



## AN LCMS GUIDE TO Supporting Foster Families

*He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.*

—Deuteronomy 10:18

**C**hildren depend on adults for protection, care, stability and love. Christian families are especially poised to care for children in need, and the local congregation (and larger church) can provide a healthy framework of love and support for foster children and their foster family. Sadly, there is an increasing number of children being placed into the foster system, but a decreasing number of families willing to provide a temporary home for these children while they await reunification. Lutheran parents are needed to fill this gap and provide love and care to children and their biological parents.

### Theological Considerations

- Christian love and care for neighbors in need is a hallmark of the church. Children who have been placed within the foster system are indeed in need of love and refuge. Since the birth of the nation of Israel, God's people have received a mandate to open their homes in hospitality, to show compassion for displaced peoples, and to advocate and provide for the needy among them (Deut. 10:18). In his explanation to the Fifth Commandment, Luther writes that the Christian's proactive observance of this commandment is to care for the needs of the neighbor. Fostering children is certainly one important way that Christian families can care for their neighbor. And yet, fostering is also a reflection of the message of the Gospel! Christ Jesus came into our world, fraught with danger and the darkness of sin (Col. 1:13). By grace, He rescued us and now sustains us. Fostering reflects this sacrificial love.
- "Who is my neighbor?" is the question that arises out of all of our vocations (Luke 10:29–37). If there are orphans or children in need of fostering, the question then becomes, "how am I uniquely positioned to care for them?" The

answer for everyone likely looks a bit different. Not all are poised to serve as foster parents; however, the whole of Christendom should indeed consider how to care for foster children.

- Family is a unique estate that has been established and blessed by God (Matt. 19:4–6). The church can support this blessed estate by supporting families who foster, caring for biological parents of foster children, and encouraging the reunification process of children with their biological family.
- Participating in the foster system is another opportunity to share Christ's love and the Good News of the Gospel (1 Peter 3:15). In our collective call as a church and in our individual call as God's disciples, let us not neglect any opportunity to share in God's mission to make disciples and to witness with the light of Christ (Matt. 5:16).

### The "How"

The LCMS is comprised of over 6,000 congregations and is made up of nearly 2 million baptized members. Our church body can have a profound impact on the foster system by supporting families who foster — for instance, read a recent story highlighting some current Lutheran foster families at [engage.lcms.org/foster-care-fall-2024/](https://engage.lcms.org/foster-care-fall-2024/).

There are two important ways that the church can become further involved. One is for individual families to go through the foster process and open their home to foster children. The other is for individual congregations to support these foster families who are in their midst. Support includes much more than monetary aid, but further entails a commitment to be active in very tangible, practical ways for the family and for the foster child(ren).

## A Quick Guide

For couples interested in fostering, the first step includes prayerful consideration and basic awareness of the process, including both the joys and potential challenges. Although the process varies from state to state, potential foster parents will need to get fingerprinted, pass a background screening, go through routine home visits and a review of family history. Foster parents are usually asked to go through a class that can be several weeks long in duration. These classes typically take place in the evening and are often offered virtually, as states seek to work around the schedules of busy working adults. From start to finish, the process can take between 3–6 months; then, after a license is issued, the family could receive a child.

The foster parents typically decide what age range they are open to fostering. It may be important to bear in mind that children in foster care will not typically have developmental ages that match their actual ages.

## Understanding the Foster System

Most foster cases begin with someone calling an abuse hotline to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. Many states have a centralized call center and a single statewide phone number. The information is assessed, and if accepted, a child protective investigator will decide if the child(ren) are in danger. If the child(ren) is deemed to be in danger, they will be taken into custody and will then need placement. Investigators try to identify a family friend or relative first. But such resources are not always available, appropriate, or willing. About 30% of youth in care are with relatives or what is called fictive kin.

With the exception of the most egregious circumstances, parents are generally given the opportunity to reunify with their child(ren). They will be given a case-specific list of services that they will need to complete, and they will be expected to exhibit the desired changes in behavior to instill confidence that the child(ren) will be safe in their care once returned. A court will oversee the case progression and make the ultimate decisions.

Each parent will have an attorney to represent them. There is typically a state-appointed attorney to manage the case and a case manager or social worker who has a responsibility to both parents and the child(ren). Some jurisdictions will appoint a Guardian ad Litem or Court Appointed Special Advocate, whose sole responsibility is to the best interests of the child.

Foster parents are not a “party” to the case and therefore usually have very limited — if any — say in what happens. The biggest impact foster parents may have is to report on and advocate for services the child(ren) might need. Foster parents may attend court when possible, in order to speak on the child’s behalf and to show the court dedication and care on behalf of the child.

The goal is for children to achieve permanency in one year. Unfortunately, this doesn’t always happen. Many cases will last 2–3 years, and some even last a decade. In most states there are multiple ways for a case to close.

- **Reunification:** The parents complete their case plan to the satisfaction of the court and the children are returned to their parents.
- **Guardianship:** For legal reasons it is determined that it is inappropriate or there are insufficient grounds to terminate the parental rights, but it is also not safe to return the children to the parents. A willing adult is then declared the permanent guardian of the child until age 18. This means that guardians must involve parents in major life decisions and accommodate visitation. This can also vary significantly from state to state.
- **Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) which leads to adoption:** If the parents have been found to not make any substantial efforts to complete their case plan or there are other mitigating negative circumstances, the court will decide to terminate the parental rights. The younger the child, the more likely the court will be to go to TPR. Usually, the court wants a prospective adoptive parent identified prior to issuing TPR, because once TPR occurs, the child has no legal ties to anyone in the world.

## Quick Facts About the Current U.S. Foster Care System

There are roughly **500,000 American children** in the foster care system because they were exposed to abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

There are **less than 200,000 foster homes**.

With the exception of the most egregious circumstances, parents will be given the opportunity to **reunify with their children**.

In some scenarios, children may have multiple placements and **may be in the system for nearly a decade**. Children who have this type of experience are 10 times more likely to have not just one mental health diagnosis, but multiple diagnoses. 50% of these males will end up incarcerated and 60% of the females pregnant by age 21. 70% will experience homelessness at some point as adults. Many will turn to addiction to self-medicate from the emotional trauma.

**Children who have the stability** of one (or maybe even two) placements are far more likely to exit the system quickly and to suffer fewer debilitating issues throughout their lives.

- **Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA):** The court may come up with other living arrangements that are in the best interests of the child.

The focus within the fostering process always remains in the best interest of the child(ren). The court will decide what path the case takes and what the final disposition of the child(ren) will be. Reunification with healthy and stable parents is always the goal.

## Trauma-Informed Care

Children in foster care child dependency generally have suffered trauma. Children can even suffer the effects of trauma within the womb. The trauma that foster children can experience may result in maldevelopment of the frontal lobe, which is primarily responsible for emotional regulation and executive decisions. This is also known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). Foster parents and their support systems in Christian churches should learn about trauma-informed care so that they know how to identify and address the manifestations of ACE.

## Expenses

Fostering a child or children does come at an expense to the family. However, there is much aid available via state and national government agencies. For instance, in Illinois, all foster children are 100% covered by Medicaid and are eligible for WIC if the foster child is under the age of 5. Monthly stipends (which are not taxable) are also given based on the age of the child(ren).

## Support from Your LCMS Congregation

Regardless of state support, the hope is that the local LCMS congregation would make a concerted effort to provide an additional layer of support for the foster family and the foster child(ren). The love and care of an entire congregation surrounding these foster children can make a meaningful impact not only on individual children but also on future generations, both in this life and in the life that is to come.

Specific examples of how the local congregation can make an impact are provided below in the Foster Family Support Needs Planner, an example developed for a fictional foster family. Each foster family and their congregation will be able to use this template to coordinate support efforts based on needs, schedules and circumstances.

Additional resources to support those serving in foster care are available at [lcmslife.org/tags/foster-care/](https://lcmslife.org/tags/foster-care/).