



# PARTNERS

THE NEWSLETTER FOR WISCONSIN'S ADOPTIVE & FOSTER FAMILIES

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## FROM THE CORNER OFFICE

It seems like I was just writing a letter about enjoying the summer and the warm weather and, in a blink of an eye, here I am writing the Fall 2018 letter to you all. I know many others have said the same thing to me; *where did the time go? Or, how did summer go by so fast?* Even when we aren't actually sprinting through life physically, our minds are often always racing; rushing ahead to anticipate the next problem, the next challenge, the next need. In all of the hustle and bustle, have we forgotten about ourselves and the beauty of simple moments? Is good enough . . . enough?

We chose to write about the impact of what it means to champion a child who has been touched by foster care and/or adoption because we know that sometimes the extra love needed is for yourself. The energy it takes to regularly ride the roller coaster of behaviors, emotions, celebrations, and disappointments takes a toll. We know that some days can feel like the movie *Groundhog Day*, that sense of having the same conversations or repeating the same actions over and over again. We know that not everyone in your lives understands why you would voluntarily take on such a task and that, sometimes, you may encounter condescension or judgement from those closest to you. Unfortunately, we don't have that magic wand to make it all go away.

To combat all the "yuck," we invite you to consider a new story—about yourselves and about the world around you. Take the time to remind yourself that you are doing an amazing job by simply getting up, advocating for the children in your care, and loving in a way so many have said they could not. **You** are doing that! Being strong is not easy, and yet you are doing it. Letting the world see your vulnerability is scary, and yet you are being courageous because a child needs you to be. You are amazing and you are enough.

We don't have a magic wand, it's true. But, what we do have, is a belief in families and parents who are facing some of the toughest days again and again. And who remain willing to do so, to find supportive connections, learn a new skill, and embrace good enough because they know their family needs them *no matter what*.

Remind yourselves of all the love you deserve and all that you are doing for the world. Remember that, especially on days when you don't feel like you are good enough, we will continue to champion your need for support and resources. We won't give up on you . . . no matter what.

Best,

Oriana Carey

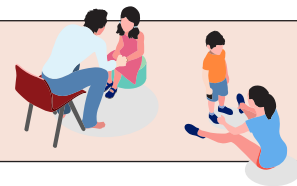
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# Making it All Work



Life, and parenting, is all about handling change. As a foster or adoptive parent, you know that as well as anyone! Does any of this sound familiar? On any given day,

- There are appointments galore
- The phone is ringing
- Your voicemail message light is blinking
- Your calendar is beyond full
- Somebody just rang your doorbell
- There may be a potential influenza outbreak at your daycare center
- Your babysitter texted to let you know that she is no longer available on Friday night
- Your boss just called you into the office for an impromptu meeting
- Little League baseball try-outs start promptly at 5pm
- There are multiple laundry piles lurking in the basement
- It's 2:45 in the afternoon and you just realized that you are wearing mismatched shoes
- The service engine soon light just lit up

Parenting, like any adventure, requires a great deal of pre-planning, post-planning, and readjustment planning. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by doctor and dentist appointments, extracurricular activities for every child in your care, special one-on-one time with each child, time for just you and your significant other, and countless other things.

Where do you even begin? First things first. Take a deep breath. Next, give yourself permission to do the best that you can and accept the realistic understanding that you will not be able to accomplish everything on your continually evolving "To Do" list. For example, your house may never be real estate showcase ready and that is perfectly okay.

Rather than trying to complete everything all at once, give yourself, or your parenting partner, permission to accomplish what is reasonable and realistic. Consider prioritizing what absolutely needs to be taken care of right away and then look at those things that can be rescheduled, or completed another day or at a different time. Remind yourself that you can't do it all, no matter how hard you try and how much you want to put a checkmark next to every task on your ever growing list. There will always be more to do and seemingly never enough time.

So, how do you make it all work? We hope that you will find some of the following ideas helpful for you and your family.

## PURPOSEFUL SELF-CARE

Amidst all the chaos and confusion that may occur from time to time, remember that there will always be a spot of calm—even in the eye of a storm. Carving out time for

self-care activities that bring you comfort and joy are essential for your keeping yourself—and your loved ones—grounded and your lives balanced. Go for that walk, take that afternoon break, check out that latest book on mindfulness, whatever "it" is that brings a smile to your face and aligns your personal compass to due North is worth exploring and following. Give yourself permission to push the "pause" button on life in order to clear your mind, collect your thoughts, and decide when YOU are ready to hit the "play" button. Coming to terms with the phrase, "progress, not perfection" can be very affirming and will provide you with the opportunity to relax and unwind after a busy day. Making sure you are taking care of yourself, so that you will have the energy to be there for your children when they need you, is important for your overall health and well-being. By discovering a balance between caring for your children and meeting your own needs, you will ultimately be better prepared and equipped to do both.

## HONING EFFECTIVE ROUTINES

Mornings, meals, snack times, nap times, please-do-not-disturb-me times, homework times, and nighttime routines. Discovering what ultimately works the best is an essential component that is part of your parenting journey. But there are no "right answers." Every family is unique and what works for your family may not work for another. It may take a little time to get everything running smoothly, but finding out the right structures, rules, and routines for your home and family will help everyone soar and thrive.

## PLANNING FOR—AND PRACTICING—PATIENCE

Changes in family dynamics and structures will happen from time to time. From little things, like who gets to shower first, to bigger topics, like sharing space, toys, and Mom and Dad's time or attention, those shifts in family dynamics can throw us all for a loop now and then. When facing challenging or unexpected changes, we invite you to incorporate patience into your response. Once again, this may be a moment to push the "pause" button. While everyone takes five deep breaths in separate spaces, you can shift gears into problem-solving mode—not to mention feel a bit calmer yourself to take on whatever topic needs your attention.

## DECIDING ON DECISION MAKING

Though it may not feel like it, not every decision needs to be made in the moment. It's okay to take some time to consider the options and alternatives, to sleep on it, to ask more questions or get more information. (And it's okay to say "no" sometimes, too!) Maybe a family meeting is in order, so you can hear from everyone. Again, there are no absolutes when deciding on what's best for you and your family. Your instincts and experience—as well as input from

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## FAMILY SELF CARE:

# *Meeting the Needs of the Whole Family*



Meeting everyone's needs really starts from the very beginning. Getting started as a foster family, or heading into the days after finalizing an adoption, can be exciting, scary, and stressful all at once! It's important to allow time for each family member to adjust. In the case of foster care, children new to your home don't understand how your family operates, and it will take time for them to adjust to the new routines, family member roles, and family rules. This also holds true for the other members of the family; things like who sits in what chair, who completes which chores, homework, caretaking responsibilities of younger children, and more will all likely be the source of squabbles or misunderstandings.

When you are able to, carve out time to get together with other families that are fostering or have adopted. This is a great opportunity for the children in your family to see other families that look like theirs. You might also want to find or start a support group that understands the demands of fostering or adopting. Opportunities that get your family together with others who are on a similar journey will help the younger members of your family learn about the importance of self-care and support, as well. If getting together in person simply doesn't work with your schedule, there are many online support groups that you might join.

Other ways to meet everyone's needs might include:

- **One-on-one time.** This might seem like a big task if you have a large family. Try taking a different child with you each time you have an errand to run or planning a special night out with individual children.
- **Having fun together.** Take silly pictures together, print them off, and put them on the refrigerator or bathroom mirror. Or, watch a funny movie together with snacks and all the lights and phones and devices turned off.

- **Taking breaks.** The best vacations can be spontaneous ones with no expectations. Because vacations and traveling can be a challenge, be prepared by being as flexible with your schedule as possible. Build in down time and set an expectation that all of the changes may lead to a meltdown or tantrum along the way. Planning ahead for this can make your vacation more fun.
- **Use respite care.** Respite care can often be guilt-provoking, and you might notice heightened behaviors when a child comes home. Still, we encourage you to use respite. Challenging behaviors will likely happen with or without respite, but it's important for everyone to have time away from one another once in a while. Respite can be for one child or all the children.

Another way to promote self-care for the whole family is by using family meetings. They are a wonderful way to give everyone in the family a voice. Planning family meetings to happen weekly will help all of the children in your care get into the habit of taking time together as a family to talk, celebrate, problem solve, coordinate schedules, plan events, and more. Members of the family can ask to have an additional meeting if they feel the need.

There are no "right answers" when it comes to how you and the members of your family care for yourselves. For some, a short walk, quiet time reading, or taking a bath with scented candles are very simple ways to quickly relax and recharge. Others may feel best after a weekend spent at a friend's house or a retreat to some place far from home. Whatever activities you find that work for you are the right ones to pursue!

# How Family Events or Traditions Impact the Children and Youth in Your Care

As a foster or adoptive parent, you do your best to make the child in your care feel welcomed into your home and part of your family. That includes things like inviting them to take part in family traditions (as well as incorporating some of theirs), vacations, and larger extended family events. It also includes mindful consideration of that child's needs and how a family event may affect them.

For example, events or gatherings with lots of people in attendance may be overstimulating for your child. Or, perhaps some extended family members don't support or understand your decision to foster or adopt. Whether the final choice was easy or difficult, a lot of thoughtful consideration went into your decision to become a foster or adoptive parent, and there may be more tough decisions for your family ahead.

Finding the right balance of what works for your family may take a little time. A good place to start may be a family meeting. Together you can talk about traditions that are meaningful for you, as well as for the new child in your care. What memories do you have from your own childhood that you'd like to continue or renew? What about the children in your care—what kinds of things do they remember fondly? Are there any things you absolutely wish to continue? Which might you be okay with letting go of? Are there new traditions that you might want to explore or try as a family?

Perhaps there are relatively easy work-arounds. For example, if your child doesn't do well with lots of people around, you might change the location of a family gathering to be at your home. That way, when they feel the need to step away, they have a safe place to go. When going to another relative's home or a different location, you might consider bringing along a special toy, blanket, or other item that makes your child feel safe and comfortable even when they are not at home. Some cases may be more complex and you may need to consider larger changes. Holidays and birthdays can sometimes be triggers for children and youth in care (or who were adopted); reminders of the birth family they have lost or can't yet be with. In those cases, you may decide that the best thing for the child and your family is to not join in a larger family celebration.

Another step in finding the best balance is talking with members of your extended family and support circle. Share with them about your child's needs and how they can have the best, most positive interactions with them. You may need to educate your family about appropriate adoption or foster

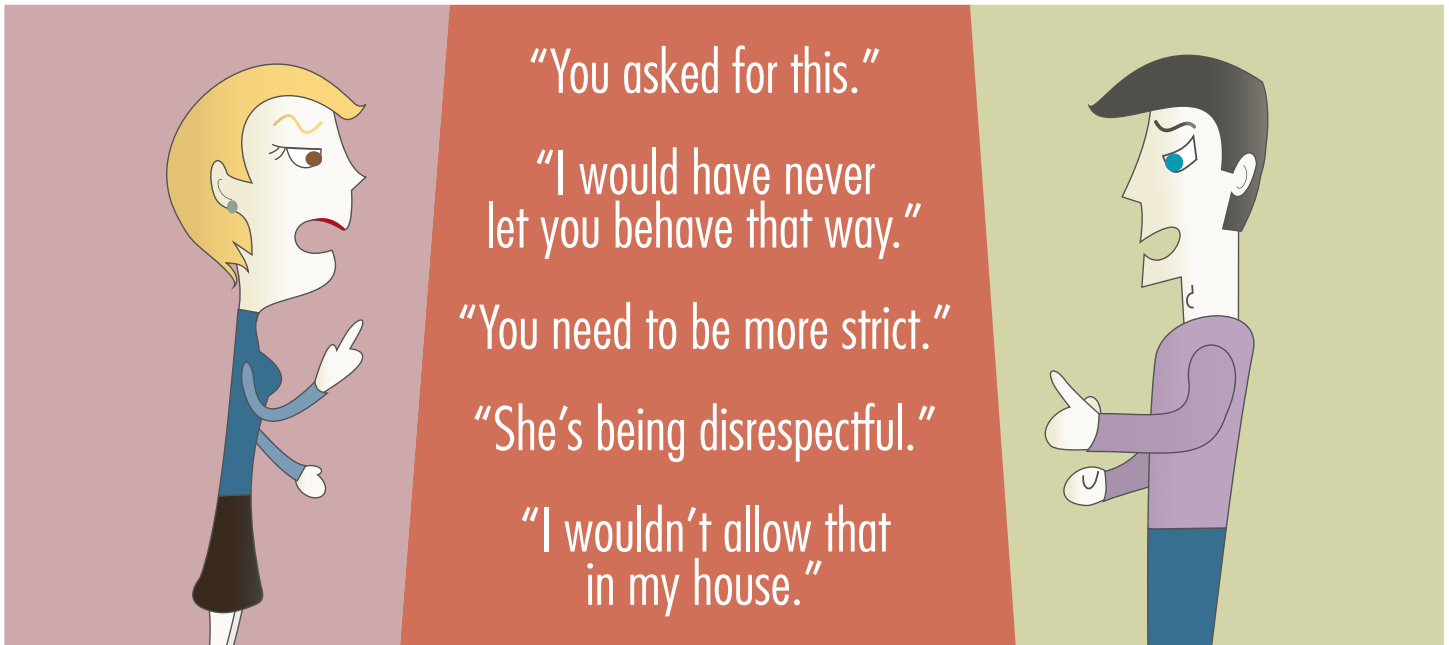


care terms or language or inform them of specific topics that are best avoided when your child is near. Such conversations can go a long way in helping members of your family feel more confident and comfortable with the children in your care.

The other side of that issue, of course, is helping the children in your care feel comfortable and safe with your extended family. There may be times when they feel on display, or as if all eyes in the room are on them. One-on-one conversations with the child can help them understand more about who they may be meeting or interacting with, as well as teach you about how the child or youth would like to be introduced. For example, one child in care expressed that what helped him most was to slowly meet the members of his foster parent's extended family on separate occasions. He said that, at a large family gathering, there were too many people at one time and it led him to feel overwhelmed.

As parents, you are or are on your way to becoming the expert about your child. You understand or are learning about your child's needs and about the topics, things, or situations that may trigger them. Remember that it may take time for children to open up and want to be a part of your extended family or to build trust with relatives. Keep talking—with your child and with your extended family and circle of support—about how everyone can feel comfortable, as well as what feels best for your family. Trust your natural instincts about what will be best for your family, and know that the Coalition is here to support you with resources, strategies, tools, and even connections with other families who have been on a similar path.

# WHEN YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIORS HAVE AN IMPACT ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS



Being the parent of a child with behaviors that are unexpected can put you in a hard place. Many times, close friends and family members will observe your child or listen to your stories about your child and come to the conclusion that they are “bad” kids. Knowing what they may about the background of the child in your care—as well as any details they might know about the child’s birth family—can lead them to label the child instead of the behavior. Other times, the disappointment or judgement is directed at you, the parent. You must not be using the correct discipline. You must not know the best strategies for dealing with disruptive behavior.

You may have had the experience at a family gathering where your child acts out. It could be verbal defiance, such as: “I’m not eating this stupid turkey, it’s gross.” This can bring about a chuckle when your child is two or three, but when they are eight, 10, or a teenager, it becomes disrespectful. However, if, for example, your child has sensory processing issues, the turkey really is gross to them, and they may gag, or even need to leave the room because of the smell. It can be hard to explain to your family that you’re not “letting them get away with” anything. Also, children who have experienced trauma typically have a decreased ability to control impulses or see cause and effect. They may not realize that what they said made the cook feel bad.

Questioning your parenting skills or labeling the kids in your care can lead to a rift in family relationships or friendships, as well as cause hurt feelings and long-lasting resentments. Very often, even well-meaning family and friends can unknowingly hurt your feelings or say something offensive.

One of the things you experience may be that your children don’t listen right away. When someone asks them to do something, they seemingly ignore it. This leads to the immediate louder follow-up. “Come here!” or “Didn’t you hear me?!” As a parent of children who have experienced trauma, you may understand that they process information much more slowly. They probably did hear you but their brain can’t make that transition quickly enough. I have often said, “just give him a minute.” Most of the time, they will do what you’ve asked, but patience is the key. *It’s not disobedience, it’s the brain.* This may not make sense to your family or friends, and you might be faced with judgement or “helpful” suggestions like, “My kids know when I ask something, they DO it.”

## **So, what is your move? How do you handle this?**

One of the things to look at and examine are your own feelings. Ask yourself why what they said triggered the particular emotion in you that it did. Was the person who said that meaning to be hurtful? Or, were they just curious? Are they in need of education, or have you perhaps already tried and they don’t seem open to learning? If you repeatedly ask your parents not to use timeout, or your children are forced to eat what’s made at their cousin’s house, but your wishes aren’t being honored, this can cause a problem for your relationship with your family and make it harder on your child.

If you see an opening to help others learn, your next step might be to seek out resources that will help you support your position and the challenges you and your family face. For example, science has proven that there



are actual physical changes to the brain of children who have experienced trauma. Certainly, removal from a birth parent—even at birth—is traumatic to an infant. You might share that the behaviors you have spoken about or they have witnessed are ways that your child copes with the trauma he has experienced. Perhaps you can help your friend or family member see that learning how to deal with your child's behaviors is full of doubt, frustration, and maybe even fear for you, as well.

- Check out our tip sheet, [What Do These Behaviors Mean](#), as a shareable resource to help introduce the topic or explain.

**Here are some other tips that you may find helpful:**

- A large family gathering or during a particularly stressful meltdown or outburst is not the time to try to explain what's going on. If you haven't yet had a conversation with family or friends, you might schedule some time to thoughtfully engage in discussion around what your child needs.
- Be patient and assume good intentions. These people love you, and want what is best for you. Sometimes grandparents are struggling with seeing their own children hurting. Share what you are comfortable with. Telling your child's whole story, or sharing diagnoses or family history isn't necessary. Rather, simply use examples you are comfortable with. Explain what works and doesn't work.
- Take a look at our article on the effects of family events on foster and adoptive families and kids (How Family Events or Traditions Impact the Children and Youth in Your Care). There you will find ideas for how to prepare ahead of time for family events—and maybe even pick up some tips on how to make new traditions of your own.
- Having a network of support is something we believe in and stress often (see [this edition of Partners](#)). Finding and connecting with another family who has walked in your shoes is one of the most important resources you can cultivate for yourself. If you don't have anyone in your circle of friends or family who has experience with trauma or adoption, one of our Journey Partners can be someone for you to talk to.

♥ **Learn more about Journey Partners and other services for support offered by the Coalition.**

Ultimately, know that you may need to make some difficult decisions. Sometimes even well-intentioned friends and family can leave you feeling exhausted. If there are people in your life who simply refuse to understand what your child needs, and what you, as a family, need, do not be afraid to allow relationships to change. Your first job is to protect your children from harm, and, unbelievable as it may seem, sometimes that danger can come from well-intentioned people in your life. Your job is not to educate everyone, and there will be times when it's simply not appropriate or you just don't have the energy. Find your go-to phrases for the harder days, and invest time in the relationships you cherish.

## Close to Home –

## *Never Give Up*

by Diane B.

One of our kids was placed with us at four months old, and was adopted at age three. He is now six, and recently had an incredibly hard year. We were dealing with physical aggression, destruction of property at home, suspensions, restraints, and more at school. It was a sad, terrifying time for us as parents. We didn't know how to help our son. We were under scrutiny by teachers and school staff. We were invited to things we had to decline at the last minute because it had just been a bad day, and no one had it in them to leave the house.

Meanwhile, we decided that family events were simply too much for us to handle. They were out of routine, and usually involved too many people and overstimulating activities. We would often spend the entire next day dealing with meltdowns. When we made this decision, our extended family was hurt, which was certainly not our intention. We had to make the decision that the “rules” we lived by our whole lives, had changed. Now we had to determine what was right for our family. And it wasn't what was expected of us.

After lots of conversations, some pretty big email fights and hurt feelings, the change and acceptance really came for our family when they were babysitting and experienced first-hand a very difficult situation. The respect and understanding of what my husband and I go through every day helped to turn the tide of feeling.

One thing I, as a perfectionist and anxious mom, had to realize was that my husband and I have OUR family that we were bringing up OUR way. Our world got very small; I decided not to worry about getting the kids in soccer or swimming lessons. I had to let go of the image we all see in movie scenes of happy, laughing families at a Thanksgiving table. Maybe not forever, but at least for now. We have to take care of what was within our four walls.



## RESOURCES

### Tip Sheets

- [Helping Children and Youth in Care Build Trusting Relationships](#)
- [Celebrating the Holidays with Children you Foster](#)
- [Reaching Your Boiling Point](#)
- [Self-Care for Families](#)

### Library Materials

- [Honoring the Holiday Traditions of Children in Care – Fostering Across Wisconsin](#), 2013
- [Building Networks of Support](#), Partners Fall 2017
- *Dim Sum, Bagels, and Grits*, by Myra Alpers
- *Adoption is a Lifelong Journey*, by Kelly DiBenedetto

### Library

- [Wisconsin's Post Adoption Resource Centers](#)
- [Wisconsin Foster & Adoptive Parent Association \(WFAPA\)](#)
- [Self-Care: Do it for Yourself, Your Family, and Your Kids](#)
- [10 Tips for Holding a Family Meeting](#)
- [A Foster Care Alumna's Thoughts on Self-Care](#)
- [Taking Care of Yourself](#)

*Continued from page 3*

your parenting partner, support team, and children—will be valuable assets in determining the best course for your family.

One thing is for certain: although you may feel like you are alone on your journey, support is available. Asking for help is one of the most important things you can do for yourself and your children. There are many parenting groups (both in-person and online) that might provide the perfect support for you. There are also resource centers, like the Coalition and Wisconsin's Post Adoption Resource Centers, that can offer everything from someone to listen to parenting resources or other pertinent information. Additionally, the Coalition can also connect you with a Journey Partner, who is an adoptive or foster parent who has lived experience and expertise.

(To find out how to connect with a Journey Partner, call or email us at the Coalition: 414-475-1246, 800-762-8063, [info@coalitionforcyf.org](mailto:info@coalitionforcyf.org).)



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#### Family of websites:

[coalitionforcyf.org](http://coalitionforcyf.org)  
[wiadopt.org](http://wiadopt.org)  
[wifostercareandadoption.org](http://wifostercareandadoption.org)  
[postadoptcyf.org](http://postadoptcyf.org)

An umbrella of services over foster care and adoption; information and referral; recruitment; training, education and support for families and professionals.



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