

Talking to kids about foster care

How do you explain foster care to a child who has not experienced it and does not know other kids who are in foster care? How do you tell them about abuse, neglect, and being removed from their parents' care without scaring them? Kids sure do "say the darndest things," and they are not afraid to ask difficult questions. It is important to be honest and straightforward. Here is a sample of questions that kids often ask about foster care:

Is foster care a place, like a daycare?

It may be hard for kids to understand what exactly foster care means. Foster care is not a place where all kids in foster care go, but a child in foster care lives with a family, in a home, just like other children. The only difference is that a child in foster care is not living with his or her parents because it is not safe.

What happens to parents when kids go into foster care? Do the kids get to see their parents?

If it is safe, and if a child's parents are available, a child will get to visit his or her parents. Often the visits are supervised just to make sure that the kids are safe. As time goes on, a child may get to visit for longer periods of time with his or her parents, and may get to go back home for good.

If kids can be in foster care because their parents hit them, what if my parents hit me when I am in trouble?

If a child asks about spanking, be careful to make a clear distinction between spanking and abuse. Though many people feel that spanking is an inappropriate form of punishment, many parents do spank their children when other forms of punishment, like time-outs, are not working. Clearly explain to children that the kind of hitting and abuse that may send a child into foster care is very, very serious.

Who picks up a kid in foster care from school? What does a kid in foster care do on the weekends?

Kids in foster care are just like other kids, but they do not live with their parents. Their foster parents do just about everything that a parent would do, like picking up the child

from school, taking the child to a sports practice or an extracurricular activity, and spending time with the child on the weekends. The foster family's home is the child's home, too, so the child sleeps there and spends the weekends there—just like other kids do at their homes.

What does a kid in foster care do for the holidays?

A kid in foster care may celebrate the holidays with family members if possible, but he or she may also celebrate the holidays with his or her foster family. Foster families, like other families, will include their foster children in their family activities. If a kid in foster care is used to celebrating the holidays differently, or even celebrating different holidays than his or her foster family, the foster family can work with the child to honor those traditions. A kid in foster care has a new foster family, but that does not mean that his or her past interests and traditions no longer matter.

Does a kid in foster care ever get to go back home to get his or her things?

This depends on the safety of the situation. If a child is very unsafe at home and must be removed, the move will probably happen very quickly, and the child will not be able to take much, if anything, from home. This is why children sometimes enter foster care with only the clothes on their backs. If the home is safe enough, it may be determined that a child can gather more of his or her things. Maybe someone else can even bring some of the child's personal belongings to him or her after the child has entered foster care. The most important thing is safety, and sometimes that means that a child's things get left behind.

What happens when kids in foster care turn 18? What do they do?

If kids are in foster care until age 18, they "age out" of foster care. This means that they were not "reunited" with their parents, and they were not legally adopted. Maybe a foster family will still stay in contact with them and help them find a place to live, work, or go on to college. Maybe a mentor or friend will help them learn to live independently. Sometimes, kids who age out of foster care will find their parents, from whom they were separated, and live with them again. There are many, many options and paths that kids may take. Before kids turn 18 and age out of foster care, they have access to many resources and tools to help them prepare for living on their own.

What else can we do to help kids in foster care?

One of the most important things that kids can do is understand that some kids are not able to live with their parents, and that being in foster care is typically a result of something out of a kid's control.

There are so many different kinds of families, and it is important to not judge others because their family may seem different than yours. Whether grandparents raise their grandchildren, aunts or uncles raise their nieces and nephews, older siblings raise their younger siblings, adoptive parents raise their adopted children, or foster parents raise their foster children, these are all families.

What is most important is that kids are safe and well taken care of. Just understanding that some kids may have experienced difficult things in their lives and choosing not to judge them by those situations can be so helpful to a child in foster care. They need friends to stick by them, just like any other child.