

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Foster Families in Vermont





Department for Children and Families Family Services Division

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CHAPTER 1: JOINING THE TEAM

Welcome to the team! Whether you got your foster care license to care for a specific child you know or any child in need of care, you are now part of a team dedicated to protecting children, supporting families and helping young people develop their fullest potential.

When a child is placed in foster care, it means that:

- A Family Court judge has granted temporary legal custody of the child to the Department for Children and Families (DCF); and
- DCF is responsible for placing the child with a licensed foster or kinship foster family.

That's where you come in. You provide the child with a safe, stable and nurturing home, while we focus on the child's family. You also participate as part of the family's team along with the parents, extended family members, Family Services worker and others. Foster care is all about teamwork!

Effective teamwork can produce extraordinary results. But it's easier said than done. It takes hard work, patience and good communication skills. It's also an opportunity – to learn, grow & develop skills you can use in all parts of your life.

About this guide

This guide will help in your day-to-day life with the child in your care. It includes:

- An overview of the foster care system, court process and resources available.
- Practical tips to help you welcome a child into your home, care for the child, work with DCF and more.
- A chapter specifically for kinship foster parents.
A kinship foster parent can be an adult relative (e.g., grandparent, aunt, uncle or sibling) licensed to care for a specific child. It can also be a non-relative adult who has a relationship or family-like bond with the child or family.

We strongly recommend that you read all parts of this guide.

The goal of foster care

From a child's first day in DCF custody, our goal is to ensure the child has a safe and permanent home. This includes:

1. Working with the parents to make it safe for their child to be at home; and
2. If that's not possible, finding another permanent home for the child — preferably with relatives or other people they know (e.g., family friends, foster parents, respite providers).

We strive to achieve permanence for children in a timely manner that respects their need for stability. Living in uncertainty and moving between different living situations is disruptive to their development and well-being.

The Family Services Division (FSD)

DCF's Family Services Division (FSD) is the child welfare and youth justice agency for the State of Vermont.

Our Vision

Vermont's children and youth live free from abuse, neglect and delinquency — in resilient families that are supported and valued by their communities.

Our Mission

We engage families, foster and kin caregivers, partner agencies and the community to increase safety and law abidance for Vermont's children and youth.

We achieve our mission by working with families to:

- Keep children and youth safe
- Keep youth free from delinquent behaviors

And if that is not possible:

Caring for children and youth in DCF or conditional custody and attending to their well-being, while working towards safe reunification.

And if that is not possible:

Achieving other forms of permanency for children and youth in DCF or conditional custody by providing them with safe, supportive and lifelong connections.

Our Values

We value equity, inclusion and justice. We believe in the diversity of thoughts, beliefs and experiences and embrace all people and their human differences.

Relationships are built on trust, collaboration and communication. We strive to resolve conflict in a way that strengthens connections and repairs and restores relationships.

LEARN MORE

Visit our website to learn about the:

- ✦ Laws, regulations and rules that govern our work
- ✦ Policies that guide our work
- ✦ Programs, services and supports we provide
- ✦ Publications we produce for parents, foster parents and others

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd>

What We Believe

Children, Youth and Families:

- ⇒ Deserve to be safe, heard and connected to their communities
- ⇒ Know themselves best and their expertise should be valued
- ⇒ Are viewed in the context of their culture and community
- ⇒ Can grow and change with support and adequate resources
- ⇒ Are active participants and partners in the process

Staff:

- ⇒ Offer their dedication and commitment, which are essential in carrying out our mission
- ⇒ Provide quality work that is strengths-based, trauma-informed and influenced by research

Foster and Kin Families:

- ⇒ Are primary partners in ensuring the well-being of children and youth
- ⇒ Deserve timely training, communication and support

Communities:

- ⇒ Are essential to keeping children safe and to promoting healthy families
- ⇒ Collaborate to meet the holistic needs of children, youth and families

What We Do

- Operate a 24-hour Child Protection Hotline
- Investigate and assess reports of abuse and neglect
- Engage families to meet their goals to increase safety
- Seek court involvement when required to keep children and communities safe
- Supervise youth on probation and help repair harm caused by their behavior
- Identify extended family and community supports
- Support safe placements for children and youth
- License and regulate foster homes, residential treatment programs and child-placing and adoptions agencies
- Achieve permanency options that are in the best interest of children and youth
- Collaborate within districts, across districts and with central office
- Partner with service providers and other state agencies
- Operate Woodside, the state's only secure facility that serves youth exhibiting harmful behaviors

CHAPTER 2: ACCEPTING A CHILD INTO YOUR HOME

Before you accept a child

1. Assess your family's values, strengths and limitations:

- ⇒ What are your beliefs and values regarding parenting?
- ⇒ Have you parented before? What skills do you have caring for children?
- ⇒ Will you be co-parenting? What does your support network look like?
- ⇒ Do you have the flexibility to accommodate the needs of a child in foster care (e.g., at least one parent who can take time off or flex their work schedule)?
- ⇒ Could your family care for children who may come from different backgrounds, have a different religion, identify as LGBTQ, have a disability, etc?

2. Decide what special needs and behaviors you're prepared to handle:

- ⇒ Are there behaviors that would make you uncomfortable?
- ⇒ Is there a particular age group or special need you feel most able to handle?

3. Think about your household rules & norms:

- ⇒ What is your household's daily routine?
- ⇒ What's it like to be a child in your home?
- ⇒ What are your expectations around privacy?
- ⇒ What are your rules around the safe use of technology?

4. Consider how you'll accommodate a new child in your home:

- ⇒ Are there any things you'll need to get before you accept a placement? *See the list below for ideas.*
- ⇒ Could your local Family Services office or a community organization provide some of these items?

ITEMS TO HAVE ON HAND

A good place to start is with these standard items:

- ★ **BEDROOM:** A bed or a crib, gender neutral bedding, mattress protector, dresser or other place for the child to put their belongings, etc.
- ★ **HYGIENE:** Toothbrush and toothpaste, hairbrush/comb, shampoo, conditioner, soap, washcloth and bath towel
- ★ **COMFORT:** Night light, cozy blanket, pajamas, a few toys, stuffed animal or doll, craft supplies
- ★ **OTHER:** a backpack, lunch box

How soon you may be asked to take a child into your home depends on how flexible you are in terms of the age, gender and special needs of the children you will accept. If you have not received a call in a while, don't assume your help is not wanted. It's just a matter of waiting for a child who is a good match for your family.

When you get a call

When you get a call about a child, the resource coordinator or Family Services worker will share as much background information as is known at the time. If the child is new to DCF custody, they may not yet have much information.

It's important to ask questions to help you decide whether it's a good match. Take some time to think about the request and talk to your family. Tell the Family Services worker or resource coordinator that you'll call back shortly, after you've had the chance to think about it.

Questions you may want to ask

About the child:

- ⇒ Why does the child need placement? How long are they expected to stay?
- ⇒ What are their strengths and challenges? Are they a risk to themselves or others?
- ⇒ What are their medical needs? Are there any unmet medical needs?
- ⇒ Who is the child's doctor? Dentist? Are they up-to-date on appointments?
- ⇒ Will they need child care if they live in our home? Do they need after school care? If so, is it available?
- ⇒ What is their religion? Do they attend religious ceremonies? If so, where?
- ⇒ Are they in school? If so, what school and grade? Do they have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)? Educational surrogate?
- ⇒ Do they participate in any extracurricular activities?
- ⇒ Do they participate in any ethnic/cultural practices?

About the child's family:

- ⇒ What is the family's current situation? Their past history?
- ⇒ What do they understand about the reason for placement?
- ⇒ Does the family pose any risk to our family? Are there any safety concerns?
- ⇒ What is the plan for the child to visit with family members (called *family time*)?
- ⇒ What role, if any, will we play in family time?
- ⇒ Are there any court orders regarding parent-child contact?
- ⇒ Are there any restrictions on the child's contact with anyone else (e.g., friends, siblings, relatives or others)?

About the caseplan:

- ⇒ May I get a copy of the most recent case plan? What is the case plan goal?
- ⇒ What transportation is required to meet the child's needs (e.g., transportation to childcare or school, doctors appointments, court and family time)?

About any pets in your home:

- ⇒ If we have pets, how will they respond to a new household member?
- ⇒ How will I supervise the pets and children during the transition? Can they be safe together?

When to say no

Carefully weigh all the factors when deciding whether to accept a child into your home. Only say yes if you think it will work.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO SAY NO. Saying no upfront will protect you and the child from a lot of pain and guilt later on. Don't feel pressured into situations that make you uncomfortable or you feel will not work. Some foster parents fear that if they say no, they will not be called again. That is not the case. The ability to say no is one of the most important skills you can have as a foster parent.

Some effective ways of saying no include:

- ⇒ I don't think this is a good match
- ⇒ I am concerned because...
- ⇒ Now is not a good time for us; please call again in a few weeks
- ⇒ I am not sure we are ready for this type of situation
- ⇒ I have some safety concerns
- ⇒ Adding this child will not work for other family members
- ⇒ I'm concerned about the impact on the other children in our home
- ⇒ I don't want to mix boys with girls or teens with younger children

When to say maybe

There may be times when you say maybe. You may, for example:

- ⇒ Request more information if you have concerns. In non-emergency situations, you may be able to talk to the current caregivers to learn more about the child.
- ⇒ Ask about any additional supports that may be available (e.g., wraparound or in-home services) before you agree to care for a child with a higher level of needs.
- ⇒ Agree to care for a child if a child care provider can be found.
- ⇒ Not be able to take the child on the day you're called because of other obligations, but consider having the child come to your home in a few days.

Talk to the resource coordinator or Family Services worker if you have questions.

CHAPTER 3: WELCOMING A CHILD INTO YOUR HOME

You have agreed to care for a child in need. So now what? Where do you begin?

Tips for a smooth transition

- Ask the Family Services worker for a completed placement checklist and medical authorization form as well as the child's Medicaid card or number.
- Talk to the resource coordinator about the best way to welcome the child into your home. Who should be home? How should you greet the child?
- Welcome the child quietly. While you may be excited, the child may be scared and confused. Remember that everything will be new to them.
- Give the child a tour of your home and orient them to this new space.
- Identify their personal spaces. For example:
 - ⇒ Where they'll sleep and store their personal belongings
 - ⇒ Where the bathrooms are
 - ⇒ Where they can find things such as drinking glasses, plates and silverware
- Don't have a house full of friends or relatives over the first few days. It may be overwhelming for the child.
- Explain your house rules. It may be helpful to make a list of the three or four most important ones and share others as you go along. Keep them positive and simple.
- Ask the child about how their family does things. To the extent possible, incorporate those routines and traditions into your family's. Settle down to a regular routine as quickly as possible.
- Let the child know how they should address you. Many foster parents are comfortable using their first names. It is not appropriate to suggest the child call you "Mom" or "Dad". The Family Services worker can help you decide what's best.
- Don't discard the child's belongings brought from home. It is preferable to not wash comfort items such as blankets or stuffed animals unless there are health or safety reasons. Familiar possessions & smells will be a comfort.
- Respect the child's loyalty to his or her family. Never speak negatively about a child's parents in front of them. Expect the child to have mixed feelings about what has happened.
- Give the child time to adjust. This is a time of great emotional stress, more than the child may show. Expect occasional problems, but try to keep them in perspective. Don't emphasize small problems or minimize serious ones.
- Remember that you are not alone. If you need support or have any concerns, contact the resource coordinator or Family Services worker. They can provide support and connect you with other foster parents in your area.

Understand what the child is going through

Don't be disappointed if the child doesn't respond to you immediately. It will take some time for everyone to adjust to the changes and for relationships to form.

Staying in a different place can be difficult for anyone, even in the best of circumstances. The child has been separated from his or her home, family and neighborhood, likely under traumatic circumstances. In addition to feeling like an outsider in your home, the child may experience an overwhelming sense of grief and loss and may even feel guilty about what has happened. At the same time, the child may feel relieved and thankful to be safe.

The first few weeks can be a confusing time for everyone. The child will likely have a wide range of emotions that even they don't understand. This could include anger, despair, fear, guilt, shame, helplessness and relief. Initially, the child may be quite well behaved. This is commonly referred to as the *honeymoon period*. It's a good time to work on establishing a positive relationship while sharing some of your expectations and rules.

As the child begins to relax and feel more comfortable in your home, their behavior may become more challenging. They may test your commitment to them and the boundaries and limits you've set. It's common for children who experience abuse, neglect and loss to show their pain by withdrawing or acting out. This is not a reflection on you.

- Try the strategies discussed during the foster parent training.
- Talk with other foster parents about how they've managed similar situations.
- Let the Family Services worker and other team members know what is happening.

Help others in the family adjust

All household members will experience change. In addition to sharing time and space, they are giving up a certain level of privacy. It's important to acknowledge this and have regular conversations about it.

Children may be jealous or resentful of a new child in the home. This could happen for several reasons such as feeling like they are getting less of your time or experiencing a change in family position (i.e., they are no longer the oldest, youngest or only child).

Your relationship with your partner may change. As you focus on caring for a child who may have challenging behaviors and helping other children in the home to adjust, you might have less time for each other. It's important to set time aside to talk through things and have a common approach to problem solving.

Carve out time to connect with one another and have fun as a family. Get help if you need it.

If you need help, ask for it early on! Talk to your resource coordinator or local foster parent association. Ask about the possibility of getting a foster parent mentor.

Recognize the importance of self care

We have all heard the saying – “Put on your own oxygen mask first” when it comes to parenting. This is especially important when parenting a child who has experienced abuse, neglect, grief and loss.

If you don't take care of yourself, you are more susceptible to experiencing:

1. Secondary traumatic stress:

This is trauma experienced as a result of being exposed to a child's trauma and their reactions to trauma.

2. Compassion fatigue:

This is characterized by physical and emotional exhaustion and a profound decrease in the ability to empathize.

If either of the things described above happen to you, it will make it much more difficult for a child in your care to grow and heal. Of course, practicing self-care is easier said than done.

Below are some ideas that can help:

- ➔ Get enough sleep
- ➔ Eat well
- ➔ Be physically active
- ➔ Limit alcohol intake or don't use it at all
- ➔ Take regular breaks from stressful activities or situations
- ➔ Plan activities or getaways that you look forward to
- ➔ Laugh every day
- ➔ Express yourself (consider journaling, talking to friends or taking up hobbies)
- ➔ Let someone else take care of you
- ➔ Practice daily mindfulness
- ➔ Connect with other foster parents
- ➔ Say NO to overextending yourself
- ➔ See the larger team as part of your support network

A key component of caring for children who have experienced loss or trauma is remaining CALM and CONNECTED.

It can be helpful to commit to a daily plan. Write it down. Let a partner or friend know your plan. Better yet – have them join you!

Planning for self care

It's important to remain emotionally regulated when a child in your care is struggling or acting out. If you're tired or angry or overwhelmed or triggered you CANNOT respond to the child in a way that's useful and may actually respond in a way that's harmful.

That's why you need a plan. Below is a *Caregiver Self Regulation Plan* that you can use to help develop your own. Your plan could include techniques such as taking space, asking for help, deep breathing and self talk.

Create your plan while you are in a calm state of mind. Ask yourself:

What are your triggers?

- ⇒ When are you most likely to *flip your lid*
- ⇒ Is it because of something internal (e.g., feeling embarrassed or scared) or external (e.g., a screaming child or invasion of your privacy)
- ⇒ Are you more easily dysregulated when you are hungry or tired

How do you know when you are dysregulated?

What do you notice about yourself?

- ⇒ Physical: pounding head, sweating, shaking
- ⇒ Behavioral: raised voice, pointing finger, stomping your feet
- ⇒ Emotional: feeling scared, overwhelmed, confused
- ⇒ Thoughts: perseverating, imaging yourself getting aggressive, thoughts of running away

How will you stop yourself?

- ⇒ Have a plan ahead of time for how you will intervene with yourself (e.g., have a touchstone in your pocket, say a mantra, walk out of the room)
- ⇒ Remind yourself that your "lizard" brain has taken over

What will you do?

- ⇒ Again, having a plan ahead of time will be very helpful
- ⇒ Decide ahead of time what works for you and plan for it
- ⇒ Do things like moving your body, practicing mindfulness, remembering what you're grateful for, taking several deep breaths, meditating, praying and calling a friend

Self-Care Resource

[Taking Care of Yourself](http://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv19n2/v19n2.htm), published in *Fostering perspectives - views on foster care and adoption on North Carolina*: <http://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv19n2/v19n2.htm>

CHAPTER 4: CARING FOR A CHILD DAY-TO-DAY

Model and maintain family rules and boundaries

- Think about the rules that are important to your family and share them with the child.
- Have a few main family rules and be prepared to negotiate on others. Remember that rules can be bent on special occasions. If a special TV show is on or there is a visitor, the bedtime hour can, sometimes, be extended.
- Some decisions will require discussion with the child and their team. Some children have a unique set of needs that may require adjustments to household rules and norms.

Use a positive approach to discipline

Children learn best from a problem-solving approach to discipline, with positive reinforcement for steps in the right direction. They need boundaries and limits so they can grow and learn in safety.

To discipline means to teach.

Tips for a trauma-informed approach to discipline

- Be clear and direct about your expectations.
- Appreciate improvements. Let the child know you notice and appreciate their efforts to correct behavior. Acknowledge and praise desirable behaviors.
- Help change unacceptable behavior by changing the environment. For example: if a child is bored or restless, set up constructive activities (e.g., craft projects, games).
- Teach and demonstrate better approaches for the child to get what they want.
- Prepare the child for transitions. For example: “We’re leaving in 10 minutes; let’s put these toys away and get ready.”
- Keep the child’s age and developmental stage in mind. Try not to ask too much or too little. Learning about child development stages can help keep expectations realistic.
- Avoid asking younger children questions that encourage a “no” answer. Instead of asking, “Do you want to get dressed for school?”, say “It’s time to get dressed for school.”
- Provide more than one acceptable choice. For example: “Do you want to wear the red or green shirt today?”
- Children need to know what they can do, not just what they can’t. Offer alternatives. For example: “Go outside if you want to play ball or stay inside and do something else.” Choices help children become more responsible for their actions.
- All children appreciate options/choices and support in making good decisions. As children get older, they need more flexibility. Give the child some control.
- Encourage the child to help solve problems. They often come up with excellent solutions. If not, offer possible solutions and let the child select from them. It’s easier for children to comply with a decision if they helped make it.
- Provide natural or logical consequences. Let the child help choose the consequences.

- ➔ Be patient and clear with your expectations.
- ➔ Short periods of time to reflect on situations or behaviors might be appropriate for some children (time out/time in). For children under 12, one minute per year of age is a good measure. If you use time outs, it's best to have the child in the same room as you so they don't feel separated or alone.

Punishment not allowed with children in foster care

- ➔ Spanking
- ➔ Any physical punishment (e.g., standing in a corner facing the wall, standing on one leg or putting soap in a child's mouth)
- ➔ Repetitive tasks such as writing lines 100 times
- ➔ Locking a child in their room or out of the house
- ➔ Not allowing family contact or visits with siblings, parents or other family members

To punish means to penalize for doing something wrong.

For more information, read the section on discipline in the *Licensing Regulations for Foster Care*. Ask the Family Services worker or resource coordinator for a copy.

Understand your role in day-to-day life

As the child's foster parent, you will be involved in every aspect of their daily life. Below is some information about what may be involved.

Baby/infant care

To help ensure the safety of all babies in foster care, you need to follow the safe sleep guidelines published by the Vermont Department of Health. If a baby has a specific health concern that prevents you from following any of these recommendations, review the guidelines with the baby's doctor.

- ➔ <http://www.healthvermont.gov/safesleep>
- ➔ http://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/CYF_SS_brochure.pdf

Dental & medical care

You may arrange for the child's routine health and dental care and immediate medical treatment in case of illness, accident or emergency. If possible, the child should remain under the care of the same physician and dentist he or she has been seeing. If appropriate, the child's parents should remain involved in their medical care.

You are responsible for keeping the Family Services worker and family (as appropriate) informed about any health concerns. The Family Services worker must give permission for anesthesia, surgery and psychiatric services. After hours, call the Emergency Services Program (ESP) at 1-800-649-5285 for permission.

In an emergency, seek medical treatment first and then notify DCF. During regular business hours, call the district office. After hours, call ESP.

Education

Numerous studies have confirmed that youth in foster care are negatively impacted by frequent school changes. Disruptions in school placement can decrease academic performance and increase the likelihood of truancy and dropping out of high school. This contributes to higher than average rates of homelessness, criminality, drug abuse and unemployment among young people who were in foster care. That's why educational stability is a priority for every child in DCF custody.

In December 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requiring state and local educational agencies to work with child welfare agencies to ensure the educational stability of children in foster care. All students coming into DCF custody must remain in their schools unless it's determined to not be in their best interest. If it's not in their best interest, they'll be immediately enrolled in their new schools, even if the records normally required for enrollment are not immediately available. The new schools will then be responsible for obtaining all necessary academic records.

Transportation planning will be part of the discussion regarding school placement. The transportation responsibility falls on the child's custodian (DCF). Foster parents are often asked to transport children to school and are reimbursed for mileage.

Foster parents attend special events and participate in school meetings. Some children who need special educational services are assigned an educational surrogate — a trained person who represents the child at meetings, requests evaluations and develops and monitors special education plans. Please tell the Family Services worker or resource coordinator if you are interested in becoming an educational surrogate.

Religious, cultural & tribal participation

You are expected to respect and support the religious, cultural and tribal values of the children in your home. They should be given opportunities to:

- Attend religious services
- Participate in church, mosque, synagogue, temple or other place of worship activities
- Participate in cultural activities and events
- Participate in tribal activities and events
- Speak in one's native language with siblings or others who speak the language

They also have the right to not participate in religious ceremonies or other cultural traditions they don't want to or the parents don't want them to. The Family Services worker and family can help you find resources when there are differences in spiritual or cultural customs.

Transportation

You will routinely provide or arrange transportation for the child — to go to school, afterschool activities, doctor's appointments, childcare, family time and court hearings. Foster/kinship parents tell us that transportation can be challenging and difficult to balance. We encourage you to work with your team and local support network to resolve any problems.

Be an active member of the family's team

As a foster parent, you are part of a team that works together for the sake of the child and family. Members could include:

- ➔ Family Services worker
- ➔ Child if he or she is able to participate (most adolescents and older children do)
- ➔ Parents, extended family members and others important to the child/parents
- ➔ Foster parents, respite providers
- ➔ Counselor, psychotherapist
- ➔ Guardian ad Litem, school staff, childcare provider
- ➔ Youth development coordinator for older children
- ➔ A member chosen by a youth age 14 and over

Meeting as a team helps ensure everyone is aware of the main issues and working together to resolve them. It's an opportunity to allow all voices to be heard, especially the voices of the children and parents. It's an opportunity to empower the parents at a time when they may feel disempowered.

Nurture and support family connections

You are essential to maintaining connections between children in foster care and the people who are important to them. Below are some ideas of how you can support these connections. Be sure to discuss them with the Family Services worker to make sure they are appropriate and in line with the case plan.

- ➔ Support various means of contact and communication (e.g., family time, phone calls, letters or emails).
- ➔ Be a formal or informal mentor to the parents.
- ➔ Encourage family participation in decision making; seek their input or help with parenting issues.
- ➔ Keep routines, traditions and rules as similar as possible or at least ask about their rules and routines.
- ➔ Get pictures of the family for the child; display photos in the child's room and the home.
- ➔ Have the child draw pictures or create artwork for the family.
- ➔ Do what you can to keep the child connected to their community, church, school, etc.
- ➔ Make sure possessions given to the child by the family are respected and kept.
- ➔ Reassure the child that their family cares for them despite the difficulties the family may have meeting their needs.
- ➔ Be courteous and respectful to the child's family; don't talk negatively to or about them.
- ➔ Don't be judgmental.
- ➔ Include family members in celebrations and school and community events unless there are safety concerns or the Family Services worker doesn't recommend it.

Participate in shared parenting meetings

A shared parenting meeting is convened jointly by the Family Services worker and family time coach to bring together the parents, foster parents, other family members as appropriate and sometimes the child/youth. If there is no coach, the meeting will likely be facilitated by the Family Services worker. The initial caregiver meeting is the first opportunity for all parties to talk about a family time schedule that will benefit the child.

Benefits of shared parenting meetings

For the child:

- ⇒ Provides a continuum of care
- ⇒ Enables the transition to be as smooth and short as possible
- ⇒ Decreases miscommunication and triangulation between the parents, caregivers and child
- ⇒ Ensures the child is free to love and be loved by both the parents and foster family

For the parents:

- ⇒ Empowers them to help their child transition into foster care
- ⇒ Helps them feel more at ease with the foster parents
- ⇒ Provides an opportunity for them to develop a supportive, long-term relationship with the foster parents

For the foster parents:

- ⇒ Helps them feel more at ease with the parents and experience them as real people, not just parents who had their child removed
- ⇒ Gives them the opportunity to benefit from the parents' knowledge and expertise about their child
- ⇒ Allows them to meaningfully and intentionally support the reunification plan

Contact Between Birth & Foster Parents

When there is positive contact between birth and foster parents, studies show that children:

- ✦ Have more stable placements
- ✦ Experience better emotional development
- ✦ Are more successful in school
- ✦ Return home sooner

Support family time

Family Time is scheduled contact between children and their parents. It's one of the main tools workers use to help children cope with separation, loss and trauma.

Research has found that:

- Frequent, supported family time is strongly associated with successful family reunification and shorter stays in out-of-home placement.
- Children who are visited frequently are more likely to have high well-being ratings and adjust well to placement.

Possible reactions to family time

What children may experience:

Family time may bring up conflicting feelings, which may lead to problem behaviors—before and after family time. Unless a new schedule is agreed on, the child's behaviors should not affect family time. If a child in your care is having a difficult time with family time and you need support, contact your resource coordinator or Family Services worker.

What parents may experience:

- ⇒ Confusion, anger, desperation, withdrawal
- ⇒ Feelings of incompetency, inadequacy, inferiority, shame
- ⇒ Feeling judged and pressured to perform to often unknown expectations
- ⇒ Relapse (substance using parents have been known to relapse following family time as a means of numbing the pain)

It's important to understand that a parent's reaction to family time (e.g., disinterest, hostility, cancelling at the last minute) may be the manifestation of grief and loss.

What you may experience:

- ⇒ Pleased when the child and parents have a great time; hopeful that the positive changes will continue and the parents will continue to recognize and respond to the child's needs
- ⇒ Confused about the expectations established by the court/DCF and the child's response
- ⇒ Concerned, especially if the child has a negative response to a parent
- ⇒ Mixed feelings about the parent(s)
- ⇒ Resentful or helpless at the demands placed on you by family time, particularly if visits are daily (often in the case of an infant) or family time increases
- ⇒ Caught in the middle when family time disrupts other "normal" activities for the child, like naps, meals and other planned activities
- ⇒ Annoyed or even angry at abrupt schedule changes or miscommunications
- ⇒ Triggered by the child's behavior or family's situation

Please make sure to get support for yourself if you need it. Remember, these are normal feelings experienced by many foster parents.

When first in care	At first family time	After family time	Returning to your home
The child might feel...			
shocked, angry, afraid, depressed	happy, relieved, sad, angry, afraid, confused	confused, afraid, sad, relieved, angry, anxious	resentful, sad, angry, depressed, relieved, happy, guilty
The child might be...			
listless, withdrawn, distracted, hostile, aggressive, tearful, inconsolable	hyperactive, hostile, aggressive, talkative, silent, cowering, avoiding the parent, clingy with parent or other adult	tearful, hostile, belligerent, whiny, leaving without saying goodbye, clingy, pleading	hyperactive, hostile, aggressive, talkative, silent, clingy, tearful, not eating, not sleeping, bed wetting or other regressive behaviors

Your role in family time

Transporting the child:

We may ask you to transport the child to family time, which could take place in:

- ⇒ The parent's home
- ⇒ Your home (if you and the Family Services worker agree it's appropriate)
- ⇒ A public place mutually agreed on and approved by the Family Services worker
- ⇒ A Family Services or other office if there are safety concerns (e.g., court or visitation center)
- ⇒ Child-specific places based on their extracurricular activities and events

Providing support:

If you're asked to support family time, talk to the Family Services worker and ask for instruction and guidance on topics such as:

- ⇒ What to do if someone doesn't arrive on time or arrives impaired, the weather is bad, unexpected people arrive, etc.
- ⇒ How to maintain boundaries and safety and what to do if the parent-child contact is concerning

General information:

- ⇒ Parents and foster parents who are trained to understand and address a child's reactions can turn distress and mixed feelings into growth experiences.
- ⇒ Positive communication between the parents and foster parents will make discussing the child's reactions and needs easier and more productive.
- ⇒ For older children, clear expectations and consistent explanations, inclusion in planning and debriefing, and opportunities for expression will maximize the impact of family time.

For more information, ask the Family Services worker or resource coordinator for a copy of the *Family Time Guidelines*. Or go to <https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/publications>.

CHAPTER 5: CARING FOR A RELATIVE/KNOWN CHILD

While this chapter is specifically for kinship foster parents, some of the issues discussed may also be relevant to non-kinship foster parents.

Special considerations for kinship foster parents

While caring for a relative child is similar to caring for any child in foster care, there are a few differences. Kinship foster parents probably have an ongoing relationship with the child, the parents and other family members. They are often new to DCF and unfamiliar with the child welfare system. Because of these differences, they often face unique challenges.

Challenge #1: Being inside the crisis

As family members, kinship foster parents may feel caught in the crisis that brought the child into custody. A long chain of events may have come to a head, things may seem to be happening quickly, emotions may be high and it may seem that DCF is acting on its own.

Challenge #2: Redefining roles & boundaries

Longstanding roles and boundaries in your family will change when the child comes to live with you and you take on the role of parent. You may go:

From friend or equal to authority figure:

Is one of the parents a friend or relative? These relationships imply equality, with neither person having control or authority over the other person's life. Once you become a kinship foster parent, you will make decisions normally made by the parents. This will complicate your relationship with the parents and may be a difficult adjustment for the child to make.

From bystander to responsible decision maker:

Relatives do not always have close relationships. You might only see the child and parents at family get-togethers or may not have seen them in years. You may go from playing a minor or non-existent role in the child's life to playing a major one. Not everyone will be comfortable with this shift.

From non-competitor to competitor:

Even if it is not your intention, you may find yourself competing with the parents and other family members for the child's affection and for authority (i.e., who gets to make decisions).

From grandparent, aunt or cousin to parent:

Being a relative is very different from being a parent. Relatives don't normally discipline children or provide for essential needs. Often, they do fun things with the child. Respect is assumed. When a relative takes on the role of parent, it can be a hard shift for both the relative and child to make.

If you are the grandparent, you may face a situation where your own child's needs are in conflict with their child's needs. You'll need to be prepared to put your grandchild's needs first, ahead of the needs of their parent (your child).

From ally to enemy:

Kinship foster parents often find themselves in the difficult position of being between their families and DCF. If you become the child's caregiver, the parents and other family members may see you as being on DCF's side. You might be insulted by, or even isolated from, some family members.

At the same time, people outside of your family may perceive you to be on your family's side. They might, for example:

- ⇒ Question your judgment about the child's needs.
- ⇒ Wonder whether you might minimize the severity of what happened to the child because of your relationship with the child's family.
- ⇒ Worry that you have the same unsafe behaviors as the child's parents, since you are family.
- ⇒ Feel that you are biased towards or against one parent.

It may seem that you constantly have to prove that you have the child's best interests at heart. Below are some tips for managing this delicate balancing act.

- ⇒ *Focus on the child's best interests:*
It's all about the child. They need a safe place to live while in DCF custody, where their emotional, medical, physical and educational needs will be met.
- ⇒ *Recognize that strong feelings are normal:*
It's normal for parents to be angry and confused when they are separated from their child. Understand that these reactions are normal, even if they are directed at you.
- ⇒ *Learn what the law requires DCF to do to keep children safe:*
Understanding what our legal responsibilities are will help you better understand why we do what we do and what we need from you. Your role is to provide day-to-day care for the child, while ours is to work with the parents.
- ⇒ *Be aware of your own feelings and opinions:*
How do you feel about the child being in DCF custody? Do you believe the abuse happened? It will be difficult for you to work with DCF if you have a different opinion about what led to our involvement. It might help to reach out to other kinship foster parents. Vermont Kin as Parents can help! (*See back cover*).

Challenge #3: Understanding your relative child

Depending on how well you know the child, you might experience some challenging moments as you settle into your new routines together. Keep these things in mind:

Expect the child to be loyal and attached to his or her parents:

Depending on their life experiences, the child may be very attached to the parents. They may even feel the need to reject and/or disobey you to prove it. You can acknowledge this love while being clear that certain events in the past were not okay.

The child will see you as he or she knows you:

When the child first moves in, you will still be Uncle, Auntie or Grandma. The child will respond to you in old ways and may not fully understand your new role as parent. It can be frustrating when it takes a while for the child to take you seriously. Make sure the child understands your expectations and rules and how much you care. This is especially important with teens who are inclined to test authority. Try to strike a balance by being nurturing and firm. Expect the new situation to take some time to become comfortable.

Treat the child as a family member, not a guest:

It's natural for new caregivers to try to make up for everything that has happened to a child in their care. It's tempting to buy them extra clothes and toys or to look the other way when they do inappropriate things. Treating them like everyone else can help them feel like they belong. At the same time, be sure to acknowledge the pain and struggle they are going through. It's also a good idea to give the child some responsibility.

The child will be used to different rules, expectations and rewards:

It will take the child time to get used to the way your family does things, especially if the child has experienced little or no structure. Be clear about your expectations. Write them down if necessary. Be patient!

Expect challenging behaviors:

Children who come from abusive or neglectful situations often show their pain by withdrawing or acting out. Depression is common. If the child withdraws, displays aggressive behaviors or self harms, seek guidance from the child's Family Services worker and other professionals in your community.

Expect things to be more difficult around family time and court hearings:

Visiting with parents and seeing them in court can be confusing. While children are usually happy to see their parents, it can also bring up strong emotions such as pain, anger and sadness. Many children lose ground after family time and acting out is common.

Recognize why the child may feel this way and help them express their feelings. The disruption will pass. Plan for these times and make sure you have extra support if you need it.

Be particularly aware if the child has been sexually abused:

If the child has been sexually abused, you may need to adjust your family's habits around personal privacy. Before the child moves into your home:

- ➔ Ask for advice about how to keep all the children in your home safe.
- ➔ Work with your team to put appropriate supports in place.

Children who have been sexually abused may act out in inappropriate ways. If this happens, make it clear that while the behavior is not acceptable, the child is still loved and valued.

If the child discloses sexual abuse to you, call Vermont's Child Protection Line immediately to report it. DO NOT INVESTIGATE. Call 1-800-649-5285 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week).

Tips to help you manage

- ➔ Know your responsibilities and limits and stick to them
- ➔ Seek help from the system (e.g., Family Services worker, resource coordinator and community service providers)
- ➔ When conflicts arise, look for win-win solutions
- ➔ Give it time
- ➔ Be patient
- ➔ Set simple goals, work towards them and celebrate small successes
- ➔ Use the child's case plan for guidance
- ➔ Find allies and resources from both sides of the child's family (*see exercise below*)

Identify allies and resources within the family

Get a large piece of paper and list members on both sides of the child's family and close friends or community supports. Try to list everyone. Ask other relatives for information if you need to. Include people important to the child and parents, even if they are not related to them. Leave space around each person's name for notes.

Ask the following questions about each person:

- ➔ How do I see this person (e.g. responsible, good, trustworthy or dangerous)?
- ➔ How does the child see this person?
- ➔ How do the parents see this person?

Put a question mark next to those people you don't know enough about and try to find out more about them later.

If the descriptions of an individual differ significantly, ask yourself why you, the child or the parents feel differently about this person. What does it tell you?

- ➔ Will limits need to be set in the relationships between the child and any of these individuals?
- ➔ Do any of these relationships pose a risk to the child or to your family?

Refer to the family tree (ecomap, genogram) whenever you are looking for someone to:

- ➔ Care for the child when you need a break or take the child for an occasional outing
- ➔ Help you advocate on the child's behalf with the agency or school
- ➔ Help you understand and work with the parents and/or child

CHAPTER 6: WORKING WITH DCF

A strong partnership between DCF and foster/kinship foster parents is critical to the safety and well-being of children in foster care. This partnership works best when it's based on mutual respect, clear communication and an understanding of each other's role.

To help you understand our role, this section describes some of the services we provide, staff and contracted professionals you may work with and the case planning process.

Services to children and families

Child safety interventions

The Child Protection Line (1-800-649-5285) takes calls about suspected child abuse and neglect. A supervisor determines whether to accept a report for intervention. If the supervisor accepts a report, a Family Services worker is assigned the appropriate child safety intervention depending on the nature of the allegation: investigation or assessment.

Services to at-risk families

During a child safety intervention, a Family Services worker assesses the safety of, and risk to, the child. If the assessed risk is high, the worker opens a case and develops a plan to address the identified risks. When we can do so safely, we keep children with their families and provide referrals and support based on the family's needs.

Services to children in foster care and their families

When out-of-home care is needed, the child or youth is placed in another setting, most often in a licensed foster or kinship foster home. The Family Services worker works with the parents and the family's team on a plan for a safe, permanent home for the child, ideally with the parents. The Family Services worker arranges for and coordinates needed supports and services, sets expectations of the changes that need to occur and assesses progress.

Supervision of youth on juvenile probation

Many youth who have committed delinquent acts are on probation. A Family Services worker monitors the youth's progress towards achieving the terms of his/her probation.

CRISIS & AFTER-HOURS SERVICES

1-800-649-5285

The Emergency Services Program (ESP) is staffed by DCF Family Services workers who are available by phone after hours, on weekends and on state holidays. ESP staff can help you solve problems and resolve emergencies when district offices are closed.

Staff and other professionals you may work with

Assessment/Investigative Family Services Workers (front end workers)

Conduct investigations or assessments in response to reports accepted for intervention. Workers in the Residential Licensing and Special Investigation Unit investigate reports of suspected child abuse/neglect in facilities regulated by the department (e.g., foster homes).

Children's Attorneys

Represent children in court. Every child in DCF custody has one.

District Directors

Oversee the 12 Family Services district offices, are members of local teams and are available to support foster families when Family Services workers, resource coordinators and supervisors are not available.

Family Safety Planning Facilitators (staff or contracted professionals)

Facilitate family safety planning meetings — structured meetings that support honest communication with families about safety issues. Foster parents are often invited.

Family Services Workers

Are assigned to families who get services from the department and children in foster care. They help families and children get needed services, make sure children are safe and work with a team towards the case plan goal when children are in out-of-home care. They also partner with resource coordinators to support the foster parents.

Family Time Coaches (contracted providers)

Facilitate shared parenting meetings and coach parents visiting their children in foster care.

Guardians ad Litem (GALs)

Meet with children, attend all court hearings and advocate in court for what they believe is in the children's best interests. GALs are volunteers appointed by the court.

Permanency Planning Counselors (contracted professionals)

Help Family Services to find adoptive homes for children, prepare children and families for adoption and finalize the adoptions.

Recruitment and Retention Specialists

Support statewide and local foster parent recruitment and retention efforts.

Resource Coordinators

Recruit new foster parents, screen applicants, match children with licensed foster parents and support all licensed foster families in their districts. They also maintain foster family records and make sure reimbursements are made.

RLSI Family Services Workers

License foster homes, residential facilities, child-placing agencies, adoption agencies and shelter programs across the state. They also investigate possible licensing violations, renew licenses and evaluate changes in foster homes.

Supervisors

Directly supervise Family Services workers, are members of the local teams and are available to support foster families when Family Services workers, resource coordinators and district directors are not available.

Youth Development Coordinators

Prepare youth in DCF custody (ages 15 – 21) to successfully transition from foster care to living on their own. They do this by teaching them life skills and providing them with information, training, support and services.

The case planning process

Case planning is the process of working with the family and service providers to achieve the goal of a safe and permanent home for the child.

The case plan provides a framework for decision-making by addressing:

- Why the child came into DCF custody
- The family's challenges, strengths and support/safety network
- Behaviors and conditions that affect safety and risk
- The outcomes, goals and tasks that must be achieved to facilitate the needed changes
- The supports and services the children and parents need
- How the family's progress will be evaluated
- The case plan goal (the initial goal is typically reunification)

The family's team, which you'll be part of, will develop the case plan together and then focus on implementing the plan, monitoring the progress made and making any needed adjustments. The plan will change as the situation changes.

After six months, the Family Services worker will invite team members to a meeting to review the case plan, assess progress, set expectations and share information. An independent person (called a *case reviewer*) will facilitate the review meeting to make sure everyone gets a chance to be heard.

At the end of the review, participants will be asked to sign the case plan indicating their agreement. If you disagree with the case plan, the appeal process to handle such disagreements will be explained.

When sufficient progress has been made, DCF may recommend that the child return home and the case be closed. However, if it becomes clear that the child can't return home, the goal may be changed to looking for another permanent home for the child. As the child's foster parent, you may be asked to consider providing that home.

What you can expect from DCF

You can expect to:

- Be respected as a valued and integral part of the family's team.
- Receive a completed placement check list and authorization letter for each child placed in your home.
 - ⇒ See *FSD Policy 94: Resource Family Care*
- Receive timely communication from the Family Services worker.
- Get answers to questions within 72 hours. (When the worker is not available to respond to an urgent matter, contact the supervisor or other team member.)
- Review the case record of a child placed in your home, after signing a confidentiality agreement.
 - ⇒ See *FSD Policy 94: Resource Family Care*
- Have the opportunity to provide input on the development of the case plan.
- Be invited to attend and participate in case plan reviews.
 - ⇒ See *FSD Policy 122: Case Plan Reviews and Permanency Hearings for Children and Youth in Custody*
- Have an opportunity to talk about any concerns DCF has about the care of a child in your home.
- Receive at least two-weeks notice of a planned move for a child living with you, unless DCF has a concern regarding the child's immediate health or safety or the court changes the child's custody status. If the child has been living with you for more than 3 months, you're entitled to a formal review of a planned or unplanned placement change. This includes circumstances in which the child has been recently removed from your home, (with some exceptions).
 - ⇒ See *FSD Policy 94: Resource Family Care*
- Receive written or verbal notice from DCF of any post-disposition court hearing regarding the child. You have a right to be heard at the hearing. The court will exercise discretion regarding your presence at the entire hearing.
 - ⇒ See *FSD Policy 94: Resource Family Care*

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>

What DCF expects from you

- Provide the child with a safe, stable place to live.
- Complete the *Foundations Training* as well as advanced trainings.
- Schedule routine medical, dental and counseling appointments for the child with providers approved by the Family Services worker. Make sure the child is taken to appointments as needed.
- Cooperate in arrangements for any other services needed by the child.
- Work with the school on the child's behalf. This may include transporting the child to their school of origin.
- Actively participate on the family's team.
- Participate in shared parenting meetings when a child is placed in your home.
- Keep the child's Family Services worker informed about information you learn from the child that you believe is important to share.
- Communicate regularly with DCF about the child's progress and any challenges you're experiencing. Document noteworthy information, events and activities.
- Make day-to-day decisions on the child's behalf using the standards in Policy 75.
 - ⇒ See *FSD Policy 75: Normalcy and the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard*
- Work actively to support the case plan goals and plan for family contact. If you disagree with aspects of the case plan, request a meeting to discuss your concerns.
- Comply with all regulations listed in the *Licensing Regulations For Foster Care* (<https://dcf.vermont.gov/pubs>).
- Give the department at least two weeks notice if you are requesting that a child leave your home, unless safety is a concern.
- Notify DCF immediately if the child has a serious or emergency medical need, has run away, has been in an accident or is involved in illegal activity. After hours, notify Emergency Services at 1-800-649-5285.
- Notify the Family Services worker or resource coordinator if you plan to use formal respite.
 - ⇒ See *Policy 95: Respite Care*

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>

Who to call if you...

Question	Resource Coordinator	Family Services Worker	School	Therapist	Doctor
Need information about childcare	X	X			
Need information about additional supports at school		X	X		
Are being investigated for child abuse/neglect and want to speak to someone	X	X			
Need to know where to send your expense forms	X				
Want to find out about court dates		X			
Are struggling with a child in your home	X	X		X	
Are going on vacation, out of state or out of country	X	X			
Want to know more about a child's likes, dislikes and routine	X	X			
Have questions about a child's special educational needs		X	X		
Need to seek medical / emergency medical care for a child in your care		X*			X
Have questions about a child's health needs, including medications		X			X
Need to report a child has run away		X*			
<p>For more information, refer to <i>FSD Policy 75: Normalcy and the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard</i> at https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies.</p>					

*** After hours, on weekends, and on State holidays, call the Emergency Services Program at 1-800-649-5285.**

CHAPTER 7: THE COURT PROCESS

Children and youth come to the attention of Family Court when the state alleges they:

- Were abused or neglected
- Were without or beyond their parents' control
- Were chronically truant from school OR
- Committed a delinquent act

While DCF makes recommendations to the court, only law enforcement officers may remove children from their homes and only family court judges may grant custody to someone other than the parent.

Court hearings that may occur

Following are brief descriptions of the court hearings that may occur. See the flowchart on page 34 for a visual overview.

IF THE CASE BEGINS AS AN EMERGENCY:

Emergency Care Hearing

Children may be taken into emergency custody if they are in immediate danger, have run away or been arrested. Parents may not know about an *Emergency Care Hearing* beforehand as it happens quickly, day or night, in response to an emergency. The hearing takes place with a judge, by phone or at court. During this time, the child could be temporarily placed in foster care and the Family Services worker gathers information to present at the next court hearing. An order for emergency care is followed by a *Temporary Care Hearing* within 72 hours.

Temporary Care Hearing

The judge decides who will have temporary custody of the child/youth until the next hearing. Based on the information presented, the judge will first decide whether the child can safely live at home with the custodial parent(s). If not, the judge will grant temporary custody to either a non-custodial parent, relative, family friend, other person known to the child/family or DCF.

IF THE CASE BEGINS AS A NON-EMERGENCY:

Preliminary Hearing

If the child was not removed from the home by emergency order, the first hearing is typically a Preliminary Hearing. It takes place within 15 days of the State's Attorney filing a petition explaining why DCF is requesting custody of the child. The judge reviews the information in the petition and hears from the parties. The next hearing is typically a *Pre-Trial Hearing*.

Pre-Trial Hearing

This hearing is held about 15 days after either the *Temporary Care Hearing* or *Preliminary Hearing*. The purpose is to discuss whether the allegations in the petition will be admitted to or denied. This decision is important because it affects what happens with the rest of the case. If the allegations are admitted to, it is called reaching the "merits" of the case and the next step is the *Disposition Hearing*. If the allegations are denied, the next step is the *Merits Hearing*.

Status Conference

A *Status Conference* is a court hearing that allows the judge and other parties to hear what is going on with the case. It may be held at any stage of the case.

Merits Hearing

The *Merits Hearing* is similar to a trial. The case is presented to a judge. There is no jury. Witnesses may be called to testify under oath. Testimony may be presented by family members, teachers, doctors, mental health providers, friends, witnesses, police officers, Family Services workers, foster parents, the child/youth and others.

After listening to the evidence, the judge may either dismiss the case or issue one of the following findings:

- *CHINS A* – child was abandoned or abused by their parents, guardian or other custodian.
- *CHINS B* – child is without proper parental care or subsistence, education, medical or other care necessary for his/her well-being.
- *CHINS C* – child is without or beyond the control of their parents, guardian or other custodian.
- *CHINS D* - child is habitually and without justification truant from compulsory school attendance.
- *DELINQUENT* – child over the age of 10 was adjudicated for committing a delinquent act.

If the judge finds the child is in need of care or supervision (*CHINS*) or the youth is delinquent, the judge will order Family Services to prepare a *disposition case plan* that identifies the permanency goal, an estimated date for achieving it and a plan for services.

Disposition Hearing

The *Disposition Hearing* is typically held within 35 days of the *Merits Order*. Before the hearing, all parties will get a copy of the *disposition case plan*. At the hearing, all parties will get the opportunity to voice their opinions and the judge will either accept or reject the case plan and make a final decision about custody.

Post-Dispositional Review Hearing

The court is required to hold a hearing 60 days after the *Disposition Order* is issued to monitor progress of the case plan. By law, foster parents have the right to be heard at this hearing and any hearing thereafter. The judge may ask questions. The foster parents may wish to prepare some notes to help them prepare for court.

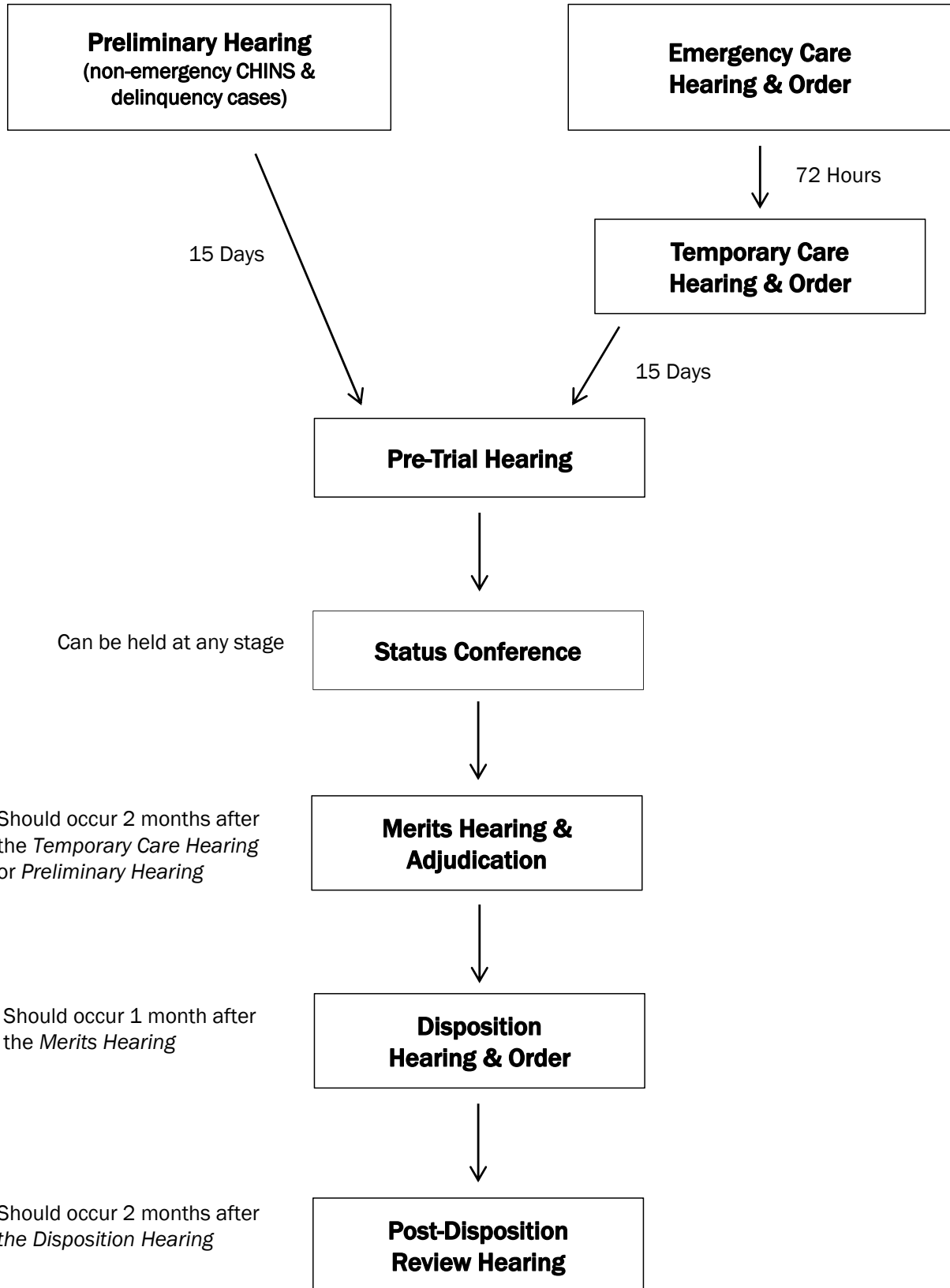
Permanency Hearing

The permanency hearing occurs within 12 months of a child's entering the state's care but may be held earlier for children under six. The purpose of this hearing is to determine the permanency goal for the child and provide an estimated time for achieving that goal.

To learn more, take the [Court Overview Training for Caregivers](http://training.vermontcwtp.org/) offered by the Child Welfare Training Partnership. <http://training.vermontcwtp.org/>

Juvenile Proceedings Flowchart

(Not all cases will follow this progression)



Other things to know about court hearings

People with party status

People with party status are determined by the court to be proper or necessary to the court proceedings. They have the right to present evidence and call witnesses. The following people are always parties to the case:

- ➔ The judge
- ➔ The State's Attorney (attorney who represents the state)
- ➔ The Family Services worker
- ➔ The parents, the child and their attorneys
- ➔ The child's Guardian ad Litem

The judge may also grant party status to others. Foster parents have a statutorily provided opportunity to be heard at, and are notified of, *Post-Disposition Review Hearings* and *Permanency Hearings*. Always let your Family Services worker and the court know how to contact you if your phone number or address changes.

Continuances

Any party to the case may request (in writing) that a court hearing be continued to another date if they cannot attend the one that's scheduled. Continuances are only granted by the judge for reasons such as illness or the inability of a party to be present. When a hearing is continued, all parties are given notice (in writing if there's enough time) of the change in date.

Courtroom guidelines

All persons are expected to be respectful of each other and the judge. Here are some pointers to help you have a good experience in court.

- ➔ It's a good idea to arrive 15 minutes early for all hearings. Security is as tight if not tighter than screening to board a plane.
- ➔ Remember that you'll have to pass through a metal detector to enter the courthouse. Purses and bags will be screened. Leave items such as pocket knives at home.
- ➔ Once you've arrived at the designated court room, ask the court clerk to put your name on the list requesting entry into the court room.
- ➔ Strive for a neutral and respectful demeanor while at court. Don't interrupt, even if you strongly disagree with something being said. The judge will provide an opportunity for all involved in the case to be heard.
- ➔ Be aware of your body language and behavior, even when simply observing. The judge will notice.
- ➔ Let the judge know (raise your hand,) if you can't hear what the others are saying in the courtroom.
- ➔ Court can be stressful. Get support if you need it. Reach out to someone (e.g., the resource coordinator, Family Services worker or another foster parent).

CHAPTER 8: THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Financial support

Monthly reimbursement

You will be reimbursed a set amount every month to help cover the costs of caring for a child. This amount covers:

- ➔ An allowance for room & board
- ➔ Money for clothing and incidentals (e.g., shampoo, school supplies and makeup)
- ➔ Money for the child or youth to use for personal spending

The reimbursement rate will depend on your training and experience and the age of the child. You'll get this amount once a month for the previous month's care —by mail or direct deposit to your bank account. Occasionally, supplemental reimbursement may be authorized if you are expected to provide a higher level of care to meet the child's need for additional care and supervision.

The IRS considers the monthly amount foster parents get as reimbursement of expenses and non-taxable income. Reimbursement for respite care may be taxed, however. For more information about the tax implications, ask your accountant.

Case plan expenses

You may also request reimbursement for expenses related to carrying out the case plan. This could include making approved phone calls, attending training and transporting the child to family time, meetings, court and other activities outlined in the child's case plan. You must get prior approval for these expenses and submit expense forms monthly. To avoid delays, be sure each form is complete and the totals are correct.

Transportation to medical appointments, including counseling, eye care and dental care, can be arranged for and reimbursed through Medicaid transportation. Please note that each district has a different process. If you will be transporting a child in your care to a medical appointment, please call the Family Services worker or resource coordinator in your district.

Clothing vouchers

An initial clothing voucher of up to \$100 may be issued if a child comes into care without adequate clothing and efforts to recover the child's clothing are unsuccessful.

Damage claims

If the child damages your home accidentally or on purpose, you may be eligible to be reimbursed for the costs of repairs. Go to <https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies> to see the relevant policy (FSD Policy 270: Damage Claim Expenses) and get the form you need to complete (FS-270: Damage Claim Form).

Hot lunch & WIC

Children in foster care are eligible for free school lunches. Those under five are also eligible to receive food from the WIC Program administered by the Department of Health, regardless of your family's income. To learn about WIC, go to <http://www.healthvermont.gov/family/wic>.

Unusual expenses and special events

If a child needs special items or has unusual expenses, there may be funds available to help. Some organizations help with things like camp, class trips and other special events. Ask the Family Services worker for more information. Requests for reimbursement of unusual expenses must have prior approval.

Training support

Training helps caregivers deal with the complex issues faced by children and families who are involved with DCF.

Vermont Child Welfare Training Partnership (CWTP)

The CWTP is a collaboration between DCF and the University of Vermont that offers learning opportunities for Vermont foster, adoptive and kinship parents. This includes:

- *Foundations Training* — required training for all licensed foster and kinship foster families in Vermont
- *Fostering to Forever...a Lifelong Journey* — required training for all families who are adopting children or youth through DCF
- Advanced trainings developed in partnership with resource coordinators across the state to enhance the knowledge and skills of caregivers

The CWTP maintains these websites:

- The *Child Welfare Training Partnership ELearning Portal*: <http://training.vermontcwtp.org/>
- *Voices at the Table* blog for Vermont caregivers: <https://voicesatthetable.wordpress.com/>

DCF workshops

DCF provides workshops for staff throughout the year. Foster parents are welcome to attend these workshops for free, as space allows. Ask your resource coordinator for a calendar of workshops, which cover a range of topics and are held during regular work hours.

Conferences

The following organizations each sponsor an annual conference for caregivers:

- Vermont Consortium for Adoption and Guardianship: <https://www.vtadoption.org/>
- Vermont Foster and Adoptive Family Association: <http://vfafa.net/vfafa-conference/>
- Vermont Kin as Parents: <http://vermontkinasparents.org>

Other supports

Childcare

We strive to provide child care for children from newborn to age 12 when it's needed. However, due to limited child care availability statewide, a child may be placed on a waiting list until an opening becomes available.

Child care needs are considered when making placement decisions. If you work or have other commitments during the day and need child care to support the placement of a child in your home, communicate this need to members of the district office team (e.g., resource coordinator or Family Services worker) immediately.

Each district office collaborates with a CIS Child Care Coordinator — a resource for district office staff and foster/kinship parents. The statewide list of CIS Child Care Coordinators and their contact information is available online at <https://dcf.vermont.gov/partners/scc>.

The CIS Child Care Coordinator may be used as a resource in the following ways:

- As a partner to resource coordinators or Family Services workers when child care is a factor in making placement decisions
- Beginning the process of finding child care for a specific child in DCF custody
- Planning for and identifying child care within tight timeframes
- Prioritizing protective services child care slots
- Expediting the child care approval process
- Utilizing variances if appropriate
- Planning for children with behavioral needs and additional staffing in the child care setting
- Specialized planning for unique child care needs

Specialized planning will need to occur for youth 13 and older with child care/supervision needs. If a youth requires supervision that can't be provided in a child care setting, discuss this with the Family Services worker or larger team. Possible resources for this population include the Youth Development Program (YDP), Balanced & Restorative Justice (BARJ), mentors, respite, etc.

- Read *Child Care And You: How to find and keep quality care* at <https://dcf.vermont.gov/pubs#ChildCare>
- Read *Specialized Child Care Handbook* online at <https://dcf.vermont.gov/pubs#ChildCare>

Contracted support services: case management

DCF works with several agencies that provide a limited amount of additional support to foster parents, including case management. Case managers may be available to come to your home to consult with you about child-specific behaviors and ways to manage them. Ask the Family Services worker or resource coordinator about services available to you.

Emergencies and Situations Requiring an Immediate Response

If you have a situation that requires immediate attention, call the FSD district office during regular office hours. If you are involved with a support agency, contact them. After hours, on weekends and on state holidays, call the Emergency Services Program (ESP) at 1-800-649-5285.

Family Services District Offices

Your local district office, including the resource coordinator, Family Services worker, supervisor and district director are available to provide ongoing support.

Medical benefits

Children in foster care are covered for medical expenses either through their parents' insurance or Medicaid.

Respite care

DCF supports the use of respite as a positive break for caregivers. It gives you time to relax and refresh your energy. It's also an opportunity for the child to have a break and connect with other caring adults. Ideally, respite is developed with the youth and family and becomes part of the case plan. Using natural supports and extended family whenever possible helps build lifelong connections for the child and maximizes normalcy for the youth.

For more information, see *FSD Policy 95: Respite Care* at <https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>.

Youth Development Program (YDP)

The YDP provides services and supports to Vermont youth ages 14-23 who have experience with the foster care system. This includes help doing things like applying to college, finding a job, securing housing and getting health insurance. The goal is to help them successfully transition from foster care into adulthood. For more information, call (802) 229-9151, email ydp@wcysb.org or visit <https://vtyouthdevelopmentprogram.org/>.

Economic Benefits

Available Through DCF

DCF administers several programs that help families meet their basic needs. Eligibility for most programs is based on family or household income as well as additional criteria. Foster care reimbursements are not counted as income for most programs; however, some programs (e.g., Fuel Assistance and 3SquaresVT) will count reimbursements as income if you choose to include the foster child as part of your household.

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/benefits>

Extended Care for Youth

If a young person turns 18 while in your care, there may be an opportunity for the youth to continue being supported in your home until their 23rd birthday.

Financial support is available as long as the youth:

1. Has a signed *Voluntary Services Agreement*
2. Continues working toward the goals set out in the agreement

The *Voluntary Services Agreement* — signed by you, the youth and a Family Services worker or youth development coordinator — outlines:

- a. The youth's goals
- b. The youth's commitment to continuing education, employment and other productive use of time
- c. Any agreement about the youth's financial contribution to their living expenses
- d. How adults will support the youth's goals and help them achieve self-sufficiency.

Your role will include helping the youth attain the competencies and life skills they need to thrive and transition into healthy, productive and self-sufficient adulthood.

For More Information

- Call (802) 585-0554 and speak to the Policy & Practice Specialist with the Juvenile Justice/Adolescent Services Unit at DCF Family Services.
- Read FSD Policy 160: Supporting Adolescents in DCF Custody (<https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/policies>)
- Read *Rule 7000 - Transition Age Youth* (<https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/rules>)

CHAPTER 9: THE ULTIMATE GOAL

The first hope for children and youth in DCF custody is to safely reunite with their parents.

If that can't happen within a reasonable timeframe, DCF must explore other options for achieving permanence for the child — preferably with relatives or other people they know.

Research shows that relative placements are usually less traumatic for children. They provide continuity and connection with familiar adults and surroundings. Even when a child or youth does not know a relative, they still help keep the child connected to their family's history and culture. This sense of identity and belonging – knowing who they are and where they come from – is essential to their well-being.

Options for Achieving Permanence

1. Adoption by a relative, family friend or non-related family:

Adoption requires the termination of parental rights (TPR) in family court followed by the finalization of the adoption in probate court. The TPR can be either voluntary or involuntary.

When you adopt a child:

- ⇒ You become the child's legal parent with all the rights and responsibilities that entails
- ⇒ The birth parents no longer have any legal rights or responsibilities

You might qualify for adoption assistance, which could include a monthly stipend, health insurance and payment for special services for the child, if you adopt a child who:

- ⇒ Is in DCF custody or the legal custody of someone other than a parent as the result of a CHINS or delinquency proceeding in family court
- ⇒ Is legally freed for adoption
- ⇒ Has at least one special need that makes adoption unlikely without assistance

2. Permanent guardianship with a relative or family friend:

Permanent guardianship provides legal permanence for children/youth without requiring the termination of parental rights (TPR). Family court may establish a permanent guardianship for a child/youth who has been the subject of juvenile court proceedings if the judge finds that:

- ⇒ Neither parent will be able to assume or resume parental duties within a reasonable period of time
- ⇒ The child has lived with the proposed guardian for at least six months
- ⇒ Permanent guardianship is in the child's best interests
- ⇒ The proposed guardian is suitable, able and willing to provide a safe, nurturing home for the child until he or she turns 18

In a permanent guardianship:

- ⇒ DCF is no longer involved
- ⇒ The guardian is responsible for the child's care, protection and education
- ⇒ The parents can't petition the court to end the guardianship or regain custody
- ⇒ The parents retain certain parental rights and responsibilities (e.g., the right to have contact with the child and the responsibility to pay child support)
- ⇒ The court sets the plan for parent-child contact

You might qualify for guardianship assistance if you:

- ⇒ Have been providing kinship foster care for the child for at least the past six months
- ⇒ Are either the child's relative or you had a significant relationship with the child prior to DCF custody
- ⇒ Meet other requirements

Assistance could include a monthly stipend, health insurance and payment for special services for the child.

A child's transition to another home

When a child leaves your home to reunify with his or her parents, join relatives or transition into an adoptive home, you will work with the Family Services worker to make the transition go as smoothly as possible. Collaboration is vital. Sharing detailed information about the child's strengths, areas for growth and daily routines will help make the adjustment easier. Helping the child to express their feelings about the move can also help.

It's important to provide the child with a planned and organized transition. The time can be used to recognize positive change and celebrate a new beginning. Many foster parents help mark the occasion by planning a favorite meal, holding a good-bye celebration or giving the child special mementos to help provide closure. It is important for children to learn how to say "good-bye" in a positive way.

Having a child leave your home can be both rewarding and painful. After the child leaves, it's helpful to schedule a meeting with the Family Services worker or resource coordinator to discuss how the placement went and share what you've learned.

Some final words

We hope this guide has helped you learn more about DCF and how you can help a child in the care and custody of the state. If you have further questions, please contact the child's Family Services worker or local resource coordinator.

Essential Phone Numbers

Name

Phone

Family Services Worker: _____

Supervisor: _____

Resource Coordinator: _____

Parent/Guardian: _____

Parent/Guardian: _____

School Contact: _____

Childcare Provider: _____

Therapist: _____

Physician: _____

Dentist: _____

Educational Surrogate: _____

Attorney: _____

Guardian ad Litem: _____

Other: _____

Other: _____

Emergency Numbers

DCF Emergency Services Program (after office hours): 1-800-649-5285

Local Police: _____

Local Crisis Program: _____

Other: _____

Foster Parent Corner

Visit this page to access resources for foster parents in Vermont, including forms, publications, a newsletter and more.

fpcorner.vermont.gov

Vermont Kin as Parents

VKAP offers free information & referral service to kinship caregivers. They can help you:

- ➔ Find programs, services, educational opportunities and other resources
- ➔ Figure out the right questions to ask so you can make informed decisions
- ➔ Connect with kinship caregivers and support groups throughout Vermont

<http://vermontkinasparents.org>

Vermont Consortium For Adoption & Guardianship

A consortium of agencies and groups around the state that offer support to guardians and adoptive parents. Supports include trauma and adoption informed parenting education, information and referral, assistance with school and community issues and support and discussion groups.

<https://www.vtadoption.org/>

Vermont Foster/Adoptive Family Association (VFafa)

VFafa's mission is to empower, support and unify foster and adoptive families by strengthening the systems that care for Vermont's children.

<http://vfafa.net/>

Voices at the Table Blog & Website

The blog is a forum for kinship, foster and adoptive families to share with one another. The website is a place to learn about current resources, support, educational opportunities and other topics relevant to your experience.

<http://voicesatthetable.wordpress.com>