



BECOMING A
Foster & Adoptive Parent



FAIRFAX COUNTY

Foster Care & Adoption



Dear Foster/Adoptive Parent Applicant:

On behalf of all the children, families, and staff working with the Fairfax County Foster Care and Adoption Program, thank you for taking the time to learn about how you can join the dedicated people who have brought love, security, and hope to young lives in our community.

Some children in our county experience abuse or neglect. Their parents may be unable to care for them due to problems such as mental illness or substance abuse, or they may have no family member able to help out. No matter what brings children into foster care, they all need a loving environment where they can feel nurtured and protected. Some need a temporary home until they can be reunited with their parents or relatives, while others need permanent homes with adoptive parents.

Foster and adoptive parents experience the special rewards of watching a child blossom while in their care. Foster parents can also feel great satisfaction when they help children reunite with their families,

become part of an adoptive family, or move on to an independent young adult life.

We hope this booklet will answer some of your questions as you consider joining the remarkable team of foster and adoptive parents in our community who are working to provide brighter futures for children and youth in Fairfax County. Thank you for caring enough to take this first step!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carolyn Fowler".

Carolyn Fowler
Program Manager
Foster Care & Adoption Program
Fairfax County Department
of Family Services





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CHAPTER 1:

Frequently Asked Questions



“There’s always the uncertainty of what will happen to the child in the end, but an element of bonding takes place right away. With my daughters it was love at first sight.”

—David Vasquez, adoptive parent



Becoming a foster/adoptive parent will change your life. The following information is meant as a starting point to describe the basic elements of foster care and adoption and to answer questions you may have about what to expect from yourself, the child, the child's birth family, and the Fairfax County Foster Care and Adoption Program.

What is the Difference Between Foster Care and Adoption?

Foster care is the temporary placement of a child into a safe environment outside the home. Children are placed in foster care when their parents decide they are unable to care for them or when the children are removed from their home as a result of abuse, neglect, or other circumstances that make their living situation unsafe or unhealthy.

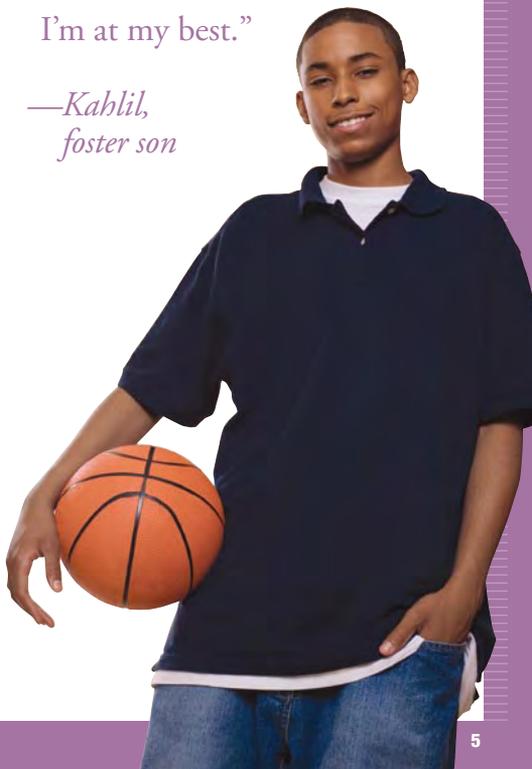
Children in foster care live temporarily with a foster family, in a group home, or in a residential treatment facility. During this time, problems in the birth family are addressed so that the child can return home to parents or relatives. If this is not possible, then plans are made for permanent placement of the child outside his or her birth family.

Adoption addresses the needs of children who cannot return to their parents or relatives. Legal adoption is permanent, and adoptive parents have the same rights and responsibilities as do parents whose children are born to them. Many adopted children are adopted by their foster parents.



“When I’m playing basketball and I can hear my mom in the crowd...I feel happy because somebody is there for me when I’m at my best.”

—*Kahlil,*
foster son





Who Are the Children in Foster Care?

Q Who are the children most likely to need foster and adoptive families?

A Children in foster care range in age from infancy to 20 years old and come from many different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Foster/adoptive families are especially needed for:

-  Brothers and sisters who want and need to be together.
-  Children over the age of 9.
-  Children who are medically fragile.
-  Children of color, of all ages.
-  Children with different language needs.
-  Teenagers.
-  Teen mothers and their babies.

Q What types of challenges do some foster children face?

A All children who enter foster care need safe, stable families who can nurture them. Often problems such as homelessness, mental illness, domestic violence, or substance abuse prevent their parents from providing the care that they need. Some children have developmental, emotional, or physical disabilities. Many of the children have experienced abuse or neglect or have been impacted by serious problems in their families. Their emotions and behaviors reflect normal

reactions for children who have faced trauma or have been mistreated.

Most children in foster care benefit from living in a foster family and are able to make great progress in learning healthy ways to express their feelings and process their previous experiences.

All children want to live as normal a life as possible while they are temporarily separated from their birth families.



Who Are Foster/Adoptive Parents?

Q Who can be a foster/adoptive parent?

A Foster/adoptive parents are ordinary people who love children and want to offer them a brighter future.

A foster/adoptive parent:

-  Must be 21 or older.
-  Must be able to provide a safe, loving environment.
-  Must complete the county's training and home study process. *(For more information on the licensing process, see chapter 3.)*
-  May be legally married, divorced, or single.
-  May work outside the home.



Q I don't have parenting experience.
Can I still apply to be a foster/
adoptive parent?

A Parenting experience can help, but it is not required. As long as you are willing to develop the skills to meet the needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect, you can be a foster/adoptive parent.

Q Do I have to be a U.S. citizen to be a foster/adoptive parent?

A You do not have to be a U.S. citizen to be a foster/adoptive parent. However, you must have a valid visa that permits you to live in the United States. Contact the Foster Care and Adoption Program in Fairfax County's Department of Family Services to discuss your situation.

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“Kids come in here and at first they're frightened, scared. But you love them and you nurture them, and they leave a completely different child.”

—Margaret Taylor, foster parent

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Can I Afford to Be a Foster/Adoptive Parent?

Q Our family lives on a modest income. Would that interfere with becoming a foster parent?

A You do not have to be wealthy to be a foster/adoptive parent. You need enough income to meet the expenses of your family, because foster/adoptive parenting does not provide an income to the foster/adoptive parents.

Q Are foster parents paid to care for the children placed in their homes?

A Foster parents receive reimbursement to offset the costs of a child's room, board, clothing, and child's personal allowance.

Q What else does the county pay for, and what support may a family expect from the Fairfax County Department of Family Services?

A In addition to providing room and board payments, the county's Department of Family Services is responsible for covering all medical and dental costs for children in foster care, using Medicaid and other funding sources. The department pays for other services the child may need, such as child care, counseling, respite care, summer camp, school fees and trips, tutoring, and music lessons.

Each child in foster care is assigned a social worker who teams with the foster parents to meet the needs of the child. Foster parents also may take advantage of support groups, social activities, and training opportunities. (For more information, see chapters 5 and 6.)

Q Do I have to be a homeowner to be a foster parent?

A No. Foster parents can be homeowners or renters, as long as the dwelling is safe, free of health hazards, and has sufficient bedroom space.

How Do I Become a Foster/Adoptive Parent?

Q How long does it take to become a foster/adoptive parent?

A Because the children entering foster care have already experienced the trauma of abuse and neglect, we must be sure their foster/adoptive parents are qualified and properly prepared to care for them. This takes time, but we are always mindful of what is in the best interest of the children.

We conduct a comprehensive, 27-hour training program for our foster/adoptive parent applicants. We also conduct a home study of the applicant. To complete the training and the home study and become approved as a foster/



adoptive parent typically takes about four months.

Q What is my legal responsibility for children placed with me and my family?

A The Fairfax County Department of Family Services has either temporary or permanent legal custody of children in foster care. For children being fostered, the foster parents are responsible for the day-to-day care of the child, while the department is responsible for determining where the child will live, what contact the child will have with birth family members, and what treatment and special services the child will receive. For children being adopted, the department retains legal custody until the adoption is finalized, when full legal parental responsibility is given to the adoptive parents.

Q How are foster parents and children “matched”?

A A child in foster care is matched with a foster/adoptive family based upon the individual needs of the child. Consideration is given to the child’s history, emotional needs, behaviors, physical condition, and birth family’s situation. During the training and home study process, the social worker will assist you in identifying your strengths as well as the characteristics of children you feel most prepared to parent.

Efforts are made to place siblings together and in as close proximity to their family’s neighborhood as possible. The race and ethnicity of a child are only two of many factors considered in deciding a placement for a child. All factors are considered to determine which placement will be in the best interests of the child.

“Just being able to be around a family made me feel good... Having people there to talk to and to care...I liked that a lot.”

—Fairfax County foster child





What are the rewards of foster/adoptive parenting?

In the words of a Fairfax County foster parent

✦ **Shared growth.** Since many of these youth have experienced significant interruptions in their emotional development, imagine the rate at which they will grow in a supportive, nurturing environment. Watching an 18-year-old youth learning to walk life's walk is just as rewarding as watching an 18-month-old baby take his first steps. More remarkably, you will find that you also have grown. I am ever so thankful to my sons for the person they have made of me.

✦ **Shared experiences.** I have expanded my interests in music, arts, languages, sports, nature, and relationships in ways that I might not have imagined. The photos, the stories, the souvenirs, and the memories of adventures large and small will be a part of my life and a part of the heritage that is passed to their children.

✦ **Sharing.** When you focus your life on helping others, your own problems lose significance and fade to tranquility.





CHAPTER 2:

Ways to Be a Foster/Adoptive Parent

A close-up photograph of two women laughing joyfully. The woman on the left has blonde hair and is wearing a pink shirt. The woman on the right has dark skin and is wearing a blue denim shirt. They are both smiling broadly, showing their teeth, and their eyes are closed in laughter. The background is dark and out of focus.

“Watching an 18-year-old youth learning to walk life’s walk is just as rewarding as watching an 18-month-old baby take his first steps.” — *Fairfax County foster parent*



“{Foster parenting} has made my life brighter and richer.... My foster daughters have broadened my views, my perspectives. They’ve introduced me to new interests—to new activities.” — *Fairfax County foster parent*

Foster families offer several types of care:

Regular Foster Home – Family cares for a child for a temporary period, from several months to over a year, until the child can return to the birth family or until another permanent living arrangement is found. Some foster parents are willing to both foster and adopt.

Child-Specific – Relatives or close friends care for children whose backgrounds and circumstances they knew prior to the children’s entering foster care.

Mentor Home – Families give older youth, ages 16 to 20, a place to live and valuable guidance as they prepare to live on their own. Mentors can help youth make good choices about such issues as careers, extending education, and building practical life skills.

Fairfax Families4Kids Host Family – A family cares for a child (or children) age 9 to 17 over a series of weekends while helping to find them an adoptive family.

Adoptive Home – Family makes a permanent commitment to adopt a child who is in foster care.

More than 70 percent of the children who become adopted through our program are adopted by families who began as their foster parents. Along with a permanent family comes a lifelong support system, love, and a brighter future.

The Foster Care and Adoption Program:

Offers support, training, and home studies to prospective foster and adoptive families.

Matches children’s needs to the strengths of prospective foster/adoptive parents.

Helps children’s birth families receive services and treatment that will enable their children to be returned home.

Provides post-adoption services and financial support to the adoptive families of eligible children.



CHAPTER 3: Steps to Becoming a Foster/Adoptive Parent





Becoming a foster/adoptive parent takes time, but the process is an investment that can repay you—and the children of our community—for a lifetime.

We will work closely with you during this process—through information meetings, home visits, training sessions, and individual consultations—to answer your questions and teach you skills that will help you become an effective foster/adoptive parent.

We encourage all applicants to use the trainings and home study process to learn about yourselves to determine if fostering and/or adopting is right for you.

During our process, you will meet other people who share your interest in becoming foster/adoptive parents. Together, we can work as a team to provide the resources and support needed to care for the children of our community.

The process to become a foster/adoptive parent has three basic steps:

Step 1: Information Meeting

Step 2: Initial Home Visit

Step 3: PRIDE Pre-Service Training and Home Study Process

Step 1: Information Meeting

People begin the process of becoming a foster/adoptive parent in many different

ways. You may have already visited our website (www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/), or you may have called our office to ask about our program. Whether you've made the decision to begin our training process or you simply want to learn more, we encourage you to come to an orientation meeting.

Orientation meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the second Monday of each month at our Fairfax office:

**Fairfax County Department of
Family Services
Human Services Center –
Pennino Building
12011 Government Center Parkway
Fairfax, Virginia 22035**

Additional orientation meetings are scheduled from time to time at different locations. To find out more about these additional opportunities, please contact us at the number listed below.

We are always happy to speak with you by phone to answer individual questions. To speak with a member of our staff or with one of our foster/adoptive parents, please call 703-324-7639, TTY 703-222-9452.



Step 2: Home Visit

If you have attended an information meeting and would like to move forward with our process, we will arrange a time for a social worker to come to your home to learn more about your home environment, your schedule and availability, and why you wish to be a

foster/adoptive parent. The social worker will also answer your questions about the training and home study process, as well as review the upcoming training schedule. Together, we will make a decision about the best time for you to begin training.

Home Study Process

Because the Fairfax County Foster Care and Adoption Program is legally responsible for the well-being and safety of all the children we serve, the department is required to approve foster/adoptive families before children are placed in their homes.

Although applicants are approved to both foster and adopt, a family may choose to do only one form of parenting.

As you prepare for the training and home study process, a social worker will visit your home to discuss all of the steps and approval standards. During this first visit, the social worker will need your help to determine if the following five basic requirements can be met:

- 1) Your residence (house, apartment, condominium, or other dwelling) is a safe place without structural or health hazards, and has adequate bedroom space for the child or children in your care.
- 2) Your family has sufficient resources to meet its needs.
- 3) You are either legally married, legally divorced, legally separated, or single.
- 4) You and every adult, age 18 and over, in the home are willing to complete a criminal record check. A criminal record does not necessarily exclude you from becoming a foster/adoptive parent, but the seriousness and nature of any criminal offense will be considered. It is important for you to share information during the social worker's initial home visit about any possible problems with fingerprint clearance.
- 5) You and every adult in the home must undergo a Child Protective Services registry background check. We do this to ensure that no one in the household has ever been the subject of any abuse or neglect report involving a child.



Step 3: PRIDE Training and Home Study Process

Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) is a training program for all prospective foster/adoptive parents. After the initial home visit, a social worker will assess your home environment, schedule and availability, and motivation to become a foster/adoptive parent and determine if it is appropriate for you to be invited to training.

PRIDE training covers a series of skills, known as “competencies,” that you will need to become a foster/adoptive parent. Through the nine sessions of PRIDE, you will be able to assess whether you have or can develop these competencies, and how willing you are to become a foster/adoptive parent.

During the training, a social worker will complete three additional home visits to determine whether you possess the core competencies: protecting and nurturing children; meeting children’s developmental needs and addressing any developmental delays; supporting relationships between children and their birth families; connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime; and working as a member of a professional team.

“You can never be fully prepared, but (the PRIDE trainers) got me close.”

“They gave us all the information we needed, and when we needed more they gave it to us.”

—Fairfax County foster parents





PRIDE SESSIONS

The nine sessions of Foster/Adopt PRIDE include the following:

SESSION 1: Connecting with PRIDE

In this session, prospective parents learn about the world of foster care and adoption and how to work as part of a team to provide care for children in need in our community. The training explains the factors that lead children into the foster care and adoption system; emotional and psychological issues they may face; the importance of permanence and stable relationships for children; roles and responsibilities for foster/adoptive parents; and how foster/adoptive families are licensed and certified.

SESSION 2: Teamwork Toward Permanence

One of a foster/adoptive parent's greatest challenges is to understand the significance of birth families to children—and to support and talk with their children about their family relationships. In this session, prospective parents learn about ways to support a child's identity, cultural heritage, and self-esteem. They also learn about how foster/adoptive families and birth families work as a team to provide permanence in the lives of children.

SESSION 3: Meeting Developmental Needs – Attachment

This session reviews the basics of child growth and development, stressing the importance of

forming deep and lasting attachments. It also describes the potential impact of abuse, neglect, and trauma on a child's behavior, development, and ability to form healthy bonds. The session emphasizes how foster/adoptive parents can help build positive attachments with children to meet their developmental needs.

SESSION 4: Meeting Developmental Needs – Loss

Children who are separated from their families often feel an overwhelming sense of loss that can affect their growth and development. This session explains the types of loss that many children experience before they enter foster care, and discusses how placement with a foster family can sometimes deepen a child's sense of loss. The training explores ways to respond to and help children cope with and heal their sense of loss.

SESSION 5: Strengthening Family Relationships

This session focuses on how families instill identity, cultural heritage, and self-esteem in children. We discuss why it is important for children to develop family connections and a sense of continuity, and learn ways to help a child develop positive cultural identity at different developmental stages. This session also explains the child welfare goal of reuniting children in foster care with their birth families.



SESSION 6: Meeting Developmental Needs – Discipline

This session reviews the agency's policy on discipline and discusses techniques for providing discipline that can work for different types of children and situations. Parents learn about strategies for managing the behavior problems of children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and trauma and steps that can be taken to manage crisis situations.

SESSION 7: Continuing Family Relationships

This session outlines the specific tasks needed to help children achieve *permanence*, through either a permanent placement with their birth families or in the home of a relative, or adoption. It explains permanency timeframes and the importance of the “child’s clock” in making permanency decisions. The session ends with a discussion of cultural issues in permanency planning, the impact of transracial placements on children, and ways to support a child’s developing identity in a transitional placement.

SESSION 8: Planning for Change



This session takes a practical view of what to expect during the first hours, days, and weeks of a child’s placement in a home. Parents find out what to ask the social worker and how to talk to the child. They also explore how the placement may affect their family and other children in the home, both in the short and long term. The group discusses ways to create a safe and healing home environment for children who have experienced sexual abuse. The session also addresses the risks of being a foster or adoptive parent and how families can find support from other team members.

SESSION 9: Taking PRIDE – Making an Informed Decision

In this closing session, parents hear from a panel of experienced members of the foster care team, including birth parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, and social workers. Parents have a chance to reflect on their own growth in the knowledge and skills required for foster/adoptive parenting. At the conclusion, they are on their way toward a final decision about the commitment to becoming a foster or adoptive parent.



From the Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE handbook, Illinois
Department of Family Services © 2003



CHAPTER 4: Checklist of Necessary Paperwork





The following is a list of the forms and information required to complete the foster/adoptive parent approval process. Additional records or background information may also be required.

- Foster/adoptive parent application, including three personal references.
- Child Protective Services checks for all household members over 18.
- Federal, state, and local police background checks for all household members over 18.
- TB test for all household members over 18.
- Physicals for all prospective foster/adoptive parents, plus a doctor's statement confirming that other household members (including children) are healthy and free of communicable diseases.
- Vaccination record for pets.
- Copies of marriage certificate, divorce decree, or death certificate as applicable.
- Family background information and autobiography.
- Family photograph.
- PRIDE homework.
- Written emergency evacuation plan with diagram of home.
- Signed confidentiality statement.

Applicants must also meet all of the foster home standards listed in Volume VII, Section I, Chapter I of the Virginia Department of Social Services Policy Manual, Standards and Regulations for Agency Approved Providers.

After all the information is compiled, a written home study is completed by the social worker and reviewed by the supervisor to render a decision about approval or denial of the applicant.

Approved foster homes are reviewed every two years. These follow-up reviews include the following:

- Review records of contact with all social workers who have placed children in the home during the previous two years.
- Visit the home to assess any changes in the home or family and discuss the family's experience with the Department of Family Services. The social worker also assesses the family's ability to continue to meet the needs of foster children placed in the home.
- Conduct updated state and local criminal record checks on all adults in the home.



CHAPTER 5: In-Service Training





PRIDE training helps you prepare for foster and adoptive parenting. Once a child has been placed in your home, you will need more specific information about the child's growth and development.

To meet this need, we provide an in-service training program that is required for all people who are fostering in Fairfax County. In-service training is optional for adoptive parents. This training consists of the following:

- ✧ **Newly approved foster parents** must attend nine hours of training on the topic of discipline techniques/interventions, as presented in the PRIDE format.
- ✧ **Experienced foster parents** must attend six hours of in-service training in each subsequent year on topics they choose.

Our department wants to support the efforts of our foster and adoptive families, not increase your burden. As a result, we make every effort to assist you in completing this annual training requirement. *For example, we:*

- ✧ Offer various training opportunities throughout the year.
- ✧ Offer trainings in different areas and at different times to accommodate your schedule.
- ✧ Invite guest speakers to some trainings to address specific topics of child development and skills enhancement.
- ✧ Enable foster and adoptive parents to fulfill requirements by attending approved community training or training presented at their place of work.
- ✧ Provide a small stipend to defray some of the costs, such as babysitting and travel costs, that foster and adoptive parents incur to attend training.
- ✧ Offer scholarships for foster and adoptive parents to attend state and national conferences, and allow conference hours to be counted toward training requirements.





CHAPTER 6:

Support Services Offered





Children and youth in foster care and their foster parents receive many supportive services, and a wide range of resources are available to them.

These resources include:

- ✧ Monthly room and board payments that include a portion for the child's food, clothing, personal needs, and the child's personal allowance, based on the child's age.
- ✧ All medical and dental care for the child.
- ✧ Services for the child such as child care, counseling, respite care, summer camp, school fees and trips, music lessons, and tutoring.
- ✧ Training prior to becoming a foster/adoptive parent and ongoing training.
- ✧ An assigned social worker to provide ongoing support and guidance.
- ✧ Support from other foster/adoptive parents, as well as the Fairfax County Foster Care and Adoption Association, which presents monthly programs and sponsors a clothing closet and social events.





CHAPTER 7: Next Steps





Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet. We look forward to the possibility of welcoming you to the team of foster/adoptive parents in Fairfax County—ordinary people engaged in extraordinary work, providing love and support for the youth who need it most. As our current adoptive and foster/adoptive parents will tell you, there are few jobs as rewarding and full of joy as helping children and their families.

This information is just a starting place. To find out more about how our process works and whether being a foster/adoptive parent is right for you, we encourage you to take the following steps:

-  Attend an information session.
-  Schedule a home visit.

As always, we welcome your questions and are happy to provide any information you need to move forward. Feel free to contact our office at 703-324-7639, TTY 703-222-9452, or visit our website at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/.





Thank you.



A Fairfax County, VA Publication, 2007

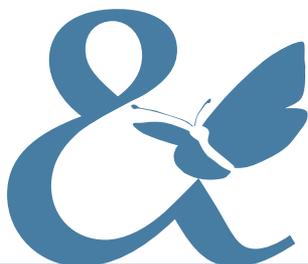
Fairfax County is committed to nondiscrimination in all programs, services, and activities. Special accommodations/alternative information formats will be provided upon request. For information, call the Department of Family Services at 703-324-7800, TTY 703-222-9452.

THE CHILDREN IN OUR CARE ARE CREATIVE, INTELLIGENT, AND ENGAGING. ALL OF THEM ARE LOOKING FOR a place to call home.

Whether you've made the decision to open your home to a child, or simply want to learn more, take the first step: attend an orientation meeting. Join us at 7 p.m. on the second Monday of each month at our offices:

 Fairfax County Department of
Family Services
Human Services Center – Pennino Building
12011 Government Center Parkway
Fairfax, Virginia 22035

We love to talk, work, and share rewarding experiences with potential foster and adoptive parents. If you'd like to speak with a member of our staff or one of our foster or adoptive parents, please call 703-324-7639, TTY 703-222-9452.



FAIRFAX COUNTY

Foster Care & Adoption