

What is foster care?

Foster care is a temporary living situation for children whose parents cannot take care of them and whose need for care has come to the attention of child welfare agency staff. While in foster care, children [may live with relatives](#), with foster families or in group facilities. Over half of children who enter foster care return to their families.

How long children stay in foster care depends on their family situation and what options are available in their communities. For some children, their stay in foster care is brief; for others foster care lasts one to three years or, in some cases, longer. A key goal of foster care programs is to ensure that children live in stable, lifelong families, since secure attachment to at least one parenting adult is crucial to healthy child development and well-being.

Over the years, Casey has invested considerable resources on improving the nation's child welfare system and, in particular, foster care. Among our investments in this area: Casey's [Child Welfare Strategy Group](#) and [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®](#), [Casebook](#), [CHAMPS](#) (a campaign to promote high-quality parenting), [Youth Transitions Funders Group](#) and [SPARC](#) (a state policy and advocacy center). In addition, we continue to mine a rich trove of lessons learned from past child welfare initiatives, such as [Family to Family](#) and [Casey Family Services](#).

Why are kids in foster care?

Children are in foster care because they or their families are going through a crisis. Often these children — from babies to teens — have been removed from their parents because they are unsafe, abused or neglected or their parents are unable to care for them. Foster care is meant to be temporary — until a parent can get back on track, or a relative, guardian or adoptive family agrees to raise a child. By law, children are supposed to have contact with family — their parents, brothers and sisters — through regular visits while they are in foster care. [Foster children report](#) that being away from family and familiar surroundings, and not always knowing what's next, are among the hardest parts of foster care. On the other hand, while they miss their families, children may realize that being in foster care can be a better solution, at least temporarily. [Listening to young people's experiences](#) in foster care is a critical challenge for agencies nationwide.

What is a foster parent?

Foster parents are relatives or non-relative adults who step up to care for children who have experienced abuse or neglect or whose parents are unable to care for them. They try to provide children as much caring and [normalcy](#) as possible, while also helping prepare children for a permanent placement, either through a return to birth parents or adoption. Foster parents, sometimes called resource parents, are licensed by the state and trained caregivers.

What's a group home?

Some children in foster care don't live with foster families. They live in group settings, sometimes called congregate care, with several or many other foster children. This includes group homes, where a group of foster children live together with staff members who work in shifts (who are sometimes called "house parents"); shelters; residential treatment centers and other non-family living situation. While quality residential settings are key features of any child welfare system, in some communities [too many children are placed in group settings unnecessarily](#), sparking reform efforts at the state, local and federal levels. A new federal law — [the Family First Prevention Services Act](#), passed in 2018 — aims to restructure how child welfare funds are spent, increasing resources available for foster care prevention and children living in families and reducing funding for group placements that are clinically unnecessary.

How do children enter foster care? Who decides that a child needs to be in foster care?

Typically, children come to the attention of the child welfare system, staffed by government officials, through a report of child abuse or neglect. Social workers investigate allegations and the agency must get approval from a judge if they determine it is not safe for the child to stay at home.

While there were an estimated 676,000 maltreatment cases in 2016 (a rate of 9.1 per 1,000 children in the population), only 143,866 of them received foster care services. Another estimated 59,716 children were placed in foster care without a finding of abuse or neglect. Many more children and their families receive supportive services in their homes, provided by the child welfare agency or a community service provider.

The agency must [go to court](#) to seek temporary custody of the child. Part of being in foster care is being visited by caseworkers and having judges check on children periodically. Caseworkers are responsible for keeping children safe and getting them into stable, long-term family situations as soon as possible; judges oversee this process. They also need to ensure that children's needs are being met—that they are going to school, for example, and getting health care and staying in touch with their families.

Child welfare agencies focus on finding [permanence](#), based on federal laws that promote the need for children to grow up in families who will always be there for them. Child welfare agencies and judges, as part of the decision-making process,

should involve children, their parents and other adults in planning how to achieve permanence for children in foster care.

How many children are in foster care?

In 2017, about 442,995 children were in foster care. Nearly one third of them lived with relatives. Slightly more boys than girls are in foster care. In many communities, African-American children are overrepresented in foster care; in others, Native Americans or Latinos are. The reasons that children of color are disproportionately represented in some child welfare systems are complex and have inspired much study, activism and efforts to change how communities support vulnerable families.

In the United States, child welfare issues are managed by local and state agencies; this may be one reason for the tremendous variety in the child welfare experiences of children and families. Evidence indicates there are significant differences in the need for child welfare interventions by race. In many communities, African-American children are at greater risk of child maltreatment than white children, largely because of the higher correlation between maltreatment and poverty and the higher poverty rates experienced by African-American families. At the same time, one important national study found that, when risk factors such as socioeconomic status and family structure are considered, white children may be more at risk of maltreatment than African-American children in some instances.

Another complex issue: The relationship between poverty and child maltreatment. While research indicates poverty does not cause neglect, poverty, especially when combined with risk factors such as substance abuse and mental health problems, can increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is important to note, however, that most children living in poverty (regardless of race) do not experience maltreatment.

How long do children stay in foster care?

Just under half spend less than a year in care. Nearly 40% spend one to three years. Lengths of stay vary according to the circumstances of children and families, but they also differ because of choices local, state and federal agencies and communities make about how children will be cared for and the kinds of services and programs that will be available to help children return safely to their families.

What challenges do children face in foster care? What are common foster care system problems?

Too often, children in foster care move from one home to another — or live in group settings such as group homes or residential treatment centers. Frequent moves can make it hard for children to concentrate on school, build friendships and family relationships, heal from abuse, neglect and trauma, and feel secure and loved. And while a short visit to a residential treatment center might be necessary to address a crisis — a mental health emergency, for example — kids in group settings often report feeling less positive about living in group settings than kids who live with family members or in family foster homes.

Research shows that living long term in group homes means children don't have a chance to experience regular family life, develop practical skills and build bonds with adults who will care for them, both now and later. Further, too many child welfare systems have not recognized that trauma — from maltreatment and multiple moves while in foster care — is even harder for children to deal with when they live in group homes without one-on-one relationships with parenting adults.

When child welfare systems send children far from home or repeatedly move a child from one school to another, that can cause problems, too. It's hard to maintain or rebuild family and other relationships over long distances; parents may not be able to afford visits to far away treatment centers. And school stability is an important building block for getting a good education. While federal legislation requires agencies to try to keep children in their home schools, that doesn't always happen.

Some children come into foster care because their parents have substance abuse issues, are undocumented, or are in prison. What if there is extreme parent/child conflict at home? What if parents don't like their children's sexual preferences or their behavior? What if adolescent behavior turns parents against their kids? While many people believe mediation or community-based counseling should be able to de-escalate such disagreements safely, sometimes children in these situations enter foster care.

What happens when kids leave foster care?

Each year about half of children who leave foster care return to their parents or a previous caregiver. Most do not re-enter foster care; the hope is that issues that brought them into the child welfare system have been addressed. Nearly 42,000 young people leave foster care to live permanently with a relative or guardian. Each year, more than 50,000 children who can't return to their parents are adopted, most often by the relative or foster parent with whom they have been living while in foster care. Kids who are teenagers when they first enter foster care often face particular challenges. If they aren't returned to their parents or adopted by the time they become adults, they may struggle emotionally, educationally and financially. Kids who "age out" of foster care — about 20,000 each year — often don't have the support they need to launch into adulthood. These young adults are more likely to report being homeless and jobless than others their age or children who achieved permanence. They may struggle to form relationships and are more likely to be incarcerated and to have children before they have sufficient resources to care for them.