



Foster Care

What is foster care?

When children cannot safely remain in their own homes, they are placed in a temporary living situation called foster care. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) develops rules and guidelines to help county agencies implement foster care programs. When a child must be removed from home, a court will grant temporary custody of the child to a public children services agency (PCSA). From there, a caseworker will attempt to find a safe place for the child to stay.

How do you determine the best placements for children?

Caseworkers first try to place children with a suitable relative, to help maintain family bonds. This is known as kinship care. The kinship care fact sheet has more information on this type of placement and is available at jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/KinshipCare.pdf. When kinship care is not an option, the caseworker will attempt to find a suitable non-relative with whom the child or family has a relationship. If the caseworker is unable to place the child with a relative or a non-relative who has a relationship with the family, the child is placed into a licensed foster care setting. This might be a foster home, a residential group home or treatment facility, or an independent living program for youths ages 16 to 18.

Each caseworker strives to achieve a culturally sensitive placement. To preserve relationships and help minimize disruption to the child's life, caseworkers try to place children in their own neighborhoods or communities whenever possible. When it is believed that the best placement for a child would be in another state, that placement must meet all the requirements of the federal Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC). Ohio's ICPC staff must authorize the placement of all children into Ohio from other states or from Ohio to other states.

How is foster care regulated?

Suitable relatives and non-relatives must either be licensed by ODJFS Foster Care Licensing staff or approved by the local PCSA. Foster Care Licensing staff members conduct inspections of all licensed foster care agencies and facilities, and a sample of each PCSA's foster homes. The following agencies require licensure:

- Private child-placing agencies, which accept temporary or permanent legal custody of children. These agencies may operate residential facilities (such as group homes, residential centers, crisis care facilities or therapeutic wilderness camps) or independent living programs. Staff at these agencies recommend foster homes for certification and place children in foster care and with adoptive families.
- Private noncustodial agencies, which provide many of the same services as private child-placing agencies but do not accept legal custody of children.
- County PCSAs that operate residential programs.

The goal of licensing is to determine whether agencies are fit to provide foster care, residential care and/or independent living services. Placement settings — such as foster homes, group homes and residential centers — are monitored to ensure compliance with ODJFS rules. ODJFS Foster Care Licensing staff members review such things as the agency's records and practices to ensure compliance with administrative rules. When necessary, they provide guidance to agency staff to improve compliance with regulations. Measures also can be taken to revoke an agency's license for noncompliance. Individual foster parents are regulated by the local agency that licenses them.

How can I become a foster parent?

Anyone who is at least 21 years old is eligible to foster a child. You may be single, married or divorced. You may own or rent your home. Before you are approved to become a foster parent, a caseworker will conduct a home study of your residence and help you determine your parenting strengths. If you are approved, you will receive training and payments to help you meet the daily living needs of the child or children placed in your care. Foster children in your care also will receive medical coverage through Medicaid.

If you're interested in becoming a foster parent, call (866) 886-3537, option 4, or your local PSCA. Also visit odjfs.state.oh.us/forms to obtain the brochure "Thinking About Becoming a Foster Parent or Adopting a Waiting Child?" (JFS 08013) or the booklet "Ohio Adoption Guide: A Handbook for Prospective Families" (JFS 01675).

When is adoption considered?

Foster care is intended to be temporary. If a court determines that it is not in a child's best interest to return home, the agency will take steps to find an alternative, permanent placement for the child. Such placements may include adoption or legal guardianship.

What services are available for children who age out of foster care?

When a youth turns 18 while in foster care, this is called "aging out." When a youth ages out, he or she must transition from foster care to independent living and self-sufficiency. This process often is difficult, so Ohio's 88 county PCSAs provide independent living services to children in foster care who are between the ages of 14 and 18, to help them successfully transition to adulthood. These services include life-skills development training; education and vocational training; preventive health activities; financial, housing, employment and education assistance; self-esteem counseling; and assistance with developing positive relationships and support systems. Some county PCSAs also may offer independent living services to help young adults ages 18 to 21, who formerly were in foster care, with rent and other costs. Additionally, medical coverage through Medicaid will be available to youth who age out of foster care until age 26.

In addition, the Education and Training Voucher Program provides federal assistance for education for young people who aged out of foster care or who were adopted after age 16. Up to \$5,000 is available to eligible youth each year until they reach age 23. To qualify, they must enroll in a full-time post-secondary education or training program by age 21, continue to be enrolled, and make satisfactory progress. Funding may be used to pay for tuition, room and board, student loan repayment, books and supplies, transportation, and other related expenses.

Anyone interested in these and other services for young people in foster care should contact their county PSCA. A directory of county PCSAs can be found at jfs.ohio.gov/County/County_Directory.pdf.