

Talking to your children about fostering

Fact sheet for parents considering fostering

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Becoming foster carers is a major family decision. It's not one that just affects the adults — it impacts the entire household, especially your own children. Open, age-appropriate conversations are key to helping your children understand, feel heard, and become part of the fostering journey.

We know from observations and research that the success of caring households really depends on a family being ready to foster together, especially your own children. We know that isn't always an easy thing to navigate, get a sense if it's the right time for the whole family.

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The first thing to do, and sometimes the hardest thing to do, is have that conversation with your family. Ask them, 'do we want to do this together?'

Katie - [Katie | Life Without Barriers](#)

Are your children ready to welcome a child?

Before you commit to fostering, it's important to assess how emotionally and developmentally ready your own children are to share their home and parents with another child. Your conversations about fostering and how it might work are a great place to start with gauging their interest in sharing their home, and ideal for ensuring they are ready to be part of the process of becoming a caring household.

Some things to think about are:

1. Observe emotional maturity

- Does your child show empathy for others, especially those different from them?
- Can they manage jealousy, frustration, or sharing attention with others?

Tip: if your child struggles with emotional regulation or needs a lot of one-on-one support themselves, they may find fostering overwhelming at this time.

2. Have open, ongoing conversations

- Ask your child how they feel about having another child stay in your home.
- Are they curious, anxious, resentful, excited — or a mix of all?

Look for: willingness to engage in honest dialogue and ask thoughtful questions.

Children may need some time to sit with the idea and ask questions over time.

3. Assess understanding

- Do they grasp that a foster child may come from a difficult background?
- Can they understand that the foster child may not behave “normally” at first?

Look for: age-appropriate understanding of what fostering involves — especially that it’s temporary and that it can be emotionally complex.

4. Evaluate flexibility & willingness to share

Are they able to share physical space, belongings, and parental attention?

How do they currently respond to visitors, guests, or younger children?

Time to pause?: Persistent resistance to sharing space or a strong need for exclusivity from parents might mean your kids aren’t ready just yet.

5. Notice patterns over time

- Are they consistently supportive or interested, or do they swing between enthusiasm and distress?
- Do their feelings seem tied to other stressors (e.G., School, friendships, recent family changes)?

Guidance: a single conversation isn’t enough. Readiness should be based on patterns over time, not one-time reactions. It’s important to give your children time to process and understand the idea of fostering, just as you’ve had time to consider it yourself.

6. Watch for willing participation

- Have they had a chance to say no or express doubt without being shut down?
- Do they express a genuine desire to be part of the decision?

Reminder: agreement under pressure or guilt is not true consent — it may lead to resentment down the road. Starting out your fostering journey with resistant household members can impact the feelings of safety and belonging in your home.

Conversations with children

Conversations about what foster care is and might look like for your family will vary depending on the age and developmental stage of your children. There are some quick tips below around what might work for certain age groups.

Ages 0–4: infants and toddlers

What they understand:

- Very limited understanding of fostering, but a growing understanding of family.
- Sensitive to changes in routine and attention.

How to approach:

- Keep routines as consistent as possible.
- Use gentle language: “we’re going to have a new little friend stay with us for a while.”
- Offer reassurance through physical comfort, routines, and extra attention.

Key messages:

- “You are loved and safe.”
- “This child is coming to stay for a little while.”

Ages 5–8: early primary years

What they understand:

- Developing empathy and basic ideas of family dynamics.
- May worry about sharing parents or toys.

How to approach:

- Use simple, honest explanations about why children need foster care.
- Reassure them about their unique and permanent place in your family.
- Involve them in small preparations (e.G., Picking toys or bedding).
- Key messages:
- “Some kids don’t have a safe place to live right now.”
- “We’re helping them feel safe and cared for — just like we care for you.”
- “You’ll always be our child, no matter what.”

Ages 9–12: upper primary / early teens

What they understand:

- Better grasp of emotional experiences and family roles.
- May have more questions or worries about fairness or behaviour.

How to approach:

- Be open to their questions and emotions.
- Talk about what fostering involves, including potential challenges.
- Ask for their input and feelings — help them feel heard and respected.

Key messages:

- “Fostering is something we do as a family.”
- “It might not always be easy, but we’ll figure it out together.”
- “Your voice matters in this process.”

Ages 13–17: teenagers

What they understand:

- Capable of deep empathy, but may be concerned about privacy, lifestyle, and emotional strain.

How to approach:

- Be transparent about motivations, expectations, and potential impacts.
- Give them space to process and voice opinions.
- Invite them into the process — they may appreciate responsibility or mentoring roles.

Key messages:

- “We value your input — this is a big step for all of us.”
- “There might be difficult moments, and your support will mean a lot.”
- “Fostering isn’t about replacing anyone — it’s about helping.”

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Terrie explains how fostering was a transformative but at times confronting experience for her teenage son, who grew to mentor and guide children they cared for - [Terrie | Life Without Barriers](#)

Across all ages: general tips

- **Listen more than you talk:** make space for your child's feelings — positive or negative.
- **Maintain their stability:** protect their routines, space, and sense of security.
- **Involve them, don't burden them:** let them participate in appropriate ways, but avoid adult responsibilities or guilt.
- **Be honest but reassuring:** set realistic expectations, while reinforcing that they remain your priority.
- **Use stories or resources:** age-appropriate books, videos, or talking with other fostering families can help normalize the idea.

Fostering can be a transformative and rewarding experience — but it should be a family journey, not just an adult one. Bringing your children along in the decision-making process fosters empathy, resilience, and shared purpose.

Introducing fostering through books

Reading is a great way to engage children and share new ideas through storytelling. Stories with diverse and fostering families can be a natural way to introduce conversations about fostering in your home. Some great books to consider are :

Picture books (ages 3–7)

- A safe place for rufus by jill seeney

a gentle story about a cat adjusting to a new home and healing from past hurt—an allegory for fostering that helps young children understand trauma and kindness in a safe, approachable way
- A different home: a new foster child's story by kelly & john degarmo

follows jessie as she enters a new foster family, asks many questions, and gradually begins to feel she belongs. Includes discussion notes for parents or carers
- Finding a family for tommy by rebecca daniel

a lift-the-flap book about finding the right home, ideal for explaining fostering and belonging to young children. It's great for involving birth children in understanding the process
- The invisible string by patrice karst

uses a comforting metaphor to show how love connects people even when they are apart—helpful during separation and transitions

Early school age (ages 5–10)

- Finding the right spot: when kids can't live with their parents by janice levy

a sensitive, reassuring story about placement and resilience, intended for all children experiencing separation or change

- No matter what: a foster care tale by josh shipp

honest and comforting, this picture book addresses instability in care, identity, and hope for belonging

Middle grade (ages 8–12+)

- Forever or a long, long time by caela carter

follows siblings flora and julian as they uncover their past—touching on memory, identity, and the importance of understanding one's origin

- The great gilly hopkins by jacqueline wilson

a classic middle-grade story about a tough foster kid yearning for her birth mother, learning loyalty and self-worth along the way

- Little foxes by michael morpurgo

tells the story of billy, a foster child who finds comfort in nature and belonging through friendships and self-discovery

- Home, and other big, fat lies by jill wolfson

a humorous yet heartfelt narrative of a girl who's bounced between foster homes until she finds a real community and acceptance

For birth or foster siblings + broader themes

- A family is a family is a family by sara o'leary

celebrates diverse family structures—including foster and adoptive families—without explicitly referencing trauma or care systems. A gentle inclusion tool for family discussions

- Wolfie the bunny by ame dyckman

a playful, metaphorical story about accepting a new family member who is different, useful for siblings adjusting to a foster or adoptive placement

Tips for using these books with your family

- Read together, even with older kids—it opens up safe, shared conversations.
- Encourage your child to reflect: “what did that story make you think about?” Or “how might that feel in real life?”
- Use an illustration or metaphor from picture books to talk about feelings gently.

Whatever your journey might look like as a family, we are here to help answer questions you might have. Reach out to our team for advice on talking with your kids about embarking on fostering, or another questions you might have.

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