



Should I or Shouldn't I? Why to File a Grievance or Complaint

Foster and adoptive parents are often the first to tell you that the journey of foster care and adoption isn't always a smooth one. There are setbacks and conflicts that come up along the way. Some things bother us, and we find a way to let go. Other times we find that those little aggravations grow bigger and bigger and can no longer be ignored, especially when they involve kids we care for directly.

Most of us avoid direct confrontation, even though that best thing is to talk directly with people we disagree with.

But filing a complaint or grievance with your agency can be difficult, even when you feel that it's the right or best option to deal with a conflict. Resolving disagreements often ends up to be a good process for everyone—and can be a great learning experience for your kids to see you dealing directly with conflict.

What Are The Steps To Filing A Complaint?

In Wisconsin, all counties and agencies are mandated to have a grievance procedure process. One of the first steps in any complaint process is that you need to "grieve" your way up the ladder before filing an official complaint. Each county's or agency's process should spell out the chain of command. [Click here to find out more.](#)

Here are some other things to keep in mind while advocating for yourself or a child in your care:

- *Know what you want to say, and be concise.* Planning what you want to say before a meeting or phone call will help boost your confidence and will also show you respect the other party's time.

Effective advocates stick to the facts and try to keep emotion out of the complaint. Words like "always," "never," "you" "everyone," are often inflammatory. Needless to say, threats of lawsuits also don't usually help.

- *Do your homework.* Having a thorough understanding of the issue at hand will be a big help to you as you advocate for change or modifications.

- *Seek support.* See if there are others who feel the same way you do about a situation, cause or issue. If there are, talk with them and get their ideas and opinions. They

may have a different point of view, and may offer an idea you may not have considered.

- *Follow up.* Keep tabs on any decisions made or progress for your cause.



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Why Might You Hesitate in Filing a Grievance?

Let's face it: filing a complaint usually involves a lot of work and potentially some heartache. Most people hesitate about filing a complaint because they have the same concerns as you:

- *Fear of retribution.* You might fear that if you say something, you will run the risk of negatively changing the relationship you have with your agency. Some families have called this the "banned" list.
- *Do you have the time?* Filing a complaint involves writing down your concerns, documenting ongoing problems, waiting for a meeting and often waiting for the outcome of that meeting.
- *Ambiguous process.* It's common to feel helpless and not take any steps to resolving an issue, especially if you don't know the steps involved in filing a complaint.
- *There won't be a change.* The purpose of filing a complaint is to seek change. You may think that even if you go through all the proper steps, there still will not be a change. This is a real possibility. But there is still value in raising your concerns.

Even if you don't feel like you've been heard, most people will still internalize what you've said. Plus there's a paper trail, which might help you or others in the future. You also may become aware of reasons why change cannot happen.

The child welfare system is incredibly complex, with many checks and balances. Sometimes change happens very slowly or not at all because of these complexities.

What Are The Benefits To Filing a Complaint?

Given that it's often time consuming, risky and emotionally exhausting, why would anyone file a complaint anyhow? Following are some reasons to move forward with your complaint:

- *Asserting your rights.* It's normal to want to stand up for yourself or your beliefs, especially when you feel someone or an agency is not treating you fairly. It's okay to let people know how you feel. The tricky part, as we all know, is when your emotions get in the way. And what incites emotions more than the children in your care and what is in their best interests?

Asserting your right without being aggressive is something all of us struggle with when there are heated disagreements, even though we also know that we're more effective when we're as objective and calm as possible.

- *Seeking Change for the Greater Good.* If you have experienced a problem in the foster care licensing or adoption process, it's

likely that others have had similar experiences. By making the agency aware of your concerns, the issue can be addressed.

- *Creating Lasting Change.* While differing opinions can lead to conflict, conflict in turn often leads to creative ideas that bring change. Where would we be today if Rosa Parks didn't sit down for her rights? Or if Susan B. Anthony didn't stand up for hers?

Filing a complaint or grievance is really an opportunity to empower yourself. Your decision to file a grievance is a chance to improve service for everyone. If no one filed a complaint or grievance there could be no

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—William Ellery Channing

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positive change.

What Should You Look For In Getting Resolution?

Conflict is normal and inevitable and it's not necessarily good or bad. Ideally, it involves dealing with a problem while it is still manageable. There are several goals of conflict resolution:

- *Finding Unity.* This includes addressing concerns as they arise, talking to the people involved and being a team player.
- *Compromising and Collaborating.* This simply means trying to work harmoniously—being negative doesn't lead to resolution and often just causes the conflict to continue.
- *Gaining Acceptance.* Sometimes you'll just have to accept that you're not able to achieve the resolution you desired.
- *Clarifying the Issue.* Make sure you identify the concern and are able to clearly state your issue.
- *Identifying Possible Options.* It sounds obvious, but one of the first things to keep in mind is, "What solution do I actually want?" Sometimes we get so fixated on the wrong that happened that we forget what it is we want going forward.
- *Explaining Your Position.* State why you feel there needs to be a change and/or how your experience has impacted your family. Be as brief and objective as possible.
- *Following Up.* Make sure you clearly understand any decisions that both parties made and actions you both agreed to do. It's also helpful to get it in writing. It doesn't have to be formal—even an email helps keep everyone on the same



page. Remember, you can also ask to speak to a supervisor.

If you're unable to resolve your concerns informally, you may need to seek a more formal resolution. Often a neutral third party might help—maybe a therapist or a licensing worker who knows you well.

Or if you can't find a neutral third party, it's helpful for you to bring a friend or advocate with you—if for no other reason than to take notes during the meeting. You'll want to ensure you have documentation of your concerns and of your attempts to try to resolve the issue.

There are many valid reasons to file a grievance, and you have every right to do so.

Resolving the conflict will help everyone—but hopefully most of all, the children and youth in our care.

As the 1800s Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing said, "Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict."



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Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Working Together*, by Katharin A. Kelker
- *Team Decision-making: Involving Family and Community in Child Welfare Decision*, by Casey Foundation

Tip Sheet

- [Foster Parents and Social Workers: Allies and Advocates for Youth in Care](#)

Additional Resources

- [Wisconsin Child Welfare Complaint Procedures](#)
- [Milwaukee County Child Protective Services Complaint Process](#)
- [Wisconsin FACETS](#)



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