

Foster Care 101

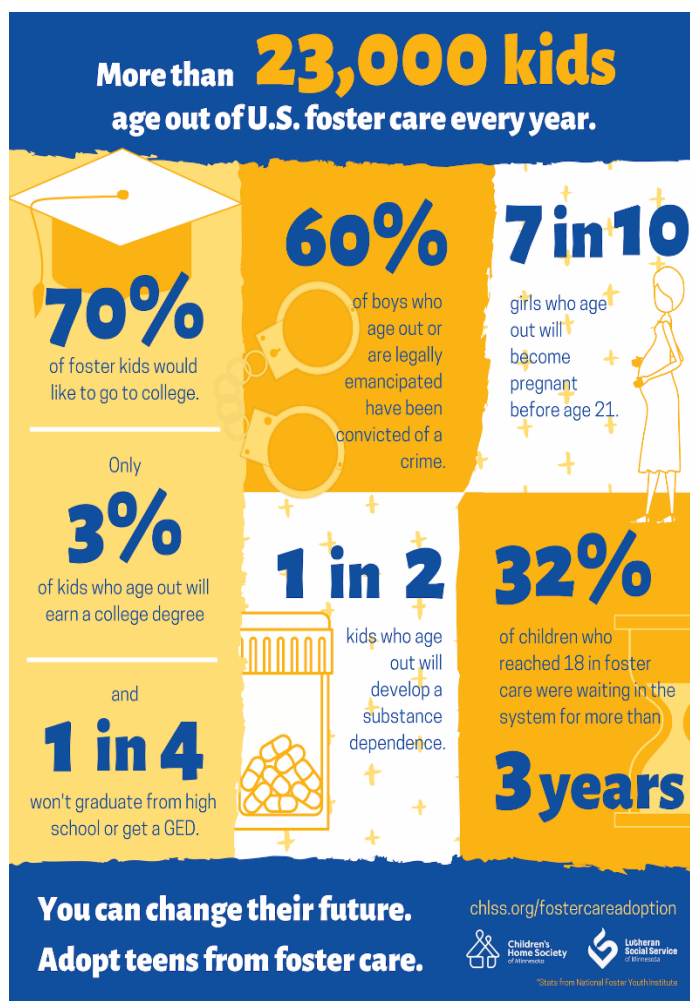
When there are concerns that a child is not safe in their home, the Local Department of Social Services (LDSS) intervenes and may choose to place the child into foster care. Foster care is a service when unrelated families, or sometimes relatives, care for these children. It is a temporary placement to enable birth parents to work on the issues that led to the child's removal from the home. Foster care placements can range from hours to years, depending on the situation. When children are in foster care, the state petitions the court for and then retains custody of the child while the foster parents act as guardians.

To become a foster parent, individuals or couples must undergo a home study and training before being certified. When children are in foster care, the foster parents provide shelter, food, and clothing. The foster parents are responsible for taking the child to any medical or therapy appointments, as well as to weekly visits with the birth parents. Foster parents also participate in meetings for the child regarding their permanency plan.

Goals for Permanency: Three Main Goals for Foster Care

- 1) Reunification: The initial goal for every child is to return home to their families if it is safe for them to do so. Parents are given time, typically a year to a year and a half, to make changes before the goal is changed.
- 2) Relative Placement: The second goal is for children to be placed with a relative. This differs from foster care because the relatives are granted custody and then the LDSS will often exit the case.
- 3) Adoption: The third goal for children in the foster care system is adoption. When a child is unable to return home and cannot be placed with relatives, the court will seek to terminate parental rights. This allows a child to be legally adopted. Typically, if a case goes to adoption, the current foster parents will be some of the first considered for the adoption.

Sometimes, especially with older teenagers, long term foster care may be an outcome based on the child's wishes to not be adopted. These kids, as well as those that are not chosen for adoption, leave the foster care system with no legal family. This is referred to as "aging out."



Agencies

Each county/city has a LDSS that recruits and trains foster families. Private foster care agencies are used when the LDSS does not have a placement among their own families, or a child is known to have a higher level of need. The LDSS have children with needs ranging from low to high intensity. Private foster care agencies, also called therapeutic foster care, focus on children with higher intensity needs. They also tend to have more support set up for foster parents to assist with the higher needs. Agencies typically have informational meetings that parents can attend when choosing with whom they would like to foster before signing up for training.

Support

The social care worker assigned to the foster child plays a large role from helping the foster parent to know which appointments to set up, to coordinating meetings with the department regarding the child, to setting up and supervising weekly meetings with the biological parents, to helping ensure that all of the child's needs are met. Foster parents also receive a monthly stipend to cover costs of food, clothing, etc. from the foster care agency. The child(ren) may be eligible for the WIC program, which can additionally help offset the cost of food. The agency will cover the cost of childcare in households where both parents work.

Adoption 101, Types of Adoption

Private Domestic Adoption

Private domestic adoption occurs when birth parents choose to place their child for adoption. These adoptions largely occur at birth but can occur at any age. Private adoption agencies are often used to connect birth parents with prospective adoptive parents. Prospective adoptive parents are required to do training and undergo a home study. Because adoptive families are often chosen by birth families in this type of adoption, there is no guarantee when a child might be placed. This process of "waiting" can be difficult.

Sometimes private domestic adoption is facilitated by word of mouth or a personal connection instead of through an agency. In this case, it can often be handled directly by an attorney. However, parties can still choose to use an agency for a variety of reasons.

International Adoption

Many families have been led overseas for adoption. Adoption of children from another country must be facilitated through a private agency. When interested in international adoption, it is helpful to look at the laws and guidelines for various countries to determine a good fit. Each country has their own rules on who can adopt a child from marital status, age, income, and health conditions of prospective parents. Once a country is chosen, families must choose an agency that facilitates adoption for that country. Visit <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption.html> for more information on country specifics.

Kinship Adoption

When a child is adopted by a stepparent, family member, close family friend, etc. it is referred to as a kinship adoption. We often neglect these families when talking about adoption, but they offer the ability to keep a child's connection in a family or community while also providing a safe and loving home. However, sometimes kinship care, especially when done through the foster care system, can cause disruption in family relationships. An unexpected child joining your home can also cause financial strain. There is more effort at the state and national levels to make sure families choosing kinship care are supported in the same way we support foster families and people adopting from foster care.

Adoption from Foster Care

When a child is no longer able to return home, the court will terminate parental rights so the child can be adopted. Typically, a search for relatives for the child to live with was conducted early in their time in foster care. If there are no relatives able to care for the child, their foster family may choose to adopt the child. Right now, in Virginia, there are 700 children currently placed in foster care eligible to be adopted. 70% of those children will be adopted by their foster parent(s).

A child eligible for adoption that will not be adopted by their foster parents is considered a "waiting child." There are hundreds of kids in Virginia currently waiting to find their forever family. In order to adopt one of these children, families must become a licensed foster family and have the child placed in their home before adoption proceedings can begin.

One of the myths about adoption is that it must be expensive. Adopting a child currently in foster care has minimal costs and adoptive parents are often reimbursed. In addition, most children adopted from foster care are eligible to receive a subsidy for their care until they are adults.

FINANCIAL COST OF ADOPTION



2022 National Foster Care Numbers

There are approximately **440,000 children** in foster care across the United States.

The average age of a foster child in the U.S. is **8 years old**.

The average length of time a child resides in foster care in the U.S. in **12 months**.

50% percent of U.S. children in foster care will be reunited with their parents or primary caregiver.

There are approximately **125,000 children** in foster care in the U.S. who are waiting for adoption.

Nearly **60,000 children** in foster care in the U.S. get adopted each year.

25% percent of children in foster care are adopted, often by their foster parents.

20,000 children in foster care age out of the system at age 18 or 21.

20% of teens who age out of foster care will **become instantly homeless**.

70% of the young women who age out of foster care **become pregnant before 21**.

All data from [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Report, August 2018 AFCARS](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars)
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>

2022 Virginia Foster Care Numbers

There are over **4,800 children** in foster care in Virginia.

Of the children in foster care in Virginia, **52% are boys** and **48% are girls**.

60% of children in Virginia foster care are Caucasian, **28%** are African-American and **11%** are Hispanic.

48% of the children in foster care are 13 years and older.

The average stay in foster care is **21 months**.

18% of children who exit Virginia foster care each year age out at 18. This means Virginia ranks as one of the worst states in the USA for the percent of children who age out of foster care without a permanent home.

32% of Virginia children in foster care return to their birth family.

1700+ foster children in Virginia are waiting for adoptive families.

The average age of children in Virginia who are waiting to be adopted is **9 years old**.

35% of children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted are under the age of 5.

30% of children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted are over the age of 13.

30% of children in Virginia foster care are adopted, many times by their foster parents.

