

Issues that Increase Stress

When the commitment to foster parenting is made, it is understood that family members will be challenged; however, the stress level that accompanies fostering often comes as a surprise. Stressors already in the home combined with the personal stress the foster child brings to the equation often results in a crisis situation.

- **Unrealistic or unmet expectations regarding fostering, adoption, and family life**
Parents might be seeking the perfect addition that will make the family complete, expecting the foster child immediately to fit right in. However, the child's background and previous experiences often result in stressors that do not go away upon placement in a loving home.
- **Feelings of failure and guilt**
Some parents find it difficult, if not impossible, to say "no." They end up owning their child's problems and experiencing feelings of failure when they are unable to control and solve the problem. Trying to "do it alone" and being the super parent can lead to feelings of failure and guilt.
- **The impact of adoption or foster care on other relationships (with partner, other children in the family, extended family, close friends)**
Changes in family roles and interactions will happen when a new family member enters the household. Children may jockey for position or feel as though they were not part of the decision process to bring a new sibling into the home. A partner might feel ignored because of extra time and attention given the foster child. Extended family members, friends, and others in the community may react to a foster child's behaviors by excluding the fostering family from activities and support. Foster parents may disengage from support and interaction with others because of exhaustion or shame.
- **Feelings of grief and loss when a placement ends or changes**
Just as birth parents feel grief and loss when their child is removed from the home, foster parents experience the same emotional pain when a child in their care moves on. Bonds of friendship, caring, and love that developed during placement are cut when the placement ends. Not only do the parents feel the loss of the foster child—siblings also grieve.
- **Coping with a child's needs or challenging behaviors**
Children who enter care usually come with behaviors or issues that present challenges to the foster parents. Difficult behaviors, health and emotional issues, and learning disorders all require additional parental energy, time, and resources. Foster parents may find themselves attending many meetings and appointments with professionals on the child's team, dealing with multiple service providers, or managing their frustration due to the lack of foster/adoption-competent service providers. It is not uncommon for parents to become their child's care coordinator, advocating for services for the child and themselves as well.

- **Social worker/agency worker/caseworker involvement in the family**
A foster child new to the home brings with him a social or agency worker assigned to his case. While a worker can be a great support and resource for families, some parents feel stressed by the loss of privacy and the time required to complete additional paperwork.
- **Health care providers**
A new foster child, especially one with a health or behavioral issue, usually means new health care providers, additional paperwork, and additional appointments. Recording behaviors and dispensing medications are often added to the list of tasks foster parents must accomplish during the day.
- **School issues**
Many foster children have learning disabilities and are on special education plans (IFSP or IEP). In addition to meeting a new teacher with new expectations and routines, foster parents often participate in multi-disciplinary team meetings to discuss the child's special education or 504 plan. Depending on the age of the child, parents also might have additional homework to monitor and other school-related issues.
- **Difficulty in finding substitute caregivers to provide occasional relief or respite**
Finding the time to renew and refresh oneself is critical to remaining healthy. Locating an appropriate respite or childcare provider can be daunting, especially if the child has medical or health issues. In many states, respite providers for foster children are required to meet agency and state safety requirements and pass a background check, which can result in fewer approved respite caregivers.
- **Lack of pre-placement preparation**
Insufficient pre-placement training may lead some parents to enter fostering with rose-colored glasses. While no one can completely prepare a foster family for the level of stress they will face, a full understanding of what is to be expected and how to build and use a support system can reduce surprises and stress.
- **Insufficient training**
Training and learning do not end when the child enters the home. In reality, that is when the real training begins. Without sufficient information on topics and issues specific to the foster child, many parents flounder. Stress turns into crisis.
- **Dealing with the birth family**
In some foster care systems, the foster family is expected to take an active role in helping to train the birth family, especially in parenting skills. Other times, the foster parents are expected to help the birth family deal with the feelings of grief and loss caused by the placement of their child. Sometimes, the birth family's frustrations with the system and struggles with grief and loss can be directed at the foster parents.

Remember, asking for help is a sign of strength.

References:

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