

# FOSTER

WATCH PARTY TOOLKIT



*“You can’t always write the beginning to your story, but you can definitely write the end.”  
-Mary*

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# EVENT PLANNING GUIDE

## JOIN COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY COMMITTED TO IMPROVING THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

FOSTER, a feature-length documentary from Participant Media and Emerson Collective, in association with HBO Documentary Films, goes beyond sensational headlines and stereotypes to take an unprecedented look at the often-misunderstood world of the foster care system. Through compelling first-hand accounts, the film shines a realistic yet hopeful light on struggling families and children in need of support and understanding.

You can help to make a difference. By inviting friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues to watch the film together, you can create an opportunity to engage in thoughtful conversations about the child welfare system and identify ways to support children and their families.

### HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR SCREENING

1. **Let your community know about the event.** Download a customizable invitation [here](#). Creating a Facebook event is a great way to keep track of who's coming, build anticipation among your friends and event attendees, and share the latest information with your network.
2. **Get people ready and prepared.** Download our social media toolkit with our video trailer and shareable images that you can post on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to help drive awareness around your event.
3. **Confirm the start time of your screening.** Follow-up with your guests by sending out a reminder and/or updating your Facebook event page before the show.
4. **Show that your community cares about children and families.** Use #FOSTERdoc in your posts to join the many child welfare advocates taking part in this moment across the country.

### SCREENING RESOURCES

Our suite of tools - customizable invitations, posters, and more - can be used not only to create a memorable event for your community and colleagues but to keep the conversation going afterward.

- [Customizable Watch Party Invitation](#)
- [Trailer](#)
- [Poster](#)
- [Social Media Toolkit](#)
- [Discussion Questions](#)
- [Call to Action](#)



## ABOUT CHILD WELFARE

Child welfare is one of our most pressing social justice issues and public health concerns. A recent national study revealed that 1 in 8 children suffer a confirmed case of neglect or abuse by the time they are 18 years old.<sup>1</sup> While most children remain in the care of their families, in many cases of abuse or neglect, the state intervenes by placing children in foster care. In 2017, over 400,000 children and youth were living in the foster care system, which includes family foster homes, group homes, and supervised independent living arrangements.<sup>2</sup> This number continues to rise. These cases have enormous costs and consequences, not only for the children and families involved but also for our society.

The foster care system was designed to provide temporary homes for children whose families are in crisis. Instead, for too many, it has become an unacceptable long-term arrangement. The sudden and traumatic separation of children from their families can create a generational cycle of poor educational, health, and well-being outcomes. The system is in desperate need of remodeling to safely meet the needs of the children and families it serves.

Keeping children safe in strong families and supportive communities, stabilizing a family in crisis, or, when necessary, placing a child in the best possible setting from the start, requires all of us -- the public, neighbors, businesses, nonprofits, philanthropists, community leaders, and more -- to work together to define needs and find solutions that secure a safe, nurturing, and permanent family for every young person, whether through reunification with their birth family, kinship care, or adoption.

How can we keep children safe from harm? What steps can we take to address the conditions that negatively affect children and families? How can we provide children and their families the opportunity to thrive?

There are no simple answers to these questions, but we do know that when we put the safety of children and the preservation of family first, positive outcomes for young people, families, community, and society are greatly enhanced, reducing the cycles of struggle and instead putting children on a path toward a successful and fulfilling adulthood.

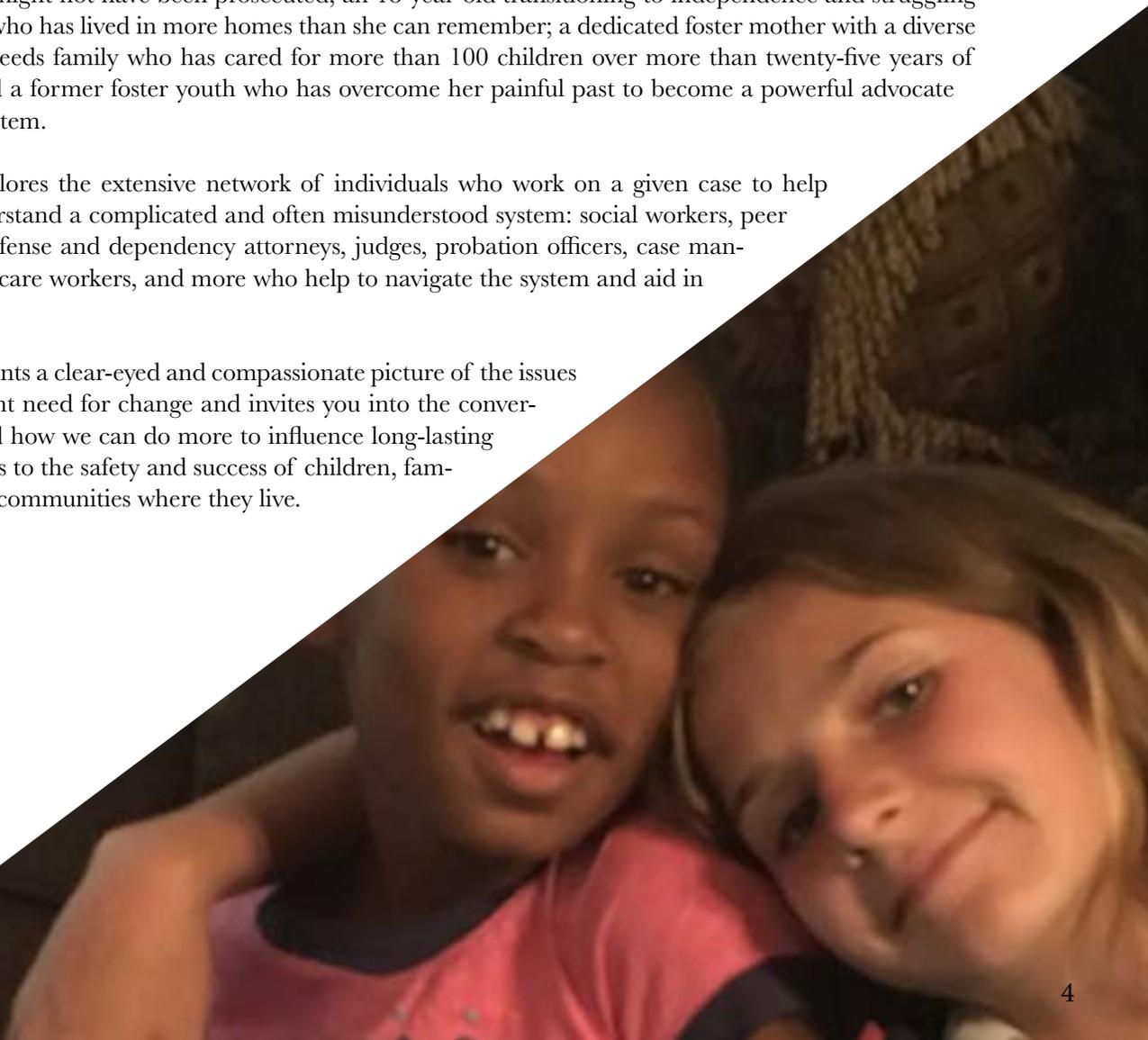
## ABOUT THE FILM

Oscar<sup>®</sup>-winning filmmakers Deborah Oppenheimer and Mark Jonathan Harris (*Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*) spent more than four years documenting the complex child welfare system as seen through the eyes of those who know it best, with a focus on understanding the perspectives of children who have experienced foster care. With extraordinary access to the inner workings of the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services, the largest county child protection agency in the country, FOSTER examines the foster care system with a compassionate yet critical eye, interweaving gripping personal stories of children and youth, and parents and foster parents, with deep insights from social workers, advocates, attorneys, judges, and others who work tirelessly every day in the field.

FOSTER traces a complex path that starts in the cradle, following an infant born to a mother who tests positive for cocaine at the child's birth and her parents' efforts to recover and reunify; a teenager who entered the system through tragic circumstances and is on probation for a typical adolescent act that in an intact home might not have been prosecuted; an 18-year-old transitioning to independence and struggling with college who has lived in more homes than she can remember; a dedicated foster mother with a diverse and special needs family who has cared for more than 100 children over more than twenty-five years of fostering; and a former foster youth who has overcome her painful past to become a powerful advocate within the system.

The film explores the extensive network of individuals who work on a given case to help viewers understand a complicated and often misunderstood system: social workers, peer advocates, defense and dependency attorneys, judges, probation officers, case managers, health care workers, and more who help to navigate the system and aid in transitions.

FOSTER paints a clear-eyed and compassionate picture of the issues and the urgent need for change and invites you into the conversation around how we can do more to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families, and the communities where they live.



## THEMES AND CENTRAL POINTS

FOSTER is intended to help viewers understand the realities and challenges within the current child welfare system and encourage conversation around solutions that might help to strengthen the health and safety of families.

To that end, a few especially relevant key themes in FOSTER are highlighted to inspire reflective discussions on the countless ways to support all children and families, focus on prevention, and promote child and family well-being:

- ◆ **Theme 1:**  
Prevention of Neglect and Abuse as a Primary Strategy
- ◆ **Theme 2:**  
Maintaining Family and Extended Family Connections
- ◆ **Theme 3:**  
Birth Parents
- ◆ **Theme 4:**  
Challenges of Long-Term Foster Care as a Replacement for a Permanent Family
- ◆ **Theme 5:**  
Challenges Faced by the Current System
- ◆ **Theme 6:**  
Building Broader Coalitions of Community Stakeholders to Take Responsibility for Child Well-Being Outcomes

FOSTER does not cover every aspect of the child welfare system and you may have questions that are not reflected in this guide. These themes are meant to begin a discussion, not end it. The more questions the better. To bring about effective reform of the child welfare system, we must work to build a more holistic understanding of each of the key perspectives reflected in the film, including understanding and supporting birth parents. Consider this guide an invitation to a conversation that we all need to have because together we can create better futures for children and families.

# NARRATIVE THEMES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



***“When you disrupt a cycle for me, you save Noah and Jonah, too. My kids are forever changed because of the trajectory that I’m on now...And maybe we’ll discover that when other people are healthy in our communities, that we actually thrive too.”***

***-Jessica (01:37:50)***

## PREVENTION OF NEGLECT AND ABUSE AS A PRIMARY STRATEGY

During the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the United States child protection system has been structured to respond to neglect and abuse at a time of crisis, *after* it has occurred. In the current system, if a child has been harmed and cannot safely remain at home, a social worker must find a temporary place for the child to stay. In many cases, that means children are separated from siblings, extended family, schools, communities, and culture. They can linger for years in foster care, moving from home to home, with some eventually entering adulthood without a permanent family or support network. Each of these disruptions in a child’s life can cause significant trauma.

Innovative researchers and practitioners are using the latest studies in the science of child development, trauma treatment, and parenting support to advocate for a new paradigm in child welfare services. They argue that a **public health** approach could align the efforts of multiple agencies in a community and emphasize prevention rather than emergency triage. A public health approach requires prevention services for all parents, regardless of their zip code or financial status, with the goal of creating safe and healthy living environments that enable children to remain with their families so that they develop positively and can succeed in life.

In FOSTER, Jessica’s experience with Nurse-Family Partnership is an example of how a national prevention program partners registered nurses with first-time mothers living in poverty to improve health and development outcomes. The trusted relationship with a nurse supports a family’s capacity to nurture and provide for the well-being of their children.

## IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Jessica’s experience with Nurse Family Partnership show how preventative services can change the course of a child or parent’s life?
2. The warning signs within Jessica’s family were not detected early enough. How could earlier intervention in Jessica’s family have prevented her from entering the foster care system?
3. Why would a **public health** approach that emphasizes prevention and finding children permanent homes be a better long-term solution than foster care?



## MAINTAINING FAMILY AND EXTENDED FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Children thrive when they have caring relationships with supportive adults to whom they can turn in times of trouble and with whom they can celebrate achievements and milestones.

Research shows that a family member or a mentor who recognizes and supports a child's strengths and skills can make the difference between success and failure for that child.<sup>3</sup> Children who are placed in out-of-home care often lack access to this kind of support. Helping children stay connected to relatives and other important adults in their community is essential in creating caring, lifelong support networks for children whose lives are unstable and unsafe.

When a child in foster care turns eighteen years old, these caring and supportive relationships are crucial, as young adults without support can struggle to take care of themselves. Eighteen-year-olds from intact families can find it challenging to figure out what they want to do with their lives; that challenge is exponentially greater for those who have aged out of the foster system. Where will you live? How will you support yourself? What adults can you turn to for guidance?

In FOSTER, we follow the story of Mary, an eighteen-year-old youth who went from home to home without ever achieving permanent placement. Through Mary's story, we see the impact of maintaining – or losing – close family connections and the challenges of aging out of the system.

## IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Mary's story illustrate the importance of family connections for children in the foster care system? How does the lack of stability and family connection affect a child's self-worth?
2. Each time a child comes in or out of care, families are disrupted. Think about the ways your family maintains or strengthens your relationships. How can we teach these skills and provide avenues for keeping families in the system connected to one another?
3. What were some of the issues you struggled with at age 18? How could communities help young people like Mary who aged out of the foster care system without the support of a family member?

***“You know that’s all I wanted for the longest time, to be close to somebody in my family just ‘cause it’s different. There’s a different connection.”***

***- Mary (1:29:38)***



***“I’m gonna admit my faults, and I’m gonna admit that I had a problem ‘cause, if I didn’t have a problem, I wouldn’t have used while I was pregnant....I’m not happy with the situation, but I’m happy that it stopped now, and I’m only 23, and I still have my life ahead of me, and I still have time to grow with my daughter and to - to be able to see her learn how to crawl and to walk.”***

***– Raeanne (01:26:43)***

## BIRTH PARENTS

The act of removing children from their families creates emotional distress and long-lasting trauma that should be avoided whenever it’s safe to do so.<sup>4</sup> Positive and proactive intervention in the earliest years of a child’s life can make the difference for children and families by providing birth parents and extended family members the tools they need to safely care for the child. For youth in the foster system, the availability of family time and visitation are critical to preserving attachment, even where there is need for supervision.<sup>5</sup>

FOSTER tells the story of Raeanne and Chris, a couple who lose custody of their baby, Kris’Lyn, immediately after her birth, when she is born with drugs in her system. Chris is able to regain custody of his daughter and is aided by the guidance of extended family and social workers, who offer in-home consultations and suggest best parenting practices. At the same time, Raeanne is able to maintain her connection with Kris’Lyn through monitored visits. Upon Raeanne’s completion of drug treatment and other services that strengthen her parenting skills, she and Chris demonstrate to the courts that they are willing and able to provide a supportive home for Kris’Lyn and are reunited. Early and proactive interventions can preserve critical attachment between children and their parents. Whenever safe and possible, family reunification is a more effective long-term solution to separation.

## IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is it important to provide resources and support to birth fathers and mothers? How can supporting and engaging birth parents impact the well-being of a child and help strengthen families?
2. What are the benefits of supporting Raeanne’s presence in her child’s life during their separation?
3. After seeing FOSTER, what did you learn about the importance of preserving family connections within the child welfare system?



***“Being in a group home is like lockdown. It’s like having a big old chain attached to your leg. You go, and if it don’t work out, you go somewhere completely different. It’s like you’re just bouncing from place, to place, to place, to place, to place. You don’t know none of these people. These people is brand-new. It’s a whole new experience. It’s a whole new way. You feel me? It’s a whole new environment. Everything is different”***

***- Dasani (00:55:29)***

## **CHALLENGES OF LONG-TERM FOSTER CARE AS A REPLACEMENT FOR A PERMANENT FAMILY**

Children in long-term foster care face complex and serious consequences, leading many experts to conclude that foster care, frequent moves, or group homes cannot replace a permanent family.<sup>6</sup> Dasani demonstrates the resilience of many foster youth, yet his experience also illustrates how long-term placement in the foster care system and the lack of trauma-informed care can fail to help children thrive and move forward.

When Dasani exhibits adolescent behavior that may be heightened by his earlier trauma, the consequences can be considerable, bringing him to the attention of law enforcement and resulting in a series of placements. The moves from place to place make it impossible to build the kinds of relationships he needs for optimal healthy development and a successful childhood.

Research supports this conclusion:<sup>7</sup>

- Youth placed in group homes rather than in family care have poorer educational outcomes, including lower test scores in basic English and math.
- Youth in long-term foster care are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to graduate high school.
- Youth who have experienced trauma are at greater risk for further physical abuse when they are frequently placed in group homes, compared with their peers placed in families.
- Children who have been neglected or abused are one and a half times more likely to be arrested as juveniles. Often their arrest is for behavior that could have been de-escalated by a teacher or care worker; behavior that would not have brought them into court had they not been in foster care.
- Foster youth are unemployed or underemployed at rates far higher than their peers in the general population.

## **IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How does long-term placement in the foster care system challenge children?
2. What services and support programs could help young people like Dasani who remain in the foster care system without the care of a family member? Were the services provided to Dasani enough to ensure he had a safe and healthy living situation?
3. How might Dasani’s story be different if he had achieved stability earlier in his experience?



***“Once a kid is taken from their parent, if they didn’t have an issue before, they got one now.”***  
***- Mrs. Beavers (00:35:10)***

***“The kids need a lot of love, and the type of love, it has to be long suffering. It has to be beyond measure. You know, you just can’t just say, ‘I love you.’ Prove it. Do something about it. Show them.”***  
***- Mrs. Beavers (1:03:48)***

## CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CURRENT SYSTEM

For decades, the federal government has reserved substantial child welfare funds for foster care placement—a funding structure that may incentivize the removal of children from their families without a sufficient exploration of all alternatives available to keep a child safe and supported. This system of funding can lead to unintended consequences, like overloading social workers and ultimately stretching the system’s resources too far. The overburdening of the system results in insufficient time, attention, and resources, and can contribute to removal of a child from their parent(s) rather than creating safe and positive outcomes for children and families. A successful child welfare system is one in which families are strengthened and safely reunited, and social workers, attorneys, and service providers have sufficient support and oversight and proper training to effectively fulfill their critical roles in the lives of our children.

When the current system works, separated children are placed from the start with caring adults or families who have received proper training that can go a long way toward mitigating trauma and helping put children on a positive path. The current system faces a severe shortage of caring and supportive foster homes like Mrs. Beavers’ in FOSTER. Systemic shifts toward new solutions and preventative approaches can reduce the burden on caseworkers, reverse the incentive around family separation, and ultimately drive the best outcomes for children and families.

## IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As you saw in FOSTER, and as Case Manager Lanny Wilson described, the Los Angeles system is at capacity. What are the consequences of having an over-burdened child welfare system?
2. What resources do parents and caretakers need to help the children in their care deal with the trauma caused by neglect and abuse? Does the current system effectively provide those resources?
3. The film shows that a safe, loving, enduring family that keeps children in the home is what’s best for their well-being. How can the child welfare system provide more safety and permanency for children to ensure the possibility of better outcomes in life?

## BUILDING BROADER COALITIONS OF COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILD WELL-BEING OUTCOMES

Every year over a quarter million children enter foster care in the United States. Too many will never go home to their parents, be adopted, or be placed with a legal guardian.<sup>8</sup> As Dr. David Sanders, Chairman of the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities (CECANF), says, “We can’t keep doing what’s been done and expect different results. We get the system the public asks for. We have accepted worse than mediocrity. We have accepted that we can do damage to children and not have to worry about it.”

How do you start helping children and families before neglect and abuse occurs? One way communities can prioritize child well-being is by better aligning multiple agency efforts in providing resources to all community members and by learning from local leaders, business, and philanthropic communities about how to create a culture of safety around children and families.

Research shows that it is never too late for children to recover from early maltreatment.<sup>9</sup> When children receive effective, evidence-based treatment they display impressive resilience. The challenge for communities is how they can provide this quality support at a systemic level. Can our country advance toward a model in which organizations move from their own individual, siloed work toward a more collaborative community model?

The public needs to know about the problems associated with child welfare issues, but they also need to see that better solutions exist and feel the potential power in these new ways of approaching some of our society’s most obstinate problems.

Nonprofits and community groups are beginning to fill the gaps, which is just the beginning of an integrated and holistic approach to child welfare. We can do much more to protect children, prevent and treat the trauma of neglect and abuse, and promote long-term well-being for the child, the family, and their community.

## IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What organizations within a community contribute to family well-being and how can they come together to fill in some of the gaps in the child welfare system?
2. How did Dasani’s music group and Mary’s theatre group create a space for them to express themselves? What function can the arts play in helping children overcome their early childhood trauma and their separation from family? What function do other organizations play in helping children overcome early childhood trauma and separation?
3. How can we help communities take the steps necessary to address the conditions that negatively affect children and families?

***“The biggest thing, I think, was having people come into my life and hold hope for me. There were very long periods of time in my adolescence where I had given up on believing that I could achieve anything. When I was 18 I went to a nonprofit organization and I met people there who started talking to me for the first time about education, and at that time I had very firm beliefs that I was a stupid person....I thought that they were gonna give up on me ‘cause I wasn’t gonna become a success story, they still pushed me. People have spoken life into me that - and - and I was dead.”***

***– Jessica (00:43:43)***

# CALL TO ACTION

Across the country, people are stepping up to provide a better future for our nation's most at-risk children. You've taken a first step by watching FOSTER and learning about the challenges facing the child welfare system and the potential solutions on the horizon.

Whether you have only a few minutes to take a step to support positive outcomes for children and families or want to engage more deeply into the issue, here are some actions you can take.

## ◆ IF YOU HAVE A FEW MINUTES...

**Spread the Word About FOSTER:** Use #FOSTERdoc in your posts to spread your thoughts and reactions on FOSTER via Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

**Keep Learning:** Learn more about foster care and gain a better understanding of the needs of those touched by the issue by exploring the Additional Resources section of this toolkit. Below are a few places to start:

- Casey Family Programs' [Signature Report](#) outlines how child welfare systems are working to improve the safety and success of children and families.
- The [Community Opportunity Map](#) from Casey Family Programs is an interactive tool that highlights the aspects of communities that are associated with safe children and strong families. There is significant evidence that community factors are correlated with child maltreatment – explore how your neighborhood performs on a variety of healthy community indicators.
- Recent [Casey Excellence in Children Award winners](#) are outstanding individuals and leaders who have demonstrated distinguished work and relentless dedication to improving child welfare in America. Their stories – and solutions – are an inspiring look into the future of child welfare.

**Support Organizations Doing Good Work:** You can [search Network for Good](#) to find such organizations serving young people in your community.

## ◆ IF YOU WANT TO ENGAGE MORE DEEPLY...

**Empower all Foster Youth:** Play a part in ensuring foster youth receive the support and guidance they need to be successful. Visit [FosterMore.com/FosterFilm](#) to become a mentor or a foster parent today.

**Support a Foster Youth's Academic Success:** Visit [Foster Care to Success](#) and [LifeSet Network](#) to learn how you can work with a local foster care program to provide academic opportunities for young people in your community.

**Tutor a Child in Foster Care:** If you want to engage more directly in the academic success of foster youth, contact your [local or county child welfare agency](#), [Boys and Girls Clubs](#), [YMCAs](#) and [YWCA's](#) to ask about how to become a tutor.

**Become an Advocate for Youth and Families:** Advocates create meaningful and authentic connections with a young person through mentorship and provide support through the span of their case. Visit [FosterClub](#) or [CASA](#) to learn about opportunities.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Abuse:** The treatment of someone that causes harm or the potential for harm. Abuse of a person can be physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, or a combination of any or all of those.

**Adoption:** The legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities for a child which is permanent.

**Aging Out:** When a youth must leave foster care because they have reached a certain age determined by their state.

**Attachment:** A young child's tendency to seek comfort, support, nurturance, and protection selectively from at least one adult caregiver.

**Casework:** Social work involving direct consideration of the problems, needs, and adjustments of the individual case (as a person or family).

**CECANF:** The Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, established by the Protect Our Kids Act of 2012 to develop a national strategy and recommendations for reducing fatalities across the country resulting from child abuse and neglect.

**Child Welfare Agency:** State agencies that are mandated to respond to reports of child abuse and neglect and to intervene as needed to protect the child. Typically, they provide a range of child welfare services for children and families.

**Child Welfare System:** A group of public and private services that are focused on ensuring that all children live in safe, permanent, and stable environments that support their well-being.

**Community Based Support:** A range of measures, including advocacy, resources, and services, to ensure the support of children and families in the community.

**Congregate Care:** 24-hour supervision for children in structured settings, such as group homes. Of the more than 400,000 children in foster care, about 12 percent reside in congregate care (or group home) facilities.<sup>10</sup> While congregate care plays a role in an effective continuum of care, there is a consensus across the field that all children and youth, especially infants and toddlers, do best in families.

**Family Based Care:** The short-term or long-term placement of a child into a family environment, with at least one consistent parental caregiver; a nurturing family environment where children are part of supportive kin and community.

**Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA):** Signed into law on February 9th, 2018 as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act, the FFPSA reforms the federal child welfare system by focusing on preventative services. Rather than placing children under state custody, it aims to give families the tools and resources they need to provide and maintain safe, loving environments for children.

**Family Support Services:** A range of measures to ensure the support of children and families – similar to community-based support but may be provided by external agents such as social workers and providing services such as counseling, parent education, day-care facilities, material support, etc.

**Foster Care:** The full-time care of a child within a non-related family who agrees to meet the needs of a child who is not able to live with their parents or extended family.

**Group Home:** Also known as congregate care, a type of residential care in which 10 children or less live in a house with one or more care workers where children typically share a bedroom.

**Home-Visiting:** A service provided by social or community workers or volunteers in order to provide assessment and monitoring of risk and support needs. It is also a form of support, whereby the home visitor may aid directly (e.g. parenting information, advice on rights, counseling, etc.).

**Kinship Care:** The full-time care, nurturing, and protection of a child by someone other than a parent who is related to the child by family ties or by a significant prior relationship.

**Legal Guardian:** The person with legal authority who acts as the primary caregiver of a child or minor.

**Neglect:** Deliberately, or through carelessness, failing to provide for, or secure for the child, their rights to physical safety and development.

**Permanency:** Establishing family connections and placement options for a child in order to provide a lifetime of commitment, continuity of care, a sense of belonging, and a legal and social status that goes beyond the child's temporary foster care placement.

**Prevention:** A variety of approaches that support family life and help to diminish the need for a child to be separated from her/his immediate or extended family or other caregiver and be placed in alternative care.

**Public Health Approach:** A public health model of prevention better aligns the efforts of multiple agencies in an effective community response to improve outcomes for children. Rather than waiting until after a report of child maltreatment has been made, a public health approach employs population-level data to provide universal prevention interventions that reflect equitable allocation of resources and services for all parents.

**Reunification:** The process of bringing together the child and family or previous care-provider for the purpose of establishing or re-establishing long-term care.

**Social Work:** Organized work intended to advance the social condition of communities and disadvantaged individuals. Social work comprises professional activities connected with social problems, their causes, their solutions, and their human impacts.

**Trauma:** A distressing past experience. In the child welfare system, child protection agencies have come to recognize the critical importance of trauma-informed services for children and families' well-being. Accordingly, there has been a movement toward becoming a trauma-informed system.

**Trauma-Informed Care:** The use of evidence-based and best practice treatment models to directly address the impact of trauma on an individual's life and to facilitate trauma recovery. Trauma-informed strategies take into account the connection between a child's exposure to trauma and the child's behavior to better equip families to provide children with protective skills to mitigate the impact of being removed from their homes.



## CHARACTERS AND STORYLINES

1. **Dasani:** A 16-year-old youth who has entered the foster care system through tragic circumstances and is supervised by both child welfare and the juvenile justice court, struggling to find stability.
2. **Mary:** An 18-year-old who has lived in more homes than she can remember. Now in college, she is transitioning to independence and grappling with her future.
3. **Chris, Raeanne, and Kris'lyn:** A family trying to remain together after their daughter, Kris'Lyn, is detained because she was born with drugs in her system. Chris is given sole custody of the baby while Raeanne goes through rehab and is allowed only supervised visits.
4. **Mrs. Beavers:** A foster mother who has taken in over 100 children. Her full house includes two teenaged girls, Sydney and Denyshia, who have become as close as sisters; Casi, an 8-year-old girl with autism; and Jake, her adopted son, who has cerebral palsy.
5. **Jessica:** A former foster child, probation youth and single mother of two who has become a social worker. She brings a unique perspective as both a client and an advocate in the system.



# ROLES OF PEOPLE INVOLVED WITH CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

This section explains the basic roles of the different people and professionals who may work with a child and family when they are involved with the child welfare system. All of the people listed below have important roles in the child's life and the cooperative efforts made by all parties ensure the safety, well-being, and permanence of the child is met. Much of the information in this section has been sourced from the State of Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook. For further information please see the additional materials.

## ◆ ROLE OF PARENTS

Parents whose children enter foster care due to allegations of neglect or abuse have the responsibility to meet the goals established by the court for reunification. To do so they must demonstrate they can safely and adequately care for their child. While working to change whatever situation led to the child being removed or voluntarily placed outside of their home, parents are encouraged to maintain regular contact with the agency caseworker to meet the requirements of the court order. While a child is out of the parent's custody, the parent retains certain decision-making rights. For example, the parent should be included in decisions about the child's education, placement, and medical treatment. These rights vary by state.

## ◆ ROLE OF FOSTER PARENTS

While the foster parent's primary task is to temporarily care for a child until the child's permanence goal is achieved, the foster parent's role is unique and involves much more. Foster parents are expected to comply with agency requirements, meet foster home licensing standards, and communicate any important information about the child to the caseworker and the court. Foster parenting also means working in partnership with the family and the agency to support the child during placement and assuring that the child's basic needs are met. As the child's family's case progresses, foster parenting also means preparing the child for return to his or her parents or attaining another permanence goal.

Foster parents have the opportunity to contribute valuable information about the child to the caseworker and the court, participate in meetings about the child, including court hearings, and communicate with the parents. Since they are living with and caring for the child on a full-time basis, foster parents are often the main source of information about how a child is adjusting to separation from home, interacting with other children, and performing in school. Foster parents also interact with the court or an administrative review panel to share information prior to or during court proceedings regarding permanency plans.

Extended family members also play a pivotal role in caring for the child when the parents are unable to. Prioritizing maintaining family connections (whether with the birth parents or through extended family members) helps relieve the child's fears, anger, and guilt about separation. Foster parents are often kin and may already have a relationship with the child and/or the parents.

Over half of children adopted from foster care are adopted by their foster parent(s).

## ◆ **ROLE OF THE CASEWORKER**

The caseworker has the responsibility for gathering information, making decisions concerning the child and family, working with the family, connecting the family with services, coordinating the activities of any service or treatment team, and presenting information to the court about the child and family. The caseworker has the duty to plan for the child during the child's foster care placement and for the duration of agency involvement with the family.

The agency caseworker functions as a facilitator in meeting the needs of the child and family. The agency has specific responsibilities to the parents of the child in placement. Because a foster parent's role is to care for the child, foster parents are often an active participant in helping the agency meet these responsibilities.

## ◆ **ROLE OF COURT PROFESSIONALS**

This section provides an overview of the professionals that parents or foster parents may interact with when they attend court hearings or work with staff in the child welfare legal system.

### **Child's Attorney**

The child's attorney is responsible for protecting the child's legal rights, advancing the child's interests in court, providing legal counsel, and helping the child understand the legal process and feel empowered to participate. In some cases, the child's attorney serves as the child's Guardian ad Litem (GAL), who is appointed to represent the best interests of the child in a court proceeding.

### **Agency Counsel**

The agency counsel is an attorney employed by the government who is charged with the responsibility of initiating proceedings on behalf of the government or the people to protect abused and neglected children. The agency attorney's role is to represent the child welfare agency or jurisdiction and present evidence of the underlying case in court, including agency compliance with federal and state child welfare laws.

### **Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)**

Court-Appointed Special Advocates are trained volunteer community members appointed by a judge to advocate, on a one-to-one basis, for a child in foster care. In some states a CASA volunteer serves as the child's Guardian ad Litem.

### **Parent Attorney**

A parent attorney is a lawyer who represents the parent in a given case. A parent attorney's role is to protect the parent's legal rights, advance the parent's interests in court, and help the parent understand the legal process. A child's parents may have an attorney appointed by the court or hired privately to represent their legal interests.

### **Judge**

The judge presides over the court and makes decisions regarding the child's case according to the facts of the case and the law (statutes). In some jurisdictions, and for certain court activities, a designated judicial officer may take the place of the judge.

### **Judicial Officer, Circuit Court Commissioner, Hearing Officer, Master**

While there are different names for this individual, he or she is a court official appointed by the judge to preside over certain court processes and to make decisions in certain cases according to the facts of the case and the law (statutes).

## ◆ **ROLE OF SUPPORT WORKERS**

Each agency works with supportive professionals in different ways. Here are some of the professionals who may also work with the family or child.

### **Mentor**

The role of a mentor is to provide the child with opportunities to explore recreational or other positive social outlets that the child can build on as he or she grows and to develop a positive adult relationship with the child.

### **Parent Aide or Home Consultant**

A parent aide (also called home consultants) is typically assigned to work with birth parents on the issues or conditions that led to the removal of their children. Parent aides might be involved during times of family interaction to help guide the parent around parenting choices and decisions.

### **Peer Advocate**

A peer advocate provides one-on-one advocacy and mentoring to children and families currently involved in the child welfare system. Parents involved in the child welfare system are sometimes matched with Parent Partners who help them develop and demonstrate the insights, skills, relationships, and protective capacities needed to navigate the child welfare system and reunify with their children (if appropriate).

### **Parent or Child Social Worker**

On multidisciplinary legal teams, the child or parent may have a social worker who partners with the attorney (and often with a peer advocate) as part of the legal team. This is different from an agency caseworker and is a role more directly dedicated to advocacy for the individual client.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### *ABA Center on Children and the Law*

The Center promotes access to justice for children and families. They ensure those who work on children's law matters throughout the country have resources and support to do their jobs at the highest level. Click [here](#) to access the ABA Center on Children and Law's guide to legal representation in child welfare proceedings.

[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/child\\_law/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/)

### *Administration on Children, Youth and Families*

As part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), ACYF administers the major federal programs that support social services that promote the positive growth and development of children and youth and their families, protective services and shelter for children and youth in at-risk situations, and adoption for children with special needs.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administration-on-children-youth-families/>

### *American Academy of Pediatrics*

The American Academy of Pediatrics is a non-profit professional organization of 67,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

<https://www.aap.org/en-us/Pages/Default.aspx>

### *Annie E. Casey Foundation*

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is devoted to developing a brighter future for millions of children at risk of poor educational, economic, social, and health outcomes. Their work focuses on strengthening families, building stronger communities, and ensuring access to opportunity, because children need all three to succeed.

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

### *Casey Family Programs*

CFP is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America.

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

### *Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University*

The mission of the Center on the Developing Child is to drive science-based innovation that achieves breakthrough outcomes for children facing adversity. The Center believes that advances in science provide a powerful source of new ideas focused on the early years of life. Founded in 2006, the Center catalyzes local, national, and international innovation in policy and practice focused on children and families. They design, test, and implement these ideas in collaboration with a broad network of research, practice, policy, community, and philanthropic leaders. Together, The Center seeks transformational impacts on lifelong learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

### *Children Awaiting Parents*

Children Awaiting Parents, Inc. is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to finding adoptive families for children in foster care who wait the longest. CAP works on behalf of children and sibling groups who wish to stay together and/or those with special needs.

<https://childrenawaitingparents.org/>

### *Children and Family Research Center*

CFRC is an independent research organization that identifies research needs and supports research that is policy and practice relevant and encourages and facilitates public child welfare research activities through collaborative relationships.

<https://cfrc.illinois.edu/>

### *Children's Defense Fund*

CDF provides a strong, effective, and independent voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments.

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

### *Child Welfare League of America*

CWLA is a powerful coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies that has worked to serve children and families. Their expertise, leadership, and innovation on policies, programs, and practices help improve the lives of millions of children across the country.

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

### *Circle of Parents*

Circle of Parents provides a friendly, supportive environment led by parents and other caregivers. It's a place where anyone in a parenting role can openly discuss the successes and challenges of raising children. It's a place where they can find and share support.

<http://circleofparents.org/>

### *Conrad N. Hilton Foundation*

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation invests in 11 program areas, including providing access to safe water, supporting transition age foster youth, ending chronic homelessness, hospitality workforce development, disaster relief and recovery, helping young children affected by HIV and AIDS, and supporting the work of Catholic sisters. From its inception as a foundation created to help the world's disadvantaged and vulnerable people, the Foundation has awarded more than \$1.7 billion in grants, distributing \$112.5 million in the U.S. and around the world in 2018.

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

### *Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption*

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is a national, nonprofit public charity dedicated exclusively to finding permanent homes and loving families for the children waiting in North America's foster care systems.

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

### *FosterClub*

FosterClub is dedicated to providing a peer support network for children and youth in foster care.

<https://www.fosterclub.com/>

### *The Juvenile Law Center*

Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity, and opportunity for youth in the child welfare and justice systems.

<https://jlc.org/>

*The Future of Children*

The Future of Children translates the best social science research about children and youth into information that is useful to policymakers, practitioners, grant-makers, advocates, the media, and students of public policy.

<https://futureofchildren.princeton.edu/>

*National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association (CASA)*

The National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association, together with its state and local member programs, supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy so every abused or neglected child in the United States can be safe, have a permanent home, and have the opportunity to thrive.

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

*Nurse-Family Partnership*

Nurse-Family Partnership is a national program that provides nurse home visits for first-time moms and their children in poverty.

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

*Youth Law Center*

The Youth Law Center advocates to transform foster care and juvenile justice systems across the nation so every child and youth can thrive.

<https://ylc.org/>

## ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

### *Children's Bureau Information Gateway*

Many child welfare terms are subject to interpretation. The Glossary identifies commonly held definitions for terms that can be found on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website or in products and materials developed by external entities (e.g., Federal or State Agencies or other reliable organizations). When noted, Information Gateway is cited as the source. The Glossary also provides common acronyms and includes links to information on major Federal legislation and related child welfare terms.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/glossary/glossary/>

### *Community Opportunity Map*

This Community Opportunity Map is an interactive tool from Casey Family Programs that highlights the aspects of communities that are associated with safe children and strong families. This interactive, research-based framework is composed of select U.S. Census Bureau indicators and is available for any community in the nation to use. It was informed by significant evidence of the community factors correlated with child maltreatment and a healthy community framework developed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

<https://www.casey.org/community-opportunity-map/>

### *Family First Prevention and Services Act*

This website provides a summary and overview of the Family First Prevention Services Act which was signed into law as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act in 2018. This act reforms the federal child welfare financing streams, Title IV-E and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, to provide services to families who are at risk of entering the child welfare system.

<https://familyfirstact.org/>

### *Foster Care Overview*

This handbook from the State of Wisconsin provides a broad overview of Foster Care.

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5000chapter1.pdf>

### *Preventive Services*

This fact sheet from the NYC Administration for Children's Services provides an overview of the preventive services designed to help families keep their children safely at home.

<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/acs/child-welfare/preventive-services.page>

### *How the Child Welfare System Works*

This factsheet from the Child Welfare Information Gateway provides an overview of the Child Welfare System and the steps taken after a possible abuse or neglect is reported.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/cpswork.pdf>

### *Understanding Texas' Child Protection Services System*

This report from TexProtects outlines how the child welfare system operates on a state level.

[https://www.texprotects.org/media/uploads/texas\\_cps\\_system\\_%26\\_flowchart.pdf](https://www.texprotects.org/media/uploads/texas_cps_system_%26_flowchart.pdf)

## END NOTES

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