves in the foster care system. One in five are six years old or older when placed in foster care and most (over 60 percent) are people of color. Many have also [experienced significant trauma in their lives](#), including physical abuse (44 percent), emotional abuse (50 percent) and neglect (59 percent).

Nevertheless, many children and foster parents have positive things to say about their experience. Three out of four say the parent-child relationship is "[very warm and close](#)," and 95 percent of foster parents would do it again.

These positive feelings are shared by foster parents no matter how old they are (more than half of all foster parents are over age 50) or why they elected to participate. In particular, while 11 percent of those who adopt after fostering a child did so to help someone in need, many others did so in order to just grow or expand their families.

Step 2: Learn the qualifications

Once you've decided that you want to become a foster parent, it's time to get started on the application process. Different states and foster family agencies have distinct and unique requirements and asks, so it's crucial to brush up on what's needed in your area first.

In California, the state requires prospective applicants to apply for and [obtain a license](#) both to become a Resource Parent (the state's equivalent term for foster parents) and to adopt. In order to get the license, a state-sanctioned worker will go to your house and chat with you and your spouse/partner if relevant to determine eligibility.

So what does the state look for when deciding if someone is fit to be a Resource Parent? Here's a [brief overview](#):

- California has particular requirements when it comes to sleeping quarters. Three or more children can't be in the same bedroom, and those in the bedroom can't be of different genders/sexes. You can't be in the same room as the children unless the child is two or younger. The bedroom can't be a thoroughfare/hallway in the house, and it needs proper bedding and storage. The room needs to be a dedicated bedroom as well, and not a converted garage or something along those lines.
- The state will also make sure that the house is safe and fit for children. Fire deterrents like smoke detectors, sprinklers and fire extinguishers need to be present and in good working order. Potential hazards like pools and fireplaces should be appropriately safeguarded. Weapons and medicine has to be properly stored and away from a child's reach.
- Trash and other waste must be properly put away, and bathrooms need to be clean and in good working order.
- Licensing requirements also take into account the physical needs of the child. The residence where the child will be staying should have a yard or another kind of safe outdoor space nearby. If the child has any physical, developmental or mental deficiencies, then the home must safely and appropriately account for them.
- In review for the license, officials will look at the fitness of the potential parents to take care of the child. They will look into whether each parent is fully committed, and if they have the financial resources available to care for the foster child.

These are just some of the legal requirements in place in California. For more information on state laws and regulations, turn to the [California Department of Social Services](#) and any relevant county or city body where you live.

Potential Resource Parents must also submit themselves to a background check, which looks at criminal history, medication and health history, references from family, driving record and more. This [guide will show you](#) all of the screenings, trainings and documentation needed in order to become a Resource Parent.

Step 3: Decide which model is right for you

When it comes to fostering children, there are different approaches to consider. Age, timelines, number of children and more should be factored into any decision. Some stats to consider:

- 42 percent of all foster youth are [13 and older](#), while 40 percent are 9 and younger.
- Over half (54 percent) of foster youth have special health care needs.
- Among all children who were first fostered and then later adopted, 82 percent had siblings. Typically, the goal is to [keep all siblings together](#) in a foster setting. Ideally, children with siblings all end up in the same location during the fostering process.

It's important to consider the preferred outcomes of the children and others involved when relevant and necessary in the decision making process. Over [half of all children who eventually leave the foster care system](#) are reunited with their parent or other primary caregiver, while

more than one in five are later adopted. The goals of the various stakeholders should be considered in the process.

These desired objectives affect timelines as well. The majority ([63 percent](#)) of foster youth stay with a Resource Parent between one and 23 months, while others stay for shorter or longer amounts of time. Consider what timelines work best for you when getting started.

Here at AFS, we offer a number of [foster care services](#) (including [therapeutic foster care](#), [intensive treatment foster care](#) and [services specifically for children with developmental disabilities](#)) as well as [mental health services](#) and services designed specifically for [youth about to age out of the foster care system](#). We have a wide variety of services to help children and prospective parents with an array of needs and concerns.

Additional requirements and considerations

Beyond the legal and logistical requirements, you may have some other questions or concerns about becoming a foster parent. Here are answers to some of the most common questions we get asked.

Is there any assistance (logistical, monetary, etc.) available to foster parents?

Yes, there is help available! In particular, [AFS works with](#) potential and current parents to develop an action plan for the new addition to their family and to ensure the placement goes smoothly throughout its duration. Foster parents are also eligible for stipends, tax refunds and reimbursements for foster-related training, to help offset some of the costs related to fostering.

What kind of time commitment does fostering involve?

Parenting is a full-time job, and foster parents must ensure children are looked after at all times. But, foster parents do have some resources available to them. AFS offers paid respite services for families, and foster parents are allowed to [make their own child care arrangements](#) as they see fit.

Am I responsible for medical care for the child? What about education?

Yes, foster parents are responsible for the health and well-being of the children they take in, which includes ensuring they remain in and attend school. Foster children do qualify for Medi-Cal, which covers medical and dental care.

Do I need to be married to be a foster parent? Do I need to live in a house?

Non-married domestic partners can 100% foster children, as can single people. Foster parents can [rent their living space](#) as well, as you don't need to be a property owner to be a Resource Parent.

Next steps: Is adoption right for you?

Over one in five children currently in the foster care system is looking for a forever home.

No matter how you slice it, being a foster parent is often a highly rewarding experience. The [majority of foster parents are very happy about their decision](#) in the end, and we're confident you will be too. If you're interested in helping children in your community and growing your family by becoming a foster parent, then [be sure to sign up today!](#)

About AFS

Alternative Family Services was founded in 1973 with the goal to improve the lives of children in the foster care system alongside the greater community. The mission of AFS is to support vulnerable children and families in need of stability, safety and wellbeing in communities. AFS serves 10 northern California counties, and offers a wide variety of foster care, youth support, family support and mental health services. The solutions and services offered by AFS are based on evidence, centered on families and community, and culturally competent.

Intro

- Stats on the overall state of foster care in US and CA
- <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/foster.pdf>
- Issues prior to placement: https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/children-adopted-foster-care-child-and-family-characteristics-adoption-motivation-and-well-being#_Toc300125443
- Common issues: <http://www.aecf.org/blog/what-is-foster-care/>

Step 1: Decide it's right for you

- Stats on benefits of having a stable and loving house
- "On average, children remain in state care for nearly two years and six percent of children in foster care have languished there for five or more years." - <http://www.childrensrights.org/newsroom/fact-sheets/foster-care/>
- Many foster parents are in their 50s and 60s: https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/children-adopted-foster-care-child-and-family-characteristics-adoption-motivation-and-well-being#_Toc300125443
- Reasons why people adopt and foster: https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/children-adopted-foster-care-child-and-family-characteristics-adoption-motivation-and-well-being#_Toc300125443

Step 2: Learn the qualifications

- <http://www.afs4kids.org/become-foster-parent/>
- What does the law say?
- Background tests
- In-depth family assessment
- State regulations require that no more than two children of the same gender and within five years of age may share a room. Each child must have his or her own bed, closet space and dresser. A foster child may not share a room with an adult (18+) unless the child is under 2 years of age.
- Screenings, trainings and documentation needed for foster parents
- Need a foster care license/license application process: <https://www.adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/how-to-adopt-and-foster/state-information/california>
- Full list of state requirements: <http://adoptionlawgroup.com/home-requirements-for-would-be-foster-parents-in-california/>

Step 3: Decide which model is right for you

Additional requirements and FAQ: <http://afs4kids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/foster-parent-faq.pdf>

- Need to live in one of the 10 counties AFS is in
- Stable income enough to support a child/children
- Need adult supervision of child whenever he or she is at home
- Service Plan is developed
- Education is very much a priority
- Be aware of adoption costs
- Goal is to keep siblings together: <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/Foster-Care/Foster-Care-and-Adoptive-Resource/Frequently-Asked-Questions>

- You don't need a house, as apartments are OK: <http://adoptionlawgroup.com/home-requirements-for-would-be-foster-parents-in-california/>
- Don't need to be married either
- Some funding available to help, plus Medi-Cal covers some medical and dental
- Paid respite: <http://www.afs4kids.org/services/foster-services/therapeutic-foster-care/>

Next steps - is adoption the right choice?

- Reunification may be part of the picture, or maybe a forever home is in the cards
- Know about state and county resources: <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/Foster-Care/Foster-Care-and-Adoptive-Resource/How-to-Become-a-Foster-Parent>

Conclusion

- Parents usually happy about their decision to foster: https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/children-adopted-foster-care-child-and-family-characteristics-adoption-motivation-and-well-being#_Toc300125443

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