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**TEXASCASA**  
Court Appointed Special Advocates  
FOR CHILDREN

# NORMALCY MATTERS

**A Guide to Supporting Children & Youth  
in Texas Foster Care**

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# INTRODUCTION



## ■ PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

**Thank you for taking the time to explore this guide about normalcy.** We hope that it will inform your understanding of what normalcy is, why it matters, and the important role you play in supporting and promoting normalcy for young people in the Texas child welfare system. This guide was developed by Texas CASA and funded by the Supreme Court of Texas Children’s Commission, with the goal of moving the conversation about normalcy beyond simply allowing activities, to really changing the culture of foster care in Texas so that young people are empowered by a fuller range of options in their daily experience of life.

## ■ DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

**To develop the guide, Texas CASA partnered with individuals who work on this issue every day.** Texas CASA formed an Advisory Workgroup to ensure the guide accurately reflects the experiences of people with lived experience and those serving and working in the child welfare system. Each role and critical issue were reviewed by individuals with experience and expertise in that area. For example, the Parent Collaboration Workgroup at the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) provided feedback on the section for parents; a group of attorneys reviewed the role-based information for attorneys ad litem; and youth who are currently or were formerly in foster care provided input and feedback on the youth section and critical issues.

## ■ USING THIS GUIDE

**In Part 1,** we discuss what normalcy is, the laws surrounding it, and its role as an important concept and direction in child welfare.

**In Part 2,** we look at specific critical normalcy issues like participation in activities, cell phones and technology, dating and relationships, clothing and personal appearance, driving, employment, healthcare, transportation, travel and many other things that should be part of regular life for young people in foster care. Many of these issues are specific to caregivers, but people in a wide variety of roles should be aware of why they are important and ready to help advocate for these normalcy experiences for children and youth.

**In Part 3,** we address the many different roles that a reader may play in the child welfare system and how people serving in each role can support normalcy. Feel free to first read about your particular role and then jump to the issues in Part 2, or to read about all of the roles.





PART 1

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**WHAT IS  
NORMALCY?**



# WHAT IS NORMALCY?

**Normalcy is all about allowing kids to be kids, whether they are in foster care or not.**

Many of us recall doing “typical” things during our childhoods like going to a friend’s house, taking a school trip, working an after-school job, joining a school club, dating, attending the prom and learning to drive. Children and youth in foster care should be allowed and supported to do these kinds of things, but it will take a cultural shift and focused effort to make that the case across the state.

Normalcy goes beyond allowing a young person in foster care to participate in activities. It means helping children and youth to live as normal a life as possible, doing activities that youth expect to do without having to go through a bunch of red tape or hurdles. For young people in foster care, normalcy often means being seen as a person rather than as a “foster youth.”<sup>1</sup>

“Normalcy” is legally defined in the Texas Administrative Code as the ability of a child in care to live as normal a life as possible.<sup>2</sup> This means engaging in childhood activities that are suitable for children of the same age, level of maturity and developmental level, as determined by a “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard.” It also means having normal interaction and experiences within a foster family and participating in foster family activities. Normalcy is critical for children living in many residential settings, including foster homes and congregate care settings.

The [Texas Family Code](#) defines “age-appropriate normalcy activity” as an activity or experience that is generally accepted as suitable for a child’s age or level of maturity or that is determined to be developmentally appropriate for a child based on the development of cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioral capacities that are typical for the age or age group; and in which a child who is not in the conservatorship of the state is generally allowed to participate including extracurricular activities, in-school and out-of-school social activities, cultural and enrichment activities, and employment opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Many youth talk about being treated differently simply because they are in foster care. This status often prevents them from making decisions, trying new things and having the freedom to make mistakes. Yet we know that children and youth in foster care need to be able to explore life, participate in activities, make friendships and learn about communication,



1 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2015). *What young people need to thrive: Leveraging the Strengthening Families Act to promote normalcy*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

2 Texas Administrative Code, retrieved July 2, 2011 from [https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac\\$ext.TacPage?sl=R&app=9&p\\_dir=&p\\_rloc=&p\\_tloc=&p\\_ploc=&pg=1&p\\_tac=&ti=26&pt=1&ch=749&rl=2601](https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac$ext.TacPage?sl=R&app=9&p_dir=&p_rloc=&p_tloc=&p_ploc=&pg=1&p_tac=&ti=26&pt=1&ch=749&rl=2601)

3 Texas Family Code, retrieved July 2, 2021 from <https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/FA/htm/FA.264.htm>



cooperation and reciprocity through the many facets of regular life that most children benefit from.

## ■ WHY NORMALCY IS IMPORTANT

**Normalcy is a critical component in healthy social, emotional and cognitive development.**<sup>4</sup> Normalcy

experiences help youth develop interests, acquire skills and build lasting, supportive relationships. Additionally, participation in extracurricular activities is correlated with better GPA performance and an increased likelihood of being enrolled in college at the age of 21.<sup>5</sup> Structured, school-based extracurricular involvement is also associated with reduced dropout rates, lower rates of substance use and reduced rates of delinquent behavior.<sup>6</sup>

Children in foster care often endure things that no child should have to experience, like the trauma of abuse or neglect, placement insecurity or separation from their home communities. Children in the care of the state might be living with a relative, family friend or people previously unknown to them, and trying to understand this different situation and dynamic. While their peers' schedules are filled with things like rehearsals, part-time jobs and late-night study sessions, these youth are doing their best to stay afloat in school while balancing activities such as caseworker and family visits, medical appointments and court hearings.

Ideally, being in foster care should be a healthier experience for a child than the circumstances that led to them having to leave their home. Foster care should provide opportunities to form positive bonds with peers and adults. Yet without normalcy, foster care can be a stigmatizing and isolating experience.

Providing normalcy in foster care includes giving children the opportunity to act like children, encouraging the development of their interests and strengths, and managing risk. Normalcy can help to facilitate a stronger bond with their caregivers and help to maintain connections to the child's community, culture and important people. The desires of children and youth to connect and fit in with their peers, pursue their hobbies, participate in fun activities and just be kids should be supported by everyone involved in their care.

4 Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2014). Advancing healthy adolescent development and well-being. Retrieved June 23, 2015, from [https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Youth-Thrive\\_Advancing-Healthy-Adolescent-Development-and-Well-Being.pdf](https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Youth-Thrive_Advancing-Healthy-Adolescent-Development-and-Well-Being.pdf).

5 Jacquelynne S. Eccles & Bonnie L. Barber. (1999). *Student Council, Volunteering, Basketball, or Marching Band: What Kind of Extracurricular Involvement Matters?*. 14 J. Adolescent Res. 10, 25.

6 Amy F. Feldman & Jennifer L. Matjasko. (2005). *The Role of School-Based Extracurricular Activities in Adolescent Development: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions*. 75 Rev. Educ. Res. 159, 193.

By making normalcy a priority, encouraging open communication and collaboration, and ensuring children’s voices are heard, everyone involved in the child welfare system can help create a better experience for children in care – setting them up for success and giving them a better chance at a bright future.

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE “REASONABLE & PRUDENT PARENTING STANDARD”

The “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard” is a crucial part of the normalcy law, both at the state and federal levels.<sup>7</sup> This part of the law allows caregivers to act as parents, making daily decisions about activities children and youth placed in their care can and want to do. The main idea is that if a caregiver would let their own child of the same age and maturity level participate in an activity, they should let the child in foster care participate in the same activity.

Caregivers who use the “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard” in their decision-making should not be liable for any injury or harm that may occur to the child during that activity.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, unless caregivers are aware of a court order stating otherwise, caregivers do *not* need to ask permission from the child’s caseworker before making decisions, and background checks are *not* required for people that the child might encounter or interact with during a normalcy activity (such as a sleepover with a friend). Additionally, extracurricular activities do not need to be listed in a child’s plan of service.

The “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard” is the standard of care that a parent of reasonable judgment, skill and caution would use to maintain the health, safety and best interest of the child and to encourage the emotional and social growth and development of the child.<sup>9</sup>

When using the standard to decide whether a child may participate in childhood activities, a person must take into consideration the following:

- The child’s age and level of maturity;
- The child’s cognitive, social, emotional and physical development level;
- The child’s behavioral history and ability to safely participate in a proposed activity;
- The child’s overall abilities;
- Whether the activity is a normal childhood activity for a child of that age and level of maturity;
- The child’s desires;
- The surrounding circumstances, hazards and risks of the activity;
- Outside supervision of the activity, if applicable and appropriate;
- The supervision instructions in the child’s service plan; and
- The importance of providing the child with the most normal, family-like living experience possible.

7 Text—H.R.4980—113th Congress (2013-2014): Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. (2014, September 29). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/4980/text>.

8 Tex. Fam. Code § 264.114.

9 26 Tex. Admin. Code §§ 748.705 and 749.2605, [https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac\\$ext.TacPage?sl=R&app=9&p\\_dir=&p\\_rloc=&p\\_tloc=&p\\_ploc=&pg=1&p\\_tac=&ti=26&pt=1&ch=749&rl=2605](https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac$ext.TacPage?sl=R&app=9&p_dir=&p_rloc=&p_tloc=&p_ploc=&pg=1&p_tac=&ti=26&pt=1&ch=749&rl=2605).



PART 2

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**CRITICAL ISSUES  
TO SUPPORT  
NORMALCY**





# ACTIVITIES, FRIENDSHIPS & SPORTS



## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

When children participate in extracurricular, enrichment and social activities with friends, it allows them an opportunity to gain skills to become independent and learn about making good decisions. Some children may test boundaries and break rules. This is normal, and with oversight and guidance, this is how children learn about natural consequences and gain an understanding of making positive choices.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Everyone in the child's life should work to promote normalcy for each child to the fullest extent possible. Encourage and give permission to the child, depending on their age and maturity level, to participate in social and extracurricular activities and sports. These activities can include things like going to a sleepover at a friend's house, going to the movies, joining a team, having play dates or going to school dances. Remember that caregivers, not caseworkers or the court, can make decisions about the activities that children in foster care can participate in; and activities do not need to be listed in the child's plan of service. Importantly, background checks are not required for a child's friends, or their friend's parents, or coaches in order for the child to spend time with them in an unsupervised setting as long as the child is spending time with them as a part of normalcy. The key idea is that if you would let your biological child of the same age and same maturity level participate in an activity or spend time with a friend away from your home, you should allow the child in foster care to do the same activity.

Support the child's participation in electives and extracurricular activities such as playing sports, playing in the band, going on field trips, attending pep rallies and other school activities. All these events help the child build connections with their peers, build self-confidence, and provide them the opportunity to experience and navigate school just as a child who is not in foster care would. Extracurricular activities and sports can enhance a child's school experience and often have positive effects on attendance, motivation, academic achievement and behavior.<sup>10</sup> If the child attends a school that does not have elective or extracurricular activities, or if the child has interests outside of what school offers, find ways to support and promote those interests.

Finally, remember that children and youth in foster care have experienced trauma. Because of this, they may push you and others away or be afraid to get close to people. Be aware that many activities may be new to the child, so they may not know what to do or how to navigate the experience. Give them encouragement, patience and guidance during these times.

<sup>10</sup> Klitsch, S. (n.d.). *Beyond the Basics: How Extracurricular Activities Can Benefit Foster Youth*. <https://youthlaw.org/publication/beyond-the-basics-how-extracurricular-activities-can-benefit-foster-youth/>.

# ALLOWANCE

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Providing an allowance adds normalcy for a child or youth, teaches them responsibility and gives them a sense of autonomy.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Everyday activities and responsibilities for children and youth help them learn to care for themselves and others. If possible, caregivers should let children and youth earn an allowance for completing chores so they can gain responsibility and gain experience in managing small amounts of money. Communicate clearly and openly with children and youth about what is required for them to receive an allowance.

This can also be a great time to have a larger conversation about financial responsibility, credit cards and bank accounts. Explore with the child or youth how money and financial matters may differ in their family or culture. Work with the child or youth to set guidelines and boundaries for spending their allowance. Only offer an allowance to the child or youth if you can consistently follow through; children and youth who have been through trauma need consistency to build trust.

You can also get creative – instead of offering money for the completion of chores, offer a fun meal or activity. As long as you talk about it and are consistent, any positive way you encourage the child’s experiential learning can be rewarding and will have the same effect of teaching them life skills and responsibility.



# CELL PHONES & TECHNOLOGY

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A cell phone is often the center of a young person's universe and is a completely normal thing to have. It is their passport to social connection with their peers and their sense of independence. A cell phone is often the only place where they store important contact information for people in their life and is an important way for youth to communicate with many friends and loved ones. A phone is also how many youth access music, games, pictures and entertainment. Music can be a powerful healing and coping tool for a youth in foster care, and most music these days is accessed through a cell phone.

While access to a cell phone and other technology can be very important to youth in foster care, it can also be a point of risk and a cause of stress for the youth's caregivers. While it can be easy to simply prevent or restrict a youth's access to a phone to avoid the stress and risks, it is important to think about what a phone means to a youth in foster care. Not having a cell phone can often lead to more problems than having one, and it is better to figure out how to help the youth to have and use one safely. Not having a cell phone can lead to feelings of further isolation and disconnection, especially for children and youth who are placed far away from their home communities or their school.

Older youth may also use their phones to search and apply for jobs, check bus schedules for work and communicate with employers. Finally, having a phone itself is a normal rite of passage in any child's life. Past middle school (and likely before), children without phones will begin to feel left out as it becomes a critical social tool. At a certain point, not having a cell phone will itself become an abnormal thing.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Regardless of your relationship to the child, you can be an advocate for them to have access to a cell phone. To determine their readiness for a cell phone, utilize the "Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard" and make sure they understand the boundaries for phone usage (times of day, types of applications on the phone, etc.). Discuss safe and responsible



# CELL PHONES & TECHNOLOGY

social media behavior and the financial implications of losing or breaking a phone. If getting the youth a phone is not possible due to circumstances out of your control, advocate that they have regular, confidential access to a phone and ensure the child has important contact information written down somewhere secure.

## RESOURCES

[Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers](#)

[NCMEC Netsmartz Online Safety Program](#)

Allowing children and youth to make and receive private phone calls is required and is listed in the [Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care](#),<sup>11</sup> unless a court says that restrictions are necessary for their best interest. Regularly discuss this right, as well as their other rights, with the youth.

Children and youth will likely figure out ways to access social media and cell phones through friends at school or during visits with family members. It is better to allow them to have safe, supervised access to technology so that you know who they are communicating with and can teach them how to be smart and responsible when it comes to cell phone use, apps and social media.

<sup>11</sup> "Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care" [https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child\\_Protection/Foster\\_Care/Childrens\\_Rights.asp](https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Foster_Care/Childrens_Rights.asp)

# CULTURE & IDENTITY SUPPORT

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

**It is important for caregivers to support the identities of youth and to be aware of disproportionality and the factors that might make successful outcomes more difficult for some youth than others.**

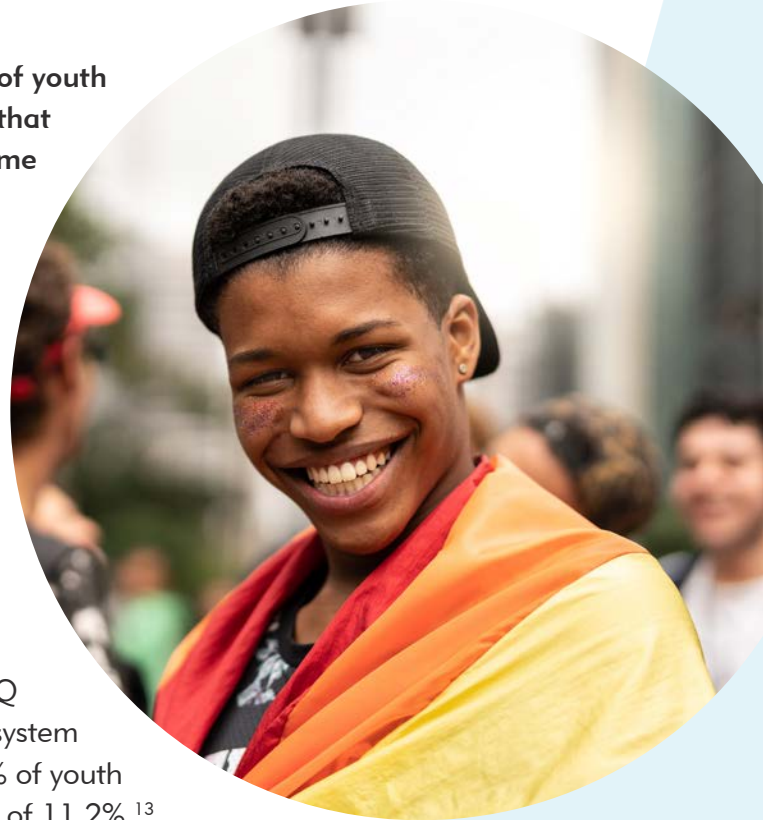
For example, in Texas, children who are African American are more likely to be the subject of a child abuse or neglect report. The Texas child welfare system is also more likely to investigate African American families and remove these children from their homes than those who are white. Once African American children are removed, the system is less likely to reunify them with their parents or guardian, and these children face worse outcomes than their white peers.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, according to studies, youth who are LGBTQ are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system compared to their non-LGBTQ peers, making up 30.4% of youth in care compared to a nationally representative sample of 11.2%.<sup>13</sup> Rejection of youth who are LGBTQ by their family of origin is cited as a leading factor driving their overrepresentation in care.<sup>14</sup>

A positive, supported sense of identity is critical to a child or youth developing healthy self-esteem and confidence. Finding ways to support a child's identity while they are in care is important to their long-term outcomes.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

**It is important to a child's health and well-being to accept all parts of their identity, as well to be aware of which parts of their identity might be less accepted by others.** Help the child build pride and resiliency. Talk to them about their culture, race, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation. Remember that the forming of identity happens over time and can change; while a child may be comfortable with one part of their identity, they may be struggling with



<sup>12</sup> *How Big is the Problem in Child Protective Services?* Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Retrieved July 26, 2021, from [https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child\\_Protection/Disproportionality/how\\_big.asp](https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Disproportionality/how_big.asp)

<sup>13</sup> Baams, L., Wilson, B., & Russell, S. (2017, March). LGBTQ Youth in Unstable Housing and Foster Care [Review of LGBTQ Youth in Unstable Housing and Foster Care]. AAP News & Journals Gateway. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/143/3/e20174211>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

## CULTURE & IDENTITY SUPPORT

other parts. Create space for the child to explain their identity and reality to you, especially if it is different than your own. Help support a connection between the child or youth and the communities to which they identify.

Share acceptance and celebration of their race, culture and identity and ask them words they use and like. Avoid harmful or hurtful terms and be aware of things that could upset the youth. Be aware of any potential biases you may have and seek resources and education on issues related to the child's identity. Speak with children and youth about whether they are experiencing mistreatment in their placement, school, or community, and work to address any problems.

# DATING & RELATIONSHIPS



## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Romantic relationships play a role in the healthy development of adolescents. Youth must feel safe enough to discuss relationships so that they can build the skills necessary to develop healthy relationships based on trust and communication. Because youth in foster care are at higher risk of becoming victims of intimate partner violence and human trafficking, conversations about safe and healthy relationships are critical to reducing that risk. Additionally, research has shown that open communication between caregivers and youth regarding sexual behavior is correlated with less risky sexual behavior.<sup>15</sup>

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

It is important to have conversations about dating and relationships. Being open and withholding judgement can go a long way toward establishing trust and building a positive relationship. Do not make assumptions about a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity when having these conversations – lay out the basics and let them ask questions as you keep an open mind about what their preferences and concerns might be. Try to use neutral language in your questions. For example, instead of asking if a girl is interested romantically in a boy, you can ask if they are interested in “anyone.” This approach will allow for a more open conversation.

Appropriate sexual education can be incorporated in the youth's service plan, giving them the tools they need to make good decisions about dating and sex. Candid conversations about dating, sex and pregnancy should be had with all youth regardless of gender, as education will help them to make important decisions. Depending on their age and maturity, youth in foster care should be informed about all the responsibilities involved in becoming a parent.

Youth should also be aware of consent laws and what sexual health services they have access to during their time in care. Federal law allows anyone enrolled in Medicaid of childbearing age, including youth in foster care, to have confidential access to family planning services, including contraception methods. Youth also have the right to refuse contraception. If youth choose to utilize birth control, they do not need permission from their caseworker or caregiver, and do not have to inform them of this decision.

## RESOURCES

[Healthy Relationships for Young Adults: Love Is Respect](#)

<sup>15</sup> Wang, B., Stanton, B., Deveaux, L., Li, X., Koci, V., & Lunn, S. (2014). The impact of parent involvement in an effective adolescent risk reduction intervention on sexual risk communication and adolescent outcomes. *AIDS education and prevention : official publication of the International Society for AIDS Education*, 26(6), 500–520. <https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.2014.26.6.500>.

# DRIVER'S EDUCATION

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

**Learning how to drive is an important part of normalcy for older teens.** It is especially important for success after foster care since public transportation is limited in many areas. Learning to drive is a huge confidence booster and provides a sense of independence. Providing access to driver's education classes ensures youth learn the proper rules of the road rather than attempting to learn to drive on their own. Having a driver's license is necessary to unlock a great array of possibilities for employment, housing, health care and education, as well as access to healthy food sources. There are many resources available to support youth in foster care who are interested in obtaining a driver's license, and it is everyone's responsibility to help youth in care work toward this goal.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

**As a youth approaches age 15, talk to them about driving and the many associated responsibilities to gauge their interest and commitment to obtaining their driver's license.** After learning about the process, if the youth would like to pursue driver's education, the plan needs to be approved by the youth's child protective services caseworker and their supervisor. The caseworker should be able to assist the caregiver with the enrollment process. Caseworkers are responsible for obtaining necessary identification documents needed for enrollment in driver's education, such as the youth's birth certificate and Social Security card, and can assist with securing community resources to pay for the course. Additionally, Texas IDs and driver's license application fees are eligible to be waived for children and youth in foster care.

Next, the youth can begin taking driver's education, either online or in a classroom. In Texas, the process for getting a driver's license starts with completing 76 hours of driver's education. The requirements for these hours are as follows: 32 hours of driver's education (if under 18 years old) and 44 hours of supervised behind-the-wheel driving training (14 of these hours can be completed with a driving school; the other 30 need to be done with an adult 21 or over in the passenger seat, and 10 of these hours must be done at night). The supervising person does not need to be part of the youth's advocacy team. For more information about driver's education requirements in Texas, see the [Department of Licensing and Regulation website](#).

There are options for driver's education such as driving schools, school-sponsored classes or "parent-taught" driver's education courses, which could be done by a youth's caregiver or mentor, if they are willing to allow the youth to use their insured vehicle. The youth's entire advocacy team should be involved in the conversation about the best options. It is important to manage the youth's expectations about getting their license and driving. The youth needs to understand that driving is a huge responsibility and that it will take time and effort to obtain their license. A new law also allows the Texas Workforce Commission to use funds to offset the



costs of driver's education classes, driving time and driving tests for children and youth currently or formerly in foster care. For information about accessing these funds, talk with the youth's Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) worker or contact your local Workforce Board.

Once the youth completes the requirements for a driver's license, they may not have immediate or frequent access to a vehicle, and if they do, car insurance will be another consideration and major financial responsibility. You can help ease these challenges for the youth by partnering with them throughout the process of completing driver's education, their supervised driving time and taking the driving test.

Communicate clearly about their responsibilities for each part of the process to help them understand the expectations, rules and laws associated with driving. In addition, it is important to have direct conversations with the youth about responsible driving habits. These include not texting, not driving while distracted and the dangers of drinking or substance use while driving. With help and support, young people in foster care can get their driver's licenses, which has been shown to be one of the most important factors in preventing negative outcomes after leaving foster care.<sup>16</sup>



## RESOURCES

[Driver Licenses for Youth in Conservatorship Resource Guide](#)

[Youth or Young Adult in Foster Care Driver License Fact Sheet](#)

[CPS Handbook Section 6454: Driver Licenses](#)

<sup>16</sup> White, O'Brien, Pecora, et al. (November 2012). Texas Foster Care Alumni Study Technical Report: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24. Casey Family Programs.

# EDUCATIONAL STABILITY

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Students in foster care are dealing with many stresses that most students do not have to endure, such as removal from their parents' care, multiple placement changes and school moves. These changes can have a negative impact on academic growth and can worsen when changes in their living arrangements and in their schools happen at the same time.<sup>17</sup> These difficult experiences may also cause behavioral issues. Students in foster care are more likely to act out or be identified as disciplinary problems in the classroom and are 3.4 times more likely to be suspended from school than their peers.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the percentage of students in foster care receiving special education services is 2.7 times that of students not in care.<sup>19</sup>

However, school offers students in foster care important opportunities to develop positive connections with peers and supportive adults. At school, young people build skills for success, develop resilience and deepen their social-emotional learning. During a time when everything else in the child's life may be turned upside-down, school can provide consistency and a sense of stability. A child's school is a valuable community resource for normalcy activities and support.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

**Educators and child welfare stakeholders must coordinate efforts.** This is especially important during school transitions. Coordination is needed to minimize the loss of relationships, records, credits, services and support systems—all losses that can hinder academic success. For most children in foster care, it is best to continue in their school of origin, the same school they were attending upon initial removal from home (or the school that the child was attending at the time of any subsequent placement change).<sup>20</sup> Advocates should work together with the school to ensure that the child can continue attending the school of origin after a placement change whenever possible, as long as it is in their best interests.

Encourage children and youth to participate in decisions about where and how they receive education. It is important to talk to them about their preferences and give them a realistic understanding of their options. Is there a plan for educational stability in their case plan? Do

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17 Children and Youth Services Review 87. (2018). The effect of placement and school stability on academic growth trajectories of students in foster care. Available online at: <https://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/pdf/Academic-Growth-Trajectories.pdf>.

18 Fiscal Notes. Helping Foster Youth in Higher Education. (April 2020). Available online at: <https://comptroller.texas.gov/economy/fiscal-notes/2020/apr/education.php>.

19 Texas Blueprint Implementation Data Workgroup. (2015, November). Texas commits to transform education outcomes of students in foster care: Findings from the Texas Blueprint Implementation Data Workgroup. Austin, TX: Children's Commission & Child and Family Research Institute, The University of Texas at Austin.

20 42 U.S.C. § 675(1)(G); 20 U.S.C. § 6311(g)(1).

they have reliable school transportation? What about funding for activities, like band or sports?

If the youth cannot remain in their school of origin, there are important steps that can help ease the transition. The team should put as much focus on this educational transition as they do when planning for a transition to a new placement. Changing schools can be just as traumatic to a young person as moving to a new home environment. It is crucial to be thoughtful and intentional about preparing them for that transition. Caseworkers and caregivers should communicate with local public schools (including charter schools) to make sure students in foster care are enrolled within three school days and that their records are transferred within 10 working days, as required by law.<sup>21,22</sup>



Additionally, it is a best practice to have the child tour their new school and meet their teachers and counselors before they start school. While not always possible, a tour can give them time to process this change, ask questions and adjust before their first day in a new school. It is also helpful when the school can provide a “buddy” for the new student on their first day. This “buddy” can introduce them to peers, show them around the school and answer their questions from a peer perspective. This can make the challenging transition go more smoothly.

In the educational setting, normal participation can range from making the school’s daily announcements to competing in a sport. Young people should be encouraged to develop friendships and participate in school clubs or other activities. Participation in activities provides opportunities to learn teamwork, build confidence, explore interests, deepen relationships and meet new people.

Caregivers and others should only disclose a child’s foster care status to the adults who “need to know” that they are in foster care. It should be up to the child or youth to disclose that they are in foster care to anyone else. Avoid situations where they are isolated or made to feel like an outsider. Help students in foster care take advantage of the resources that schools offer.

21 Tex. Fam. Code § 264.115(a); CPS Policy Handbook Section 15310 Time Frame for Completing the Child’s Enrollment. Available online at: [http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Files/CPS\\_pg\\_x15000.asp#CPS\\_15310](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Files/CPS_pg_x15000.asp#CPS_15310).

22 Tex. Educ. Code § 25.007(b)(1); 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 89.1603.

# EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Employment helps develop many vital life skills, such as interviewing, time and money management, responsibility and accountability. Having a part-time job is a normal and positive part of being a teenager and supports a healthy sense of identity and independence. Through holding a job, young people build healthy social relationships with their peers and other adults who are not associated with the child welfare system. These skills and relationships help youth build a foundation for independence and success.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

A first job can be an important milestone in a youth's life, and if this is something they want, it should be supported as much as possible. However, holding a job should not be required of a young person who does not feel ready, does not have time, or who currently lacks the skills to obtain and maintain employment. If that is the case, it is important to work with the young person and everyone involved, including the youth's family, to address those barriers as part of preparing the young person for adulthood. Use open and supportive communication and talk with the youth about their interests, skills, experiences and time commitments regularly.

To apply for jobs, the youth needs support to obtain required documentation, such as their Social Security card and identification card. The youth's caseworker is responsible for obtaining those documents before the youth turns 16. Caregivers and other supportive adults can assist youth in writing resumes, completing job applications, practicing interviewing skills and obtaining clothing suitable for interviews.

Once a youth has secured a job, they may need support to manage their time and schedule. This can be done by starting a family calendar, helping them secure transportation to and from work, and helping them open a bank account so they can deposit their paychecks. A cell phone may be necessary for work communication and for calendar and public transportation apps.



Try to strike a good balance between offering support and showing trust. For example, the youth may not want your help with a calendar or reminders of their shifts at work, and that is okay. You can show care and support to the youth by talking to them about the importance of showing up on time, getting a good night's sleep, and ensuring schoolwork and other responsibilities get done. A youth's feelings about their new job might range from happiness, pride and excitement to worry, fear and anxiety. Whatever their feelings, support them by asking specific questions about their job, and show interest in the relationships and skills they are developing. Helping a young person get a job while they are still in foster care is one of the most important and tangible ways that caregivers and others can help the young person prepare for adulthood and success after they leave care, so prioritize it whenever possible and appropriate.

# FAITH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

If a child or youth is interested in being a part of a faith community, that community can provide them with many nurturing things. These could include a peer group, caring adult relationships and a sense of meaning, structure, belonging and continuity. If a child's family was part of a faith community prior to coming into foster care and it is logistically feasible for the child to continue attending that faith community, that can provide a sense of "home" when other areas of life are unstable. Faith communities can also be asked to provide needed goods and resources, respite care, healthy activities and support for caregivers. Faith is a part of cultural identity, and supporting the cultural identity of the child or youth in care is critical to their well-being.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Texas law, codified in House Bill 3859 from the 85<sup>th</sup> Legislature, permits Texas child welfare providers, including foster parents, to provide "religious education." It is important to exercise this right with sensitivity and to honor the child's wishes. Religious education can create a dilemma for children whose placement holds to a different belief system or religious tradition than their family. It is important to take into consideration the original cultural and faith identity of the child. If the child wants to, caregivers should work to uphold the child's access to, and relationship with, that faith.

Even if the child is placed far from their home and cannot attend services at the religious location they are used to, connecting them with a house of worship in the same faith or denomination can provide comfort and security with familiar prayers, rituals and stories.

If transportation is an issue, ask the leaders of the house of worship if they can arrange transportation for the young person to attend services and activities, or if they can attend online.



# FINANCIAL LITERACY & BANKING

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Without the ability to have a bank account, children in foster care are limited in their ability to learn about and earn interest on their money, and they cannot practice things like using debit cards or balancing a budget. Helping youth in foster care establish a banking account is important because many youth receive limited support as they transition out of foster care. Among the supports they lack, financial support and stability are some of the most important because these youth face financial independence almost immediately once they exit care. Only half of youth who leave foster care have a bank account at age 21.<sup>23</sup> A high proportion use alternative financial services, such as check-cashing services. Among those who do access mainstream banks, some are discouraged by high bank fees and unexpected penalties. Some have also experienced fraud and identity theft, leading them to distrust banks and to delay opening new accounts.<sup>24</sup>



## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Many banks only require a small initial amount of funds to open a checking or savings account, so encourage the child or youth in your care to save up enough to open their own account at a reputable bank. Try to select a bank that has branches in towns and cities across Texas so the child or youth can easily access a banking professional connected with their account, regardless of where they might go if they change placements or leave foster care.

If the child or youth in your care is too young to open a banking account or if they do not have start-up funds, you can still work to teach them about banking. You can ask them about the different ways they have learned about how to handle money and what they may need some additional support around.

Explain the reasons for the budgets and types of accounts you use, and discuss the benefits and drawbacks that your approach has compared to others the child might have been exposed to.

23 Edelstein, S., & Lowenstein, C. (2014, December). *Supporting Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care*. Issue Brief 2: Financial Literacy and Asset Building Programs. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/43276/2000129-Supporting-Youth-Transitioning-out-of-Foster-Care-Financial-Literacy-and-Asset-Building-Programs.pdf>.

24 *Ibid.*

## FINANCIAL LITERACY & BANKING

Focus on practical, everyday skills like budgeting and reading bank statements before you worry about more complex tasks such as investing, and let the child work hands-on whenever possible.

Take them with you to the bank and show them how you use your phone or computer to access your bank accounts as well. As much as possible, talk to them about the benefits of saving money, budgeting and limiting their use of loans or check-cashing services. While older youth in foster care learn some of these skills in the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) classes, it is important that budgeting and banking skills are modeled for them regularly from a young age whenever possible.



# MEDICAL SELF-ADVOCACY

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

It is important that a youth has a say in their own medical care so they have a sense of control over their own body and care.

It is especially critical for older youth in foster care to have a basic understanding of the medications they take, how to make medical appointments, and the type of insurance that will be available to them after they leave foster care. Failing to educate them or not allowing them to practice these crucial life skills could have serious consequences for young adults who age out of foster care.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

### Medical Consent

Youth who are 16 years of age or older may become their own medical consentor if a judge signs an order allowing them to do so. Before a youth reaches age 16, their caseworker and attorney must advise the youth of their right to request a hearing to determine whether they may be authorized to consent to their own medical care.<sup>25</sup> Youth also receive training on informed consent and the provision of medical care as part of the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program.

Older youth in care can also learn about their medication and can self-administer their medication as long as:

- The youth's parent allows it;
- The self-medication program is included in their service plan; and
- The health care professional who prescribed the medication is consulted.

Allowing older youth to administer their own medication with supervision and support from their caregivers gives them a sense of autonomy. It gives them responsibility for caring for their physical health that they cannot gain any other way during their time in foster care.



<sup>25</sup> Tex. Fam. Code § 266.010.

# MEDICAL SELF-ADVOCACY

So that they are not at risk of leaving care without the ability to continue taking medication that might be essential for their health, youth who are 17 or older and preparing to leave foster care especially need to understand:

- When and how to take their medication;
- How to get it refilled, and where; and
- How to make appointments with their doctor.

## Family Planning

Federal law allows anyone enrolled in Medicaid of childbearing age, including children and youth in the conservatorship of the state, to have confidential access to family planning services, including contraception methods. Youth also have the right to refuse contraception if they do not want it. If children and youth choose to utilize birth control, they do not need permission from their caseworker or caregiver, and do not have to inform them of this decision.

## RESOURCES

[Health Advocacy Guide: How CASA Volunteers Can Support Medical & Mental Healthcare for Children in Foster Care](#)

# PERSONAL APPEARANCE & HYGIENE

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

**Self-expression through appearance is a natural and important part of growing up and identity formation.** However, this can sometimes be a source of stress and conflict for youth and their caregivers. Children and youth in foster care have the right to personal care, hygiene and grooming supplies, as well as to have someone show them how to use them. Beyond this basic requirement, it is crucial to honor a young person's identity and creativity by encouraging them to choose their own clothes, hairstyle, accessories, etc.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

**Personal appearance is just that – highly personal – and should be approached with respect and sensitivity.** Like all children, children in foster care may change their appearance over time as their interests and tastes change, and they may go through phases of experimentation. Caregivers should show understanding, patience and interest with the youth and their personal appearance and try not to take it personally if they do not like or agree with the youth's fashion, makeup or hairstyle choices.

Give the child age-appropriate choices, input and control in their clothing, hygiene and makeup products, and hair care. This promotes their independence, responsibility and individualism. It also supports their identity. Caregivers should ensure fairness in the amount of and type of clothing and appearance-related items, for all children and youth in their home. Talk to the child or youth about their style and appearance preferences, take them shopping at stores of their choice and let them pick out their own outfits.

Race, ethnicity and culture influence a young person's style. Caregivers should be sensitive to this, particularly if the child or youth's race, ethnicity or culture is different from theirs. This is a great chance to learn about a child's background and is an opportunity to engage with the child's parent and extended family.

Finally, helping a child or youth learn about personal hygiene can feel uncomfortable, so caregivers should approach this topic from a place of openness and care, not shame or blame. Caregivers can demonstrate how to use grooming equipment and supplies or allow children computer time to look up instructional videos. Giving them choices in their hygiene products gives them a sense of independence and ensures their basic hygiene needs are met.



# RULES & CURFEW

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

**Having to follow adult expectations and rules is a normal part of childhood and adolescence.** In fact, people must follow rules their entire life, so the ability to follow direction is an essential life skill. That being said, children in foster care tend to face far more rules and restrictions than other children. Consequently, they may react strongly to rules or violate rules on occasion. It is common for all children and youth to test boundaries and resist authority at different stages in their life. The teenage brain is actually wired for risk-seeking behavior!

Children and youth in foster care may experience frequent changes in their living situation. Each change of placement and caregiver is likely to bring about different expectations and rules, which may cause frustration as they repeatedly adjust to those changes.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

**As soon as possible after a child or youth comes to live in your home, sit with them and explain what the “house rules” are and why they are in place.** By giving the child context and encouraging them to ask questions, you can often give them a greater sense of autonomy over their situation. If the youth reacts strongly to a rule or expectation, engage with them to gain a better understanding of the reason for their reaction. When appropriate, consider allowing the child or youth to give input on the rules, expectations and possible consequences of a violation.



If you have other children in your home, it is crucial that your expectations of all children in the home are consistent, as inconsistency can undermine your relationship with a child in foster care as well as their sense of normalcy and belonging. When you cannot avoid having a different set of rules for a child in foster care, explain the reason for the difference openly and straight-forward and encourage them to ask questions.

Give the child opportunities to build trust by showing that you trust them to follow the rules when they come to stay in your home. Establishing expectations that create healthy boundaries and leave room for the child or youth to have some autonomy is encouraged. Having a curfew is a good way to give the child some freedom, while still teaching them responsibility and keeping them safe. Stress that following rules is essential to maintaining trust and the flexibility you are offering.

Finally, each child will learn and respond to rules differently. Parent each child as an individual and explain rules in a way that will make sense to them. Consistency is key and will help with establishing a respectful dynamic that is mutually beneficial.

# SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Children and youth in foster care deserve the opportunity to live as normal a life as possible. However, there may be circumstances in which it is important to consider their safety and put some extra protections in place so they can engage in normalcy activities without risking contact with someone who might wish them harm. It is especially critical to be careful when children have witnessed violence, have survived human trafficking or may be protected from harm by individuals in their life by an order of protection.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Allowing children and youth access to normalcy activities, including unsupervised activities and social media engagement, is essential for ensuring their well-being. At the same time, it is important to establish rules and set boundaries to ensure their safety.

Safety considerations should always be balanced with the proposed normalcy activity. Maintain open and direct communication with the child and whoever may be responsible for caring for the child during an outing. Consider if the activity is in an area where the child has spent significant time, if there was a particular area that could be triggering or that may subject the child to running into people who may create additional trauma. Speak with the child about what activities bring happy memories and what activities bring challenging memories. Support this by having a check-in prior to and after a normalcy activity. It can be helpful to the child to have input on their activities to provide them with a sense of control.

Be thoughtful before sharing photos and information publicly on social media about the child or their location, particularly if there is a potentially dangerous or harmful person trying to locate or contact the child. When you are making plans for the child or talking with others about a potential activity, it is important not to violate the child's confidentiality. You can make sure the child is safe without losing their trust or sharing unnecessary information. When information is shared broadly, there is always a risk that the child's information may be gained by someone who should not have it—for example, a known abuser or that person's attorney. Always use caution when you are sharing information about a child or youth in foster care.



# SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Keep in mind that conversations can and do happen through video gaming systems and social media. This is a big way for perpetrators to gain access to children directly. Be on the alert for red flag behavior that could be associated with a child being bullied, trafficked or at risk in other ways. Some red flags of trafficking include:

- having two cell phones;
- unexplained money;
- new, expensive items;
- refillable gift cards;
- a new tattoo;
- unexplained injuries;
- multiple social media accounts or email addresses;
- changes in school attendance, appearance or attitude; and
- newly developed isolation or secretive behavior.

If you see any of these red flag behaviors, make sure to talk to the child about it and also share your concerns with the child's team, including their parents, caseworker, attorney, guardian ad litem, or therapist. Some behaviors may be the result of trauma or could be developmentally appropriate, which is why talking openly with the child and team is the best approach to build trust with the child.

## RESOURCES

[How to Fight Human Trafficking as a Parent or Foster Parent](#)

# SOCIAL MEDIA

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

**Social media is one of the most powerful tools youth use to connect with their peers.** Children and youth who do not have access to any type of social media can feel embarrassed or isolated from their peers. Social media can also be a good tool for self-expression, which may be helpful to children and youth in foster care since they may not always feel heard or understood. It may also provide them with a way to reach out and connect with family members who are an important part of their life. Caregivers may be able to use social media to connect with and understand children and youth in their care as it can provide insight into their life and feelings that they may not feel comfortable revealing face-to-face.

Social media benefits for youth:

- Social ties
- Support
- Family connections
- Self-expression

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

**Caregivers may fear social media because it opens young people up to individuals and situations that can be unhealthy or even dangerous for them.** This fear can lead to a complete ban on access to social media. However, trust is an important part of any relationship. It represents your belief in someone's good sense, ability and honesty. As a youth gets older and starts becoming more independent, you have to find the balance between a teenager's need for independence and privacy, and your need to know what is happening to keep them safe.

However, it is important to understand that children and youth will likely figure out ways to access social media and cell phones whether you allow it or not. It is better to support youth to have safe, supervised access to social media so that you know who they are communicating with and can teach them how to be smart and responsible when it comes to cell phone applications and social media – an increasingly important life skill.

To determine their readiness for social media or a cell phone, utilize the "Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard" and make sure they understand and agree to the boundaries you set (times of day they can access their cell phones or computers, types of social media



# SOCIAL MEDIA

accounts, etc.). Provide expectations, guidance and boundaries in relation to social media and encourage them to use it in safe and healthy ways. It is also important that you are honest with young people if you plan to monitor their account. Many caregivers choose to make social media monitoring a condition of children and youth having an account.

Education is key for social media safety, so caregivers, children and youth should take advantage of the latest information available on staying safe online. Caregivers should also educate themselves about cell phone applications designed to keep information private and hidden. In addition, caregivers should have regular conversations with children and youth to make sure boundaries are being maintained on both sides. A quick search about how to keep kids safe online will reveal dozens of helpful articles and tips to ensure you are doing all you can to stay safe from everything from computer viruses and hackers to online bullying and predators. Talk to the child about how to have conversations with friends who might tag them in photos on social media and any risks that this may pose.

Understanding just how powerful a tool social media can be is critical for both caregivers and youth. Actions on social media have real life consequences, either good or bad, and leave lasting impressions. It is important that youth are educated on understanding how to properly use social media tools.

## RESOURCES

[Kids and Social Media: Online Safety Tips Every Parent Should Know](#)

[8 Dangers of Social Media to Discuss with Kids and Teens](#)

[10 Best Parental Control Apps of 2021](#)

[Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers](#)



# TRANSPORTATION

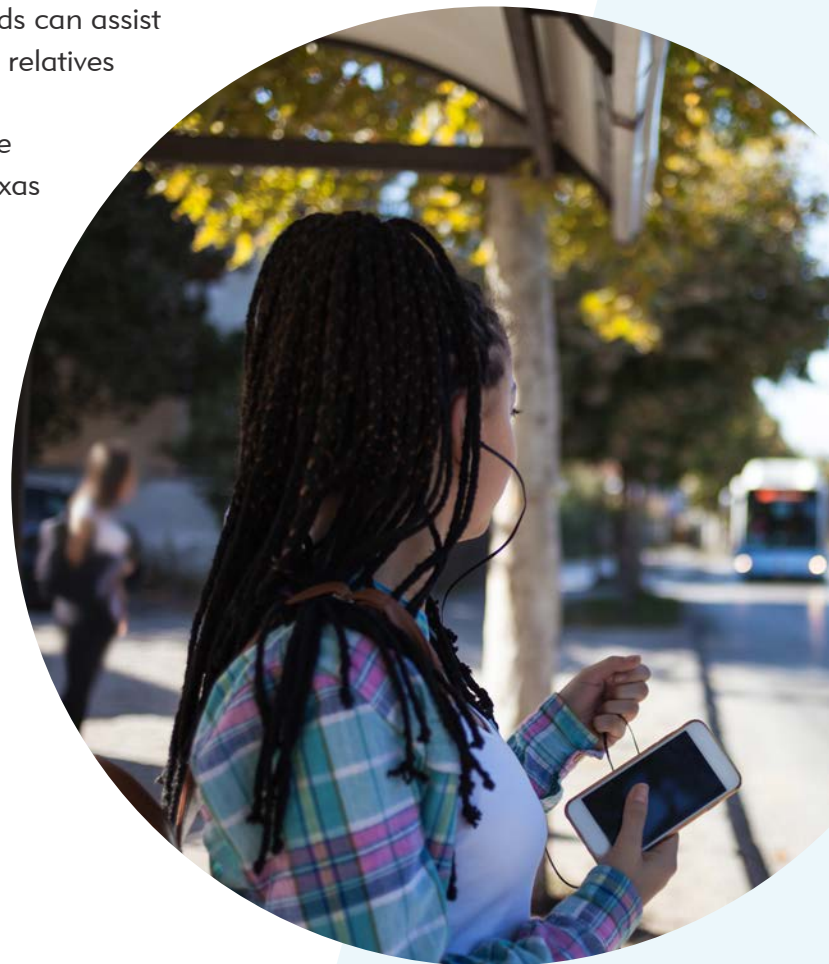
## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Caregivers often cite transportation as the biggest barrier to allowing normalcy activities for children and youth in foster care. This is especially true for large group settings or families with multiple children. However, caregivers are required to provide or arrange transportation for children and youth for normalcy activities, so it is critical to overcome this barrier.<sup>26</sup>

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Caregivers in the child welfare system often believe that they must provide all transportation for the children in their care. This is not true! It is important to consider the “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard” in all the decisions related to normalcy, including transportation decisions such as carpooling or riding the bus. Find out if the child’s parents, other relatives or family friends can assist with transportation and even explore searching for relatives if possible. This is a natural way that families help one another and stay connected, so they should be considered as an option and resource. In many Texas counties, a child’s CASA volunteer or caseworker may also be a resource to help with transportation on occasion.

Finally, do not forget to reach out to the community. Schools, community organizations and other groups may offer transportation options that children in foster care can take advantage of. Do not say “no” to something just because you cannot drive the child yourself. Explore your options, reach out to your community and the child’s advocates, and remember the “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard.”



<sup>26</sup> Tex. Admin. Code §749.2593. *Minimum Standards for Child Placing Agencies*. <https://hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/doing-business-with-hhs/provider-portal/protective-services/ccl/min-standards/chapter-749-cpa.pdf>.

# TRAVEL

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Going on trips with family and experiencing activities and communities outside of one's hometown can enrich a young person's sense of self and broaden their perspective on the world. Taking vacations and traveling are considered a normal and cherished part of childhood and adolescence for many families. However, you may have some concerns or uncertainties about taking a child in foster care out of town for a trip.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

Nothing forbids foster parents or congregate care facilities from taking children and youth on trips – in fact, it is encouraged! However, there are a few logistical details that you should know and consider.



If you are traveling with the child within the state of Texas or states bordering Texas for less than 72 hours, you do not need approval from the child's caseworker or a judge.<sup>27</sup> If you are traveling for longer than 72 hours, you will need written permission from the child's caseworker. Lastly, if you are traveling out of state, or outside of the United States, approval from a judge may be required. The child's caseworker or attorney ad litem can help you obtain this permission, so notify them about your plans as soon as possible.

For international travel, a passport is required, which will necessitate additional coordination with the Department of Family and Protective Services. Working to obtain a passport for the child or youth might be beneficial even if you do not currently have an international trip planned, since having a passport makes things easier if international travel opportunities come up. It also gives children and youth a useful form of identification.

For more information, please see the [DFPS Travel Services policy](#).

Additionally, you can find more detailed information about traveling with a child or youth in foster care in the DFPS CPS [Resource Guide](#) for when a Child or Youth in Conservatorship Travels.

<sup>27</sup> CPS Handbook 6471.2 Out-of-State Travel Approval. [https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Files/CPS\\_pg\\_6400.asp#CPS\\_6471\\_2](https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Files/CPS_pg_6400.asp#CPS_6471_2).

# UNSUPERVISED ACTIVITIES

## ■ WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Many types of activities might be unsupervised, from time alone at home or in the next room, to walking to school, or spending time with a friend. It is recommended that children and youth in foster care have access to both supervised *and* unsupervised normalcy activities, regardless of their placement setting, as this is a normal and healthy part of development and growing up.

Liability fears should not stand in the way of allowing children to participate in these types of activities. Those caring for the child, including a foster parent, caregiver, relative or licensed child placing agency, are not liable if something happens to the child while they are taking part in age-appropriate normalcy activities. This is the case if the activity is approved by the caregiver and the standard of care of a reasonable and prudent parent is kept in mind.

## ■ SUPPORTING THIS CRITICAL ISSUE

When you are trying to decide whether a child may participate in an unsupervised activity, use the “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard.” If the activity is age-appropriate and a reasonable parent would allow their child to participate in the activity, the caregiver can *and should* allow the child to participate. Remember that background checks are not required for people whom children and youth spend time with while participating in normalcy activities, including those that are unsupervised.<sup>28</sup> Unsupervised activities can be more challenging for children and youth who are in congregate care settings, but staff should actively work to create opportunities for children and youth to have some unsupervised time, even on group outings, when it is safe and developmentally appropriate to do so.



<sup>28</sup> DFPS Public Service Announcement 14-025, dated November 18, 2013.



PART 3

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**YOUR ROLE  
IN SUPPORTING  
NORMALCY**



# YOUR ROLE: YOUTH



The experience of being in foster care can make you feel like your life is not “normal”—most kids do not have to go to court, or deal with the stress of having to move multiple times without knowing about the place they are going. However, no matter where you live while in foster care, you should have normalcy in your life. The law requires that caregivers and all the professionals in your life, including your caseworker, attorney and guardian ad litem, do all they can to make your life as normal as possible. In fact, this is a *right* you have in foster care. You have an important role in making sure you have access to the activities and relationships of your choice, as long as they are safe for you.

## ■ KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

If you are not allowed to do an activity or something you want to do because “it’s too expensive” or “the rules say you can’t,” it can be helpful for you to talk to someone about your desire to participate in the activity. You can ask your parents, caregivers, caseworker, attorney, your Guardian ad Litem, CASA volunteer, or Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) coordinator about the rules related to participation and ways to help pay for them. Use this resource guide to get ideas!

It is also important to know your rights. *The Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care document* or “Foster Care Bill of Rights” is something that your caseworker must give and review with you. You should know about this document and read it. If you believe something is against your rights, you can talk to your caseworker, your attorney, your Guardian ad Litem, or your CASA volunteer. You can also file a complaint with the Foster Care Ombudsman by calling 1-844-286-0769. If you live in a group home or center, there should be a poster up with this information on it, too.

## ■ BE CLEAR

It is important that you clearly ask for what you want, especially at service planning meetings or other meetings with your support team. While making a plan will help you meet your goals, some goals may take time. Remember though, that it is a completely normal (and frustrating) part of growing up to not always get what you want.

The best ways to be able to do activities are to make requests and try to avoid things that will prevent you from doing those activities. During a stressful time, you can build skills like communicating clearly, being patient, problem solving skills and addressing things that make you mad in a calm manner. All of these are good life skills that will give you more freedom in the long-term.

## ■ BALANCE INDEPENDENCE WITH INTERDEPENDENCE

Keep track of your personal documents such as your photo ID, birth certificate, Social Security card, citizenship papers and school records. Know that these are all documents which should be given to you by your caseworker before you leave foster care. You should have your photo ID, birth certificate and Social Security card *before* you turn 16. By asking for these documents and following up with this yourself, you avoid needing someone to do this for you. It is also completely okay to need and ask for help with this.

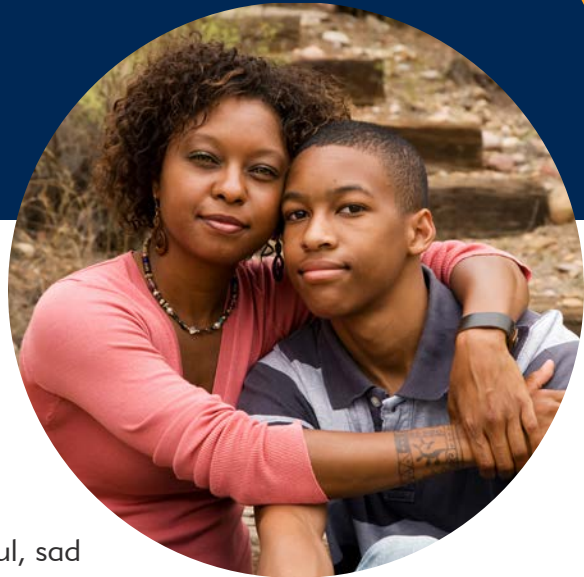


### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Do you know your rights and the resources available to you?
- ✓ Do you have a copy of the Foster Care Bill of Rights?
- ✓ Have you developed plans to get what you want?
- ✓ Do you have all your important documents?
- ✓ Are you able to participate in activities similar to those of your friends?
- ✓ Do you know which activities are most important for you to have normalcy?



# YOUR ROLE: PARENT



Being involved with the foster care system can make you feel like your life, and the life of your child, is no longer normal. Having your child placed in foster care or with a relative disrupts your family's connections, emotions, life and daily routine. It also brings with it a lot of meetings, appointments and requirements. There is no denying that this is a stressful, sad and difficult time for you and your family.

There are many ways that you can do what is best for your child while they are in foster care. One of those ways is by supporting their involvement in normalcy activities. You can also share information that will help your child feel a connection to things they love and enjoy. Your child has a *right* to normalcy while in foster care. The law requires that everyone involved with your child, including their caregivers, do everything they can to make your child's life as normal as possible. Supporting normalcy for your child will depend on information from you as their parent and the expert on their life, routines and interests.

## ■ YOU ARE THE EXPERT

**You know your child best: their hopes, dreams, fears, interests, talents, likes and dislikes.** You are the expert on what your child needs and what can help make their time away from you as normal as it can be. You can share information and ask for certain normalcy activities with people on your and your child's team, throughout the time of your case.

## ■ WHEN FIRST IN FOSTER CARE

**The first few days and weeks after your child enters foster care are a key time for supporting normalcy as your child gets into a new routine.** Everyone working with your child can learn from you about:

- your child's routine at home and school,
- cultural and religious needs and observances or traditions,
- any specialized hygiene and hair products your child uses,
- favorite foods,
- activities they are involved in,
- upcoming plans that they are looking forward to, and
- important and favorite people (and pets!) that your child might want to maintain contact with during their time in foster care.

# PARENT

Coming into foster care should not mean losing out on all aspects of their life with you, and normalcy includes that efforts be made to continue activities and relationships that are safe for your child. You can also look into sending along some personal belongings of your child's that they might like to have with them while they are in foster care such as a favorite stuffed animal, pillow, night light, or family photo.

## ■ WHILE IN FOSTER CARE

Many decisions related to your child will be made while they are in foster care, and you can be a part of making those. However, there may be times when this is not possible, and those currently caring for your child will be responsible for making decisions. It is also possible that your child may have opportunities to engage in activities that are different from when they lived with you. It is helpful for your child to know that you support their new activities while in foster care. Activities might include school trips, sleepovers with friends, after-school clubs, groups and teams, contact with appropriate family members, and visits with their siblings if they are not placed together.

If you have ideas to support normalcy for your child during their time in foster care, you can ask and advocate for them, along with your attorney. For example, you could suggest a familiar and appropriate location for your visit with your child so that you may have a more natural time together than if you met in a CPS office. If you have ideas or suggestions to support your child, be sure to let your team know!



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Do you have open channels of communication with the professionals on your case?
- ✓ Have you shared with your team about your child's routine at home and school, upcoming plans, activities or people your child would like to see?
- ✓ Did you let the professionals know that you would like to be involved in the decision-making around normalcy activities for your child when possible?
- ✓ Have you asked your child about what activities they would like to do while in foster care, and advocated for these for your child?
- ✓ Do you offer support for the activities offered to your child?
- ✓ Do you encourage your child to spend time with important and supportive people they care about and who care about them?

# YOUR ROLE: KINSHIP CAREGIVER

Being a kinship caregiver is a gift to the child and family you are helping. By stepping up to serve as a caregiver, you are easing the trauma that can happen when a child is removed from their home. You are providing a great sense of stability for the child who is already connected to you. As a kinship caregiver, you give and preserve for the child placed in your care a sense of who they are and where they come from, which can help them adjust to the changes they are experiencing.



## ■ UNDERSTANDING NORMALCY

While coming to live with you might be less difficult than going to a foster home with people they do not know, the child is still experiencing a lot of change all at once. You can promote normalcy by honoring their relationships with supportive and appropriate members of their family. You can also encourage and support their involvement in school, after-school, community and faith-based activities.

A child has a right to stay in the same school they were attending before entering foster care, or the school they are enrolled in after a placement change while in foster care. They are able to stay in the same school even when they leave foster care, until they complete the highest grade offered at the school.<sup>29</sup> One way to support normalcy is to ask the child where they want to go to school and work with the child's team to keep them enrolled there (unless it is not the best thing for them).

## ■ STRIVE FOR EQUAL TREATMENT

If there are other kids in the home, try to make it so that all the children have the same rules, types of belongings and time with their friends. Communicate with all the children in your home about why things might be different for each of them, if they need to be different. For example, if the children in foster care get holiday gifts from CASA or CPS that other children do not receive, explain why. Talk with all the children openly about their feelings to help avoid problems or hurt feelings.

## ■ TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES

It is important to know that you can ask for support, including financial support, without the worry of having the child removed from your care. The professionals working on the child's case should let you know about the resources available to you as a kinship caregiver, but if you

<sup>29</sup> 20 U.S.C. § 6312(c)(5), 42 U.S.C. § 675(1)(G); Tex. Educ. Code § 25.001(g)-(g-1).

# KINSHIP CAREGIVER

are in doubt, ask them. Some of those resources might include a Texas Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant, a monthly reimbursement payment, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, Women, Infants & Children (WIC) benefits, or housing assistance. The child's caseworker or child advocate might be able to get community resources that can help support normalcy activities for the child. You can learn more about all of the benefits and supports available to you by visiting the [kinship caregiver page](#) on the Department of Family and Protective Services website. You can also visit the [Facebook page](#) that promotes kinship caregiver support groups and resources available in Texas.



## CHECKLIST

- ✓ Are you treating all of the children in your household the same, when possible? And when not, are you explaining why they are treated differently?
- ✓ Do you have open communication with the parents, family members, teachers, community members and child welfare professionals that are involved with the child?
- ✓ Are you aware of the resources available to you as a kinship caregiver?
- ✓ Do you know who can help you identify resources you may need?
- ✓ Are you aware of the available resources for the child?

# YOUR ROLE: FOSTER PARENT



Children and youth in foster care regularly discuss how much they need their caregivers to help them live normal lives. There is nothing “normal” about being in foster care, so it is necessary to show patience and compassion for the child in your care as they adjust to new people, a new environment, new rules, new food, etc. This newness also means that other things were lost, and this loss may be traumatic. These big, hard adjustments can take time, even in the most loving, safe and positive of places. It is important for you to recognize these changes with the child by asking them how and what they are feeling and supporting their responses. Open channels of communication to help the child or youth express their needs and concerns. Try to include the child’s opinions and needs when you are making both big and small decisions that impact them.

In order to offer normalcy, it is important to understand and use the “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard” in all of your decision-making regarding activities and responsibilities for children in foster care. When a child or youth asks to do something, try to think of the reasons you can say “yes” before you start thinking of reasons you could say “no.” Talk with them about what they can do, rather than what they cannot do.

## ■ CREATE TEACHING MOMENTS

Try to create opportunities for practical learning as often as possible, such as cooking or making their beds. These everyday activities and responsibilities for children and youth help them learn healthy independence. If possible, let children and youth earn an allowance for doing their chores so they can learn additional responsibility and gain experience in managing small amounts of money.

## ■ BE AWARE OF THE IMPACT OF RULES & EXPECTATIONS

It is crucial that you have the same set of rules and expectations for all of the children you are caring for. Having different rules will undermine your relationship with the child in foster care and hurt their sense of normalcy and belonging. If your own child is allowed to date, you should allow the youth in foster care to date as well (assuming they are the same age and of appropriate developmental level). When you cannot avoid having a different set of rules for a child in foster care, it is important that you explain the reason for the difference openly and give them the chance to ask questions.

Encourage children and youth to provide input on the activities that you and your family participate in. Always make efforts to include the youth in your family activities if they would like to participate (vacations, for example). Be mindful that your family activities or traditions may not fit with the cultural or religious practices of the child’s family of origin and may require extra

# FOSTER PARENT

sensitivity and discussion. As with all things, it is important to find a balance and to ensure that you are openly communicating with children and youth in your care to help them understand that they are an important and valued part of your family.

## ■ KNOW YOUR LIMITS & ASK FOR SUPPORT

If you are struggling to meet a child's needs or have barriers to their participation in normalcy activities, talk to staff from your child placing agency (CPA), the child's parent, their caseworker and/or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer about these issues. There are often helpful resources in the community and finding those is more likely when the child's entire team is aware there is a need. Additionally, if the child welfare system itself is creating a barrier (for example, the child's therapy appointment always conflicts with their football practices), talk to the child's support team about scheduling therapy at a different time, having all the child advocates visit on the same day, etc. The entire team should be committed to supporting normalcy for the child or youth. Communicate with the team if certain requirements are creating challenges to normalcy for the child or youth in your care.

### Reasonable & Prudent Parenting Questions

When making a decision about a normalcy activity, consider the following questions:

1. What is the child's age and maturity level?
2. What is the child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development level?
3. What is the child's behavioral history and ability to safely participate in a proposed activity?
4. What are the child's overall abilities?
5. Is the activity a normal childhood activity for a child of that age and maturity level?
6. Does the child desire to participate in the activity?
7. What are the surrounding circumstances, hazards and risks of the activity?
8. What is the outside supervision of the activity, if available and appropriate?
9. What are the supervision instructions in the child's service plan?
10. How important is the activity in providing the child with the most normal, family-like living experience possible?
11. Is there a court order limiting or prohibiting the child's participation in the unsupervised activity?



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Do you understand the "Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard"?
- ✓ Have you opened safe channels of communication for the child?
- ✓ Have you created practical learning opportunities?
- ✓ Do you have different rules or expectations for your own children? If so, do you explain any differences to the child?
- ✓ Are you asking for support when you need it?

# YOUR ROLE: CONGREGATE CARE STAFF

Youth who reside in a congregate care setting, such as a cottage home, emergency shelter or residential treatment center, experience additional challenges to normalcy.

However, as staff in one of these settings, you can do a lot to create normalcy experiences for youth. Asking about the youth's needs, traditions, interests and wishes early and often allows you to create a more individualized care setting for each young person in your care. Remove unnecessary barriers to normalcy activities by updating policies and being open to changing historical practices. Additionally, be aware of trauma that might impact behavior, and do not punish children for trauma responses.

Responses like using restraints and/or seclusion can exaggerate trauma. Using a trauma-informed approach can make a huge difference in a child's life.



## ■ PROVIDE A HOME & THE SKILLS THAT COME WITH ONE

**Addressing the physical space of the congregate care setting can make children feel more at home.** Allowing youth to have personal items in their room, letting them pick the paint color of their room, and providing clean and comfortable furniture are all things that can make a big difference in a youth's experience in your care. Additionally, youth living in a congregate care setting often miss out on gaining vital household skills. To address this, offer the youth activities that help build life skills like cooking, doing laundry and managing money. Many congregate care settings offer small allowances for completing chores or jobs around the campus, which is a great way for the youth to experience responsibility and gain confidence. Like foster and kinship homes, congregate care settings can also help a youth open up a bank account.

## ■ BRING THE COMMUNITY INTO CONGREGATE CARE

**Creating opportunities for children to participate in activities outside of the congregate care setting can be a challenge.** Developing partnerships with the community and an understanding of community resources can help staff arrange for youth to participate in normalcy activities, both on and off campus. It is also important to ensure that all staff and management know that youth may participate in their school district's activities, including sports and dances. While transportation and balancing individual needs with group activities are both major challenges, it is important to work with the child's advocacy team, family and the community to address these barriers. You are a part of the youth's broader support team, which can work together to ensure that youth have access to normalcy activities appropriate

## CONGREGATE CARE STAFF

for each child's unique developmental level, needs, strengths and interests. As part of the support team, you can also support transition planning so that the young people you care for can have normalcy and success in a family-like setting.



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Do you know the youth's preferences and interests?
- ✓ Have you given the youth opportunities to trust you and earn your trust?
- ✓ Have you incorporated trauma-informed communication and responses into your day-to-day interactions with youth?
- ✓ Have you done what you can to make the center's physical environment welcoming?
- ✓ Have you made efforts to ensure youth are learning life skills while they reside in the center?
- ✓ Has your center or home developed partnerships with organizations in the community and with the youth's advocacy team and family?



## YOUR ROLE:

# COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE (CASA) VOLUNTEER/GUARDIAN AD LITEM (GAL)

To be an effective advocate for a child or youth in foster care, it is important that CASA/GAL volunteers talk with the child or youth frequently and directly about their interests and goals. You should be communicating with the child you are appointed to serve regularly and in private. Make sure your monthly conversations with children and youth always include the topic of normalcy. You can do this by asking:

- What is the child or youth experiencing?
- Are their physical, emotional and educational needs being met?
- Are they having their cultural and faith-based needs met?
- What are the child's interests?
- Is the child able to stay enrolled in the same school and maintain connections to their friends and community?
- Are there any clubs, programs or activities they are interested in participating in?
- What barriers to normalcy do they have?



Getting this information requires communicating with children and youth in an age-appropriate manner. You might use non-traditional communication methods to help make them feel comfortable and engaged. Try doing a survey or quiz, or looking online for resources and activities, to give the child a better idea of what they might like and what is available to them. Talk to the child's caregiver, parents and any other individuals with insight about the activities the child has done before. Find out what they liked or did not like, and any activities that the child would like to do. Speak to the child's current caregiver to identify any potential barriers. Having a basic understanding about programs designed to help navigate these barriers (see "Community Partners" in the Appendix) can help you better support the child and their caregiver during these conversations.

## ■ MOTIVATE CHILDREN & YOUTH TO SPEAK UP FOR THEMSELVES

An exciting part of being a CASA volunteer is the ability to encourage children and youth to speak up and advocate for themselves. The law requires children to attend each of their permanency hearings unless the court specifically excuses their attendance.<sup>30</sup> You should encourage them to take advantage of this and appear in court to advocate for their own normalcy activities. If they cannot or do not want to attend in person, see if attending virtually via video conference is an option. Make sure that you are able to clearly communicate their needs to the court by discussing with the child what they want the judge to know. Check to see

<sup>30</sup> Tex. Fam. Code § 263.302.

that the child or youth also knows about their rights in foster care by sharing the “[Foster Care Bill of Rights](#)” with them and explaining what to do if they feel their rights have not been honored.

You represent the best interest of the children and youth you work with, so do not be afraid to suggest ideas or think outside of what is usually offered. Be creative and diligent in supporting them, and help them do the same for themselves.

### ■ WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

**It is important to make partnerships with the child’s parents, caseworker, caregiver, child’s attorney ad litem, facility or child placing agency (CPA) case manager and other child advocates to ensure everyone is supporting and promoting normalcy.** Some areas to explore are:

- Can visits to the child’s placement be scheduled to occur on the same day to limit interruption of school or activities?
- What about participation in court hearings via video conferencing?
- Can visits with siblings and parents happen outside of school and/or work hours?
- Are there better timing options for therapy and other required appointments?

If a child or youth tells you something is important to them, make sure the rest of the child’s team knows about that and joins you in working to make it happen if possible. While some conflicts may not be avoided, CASA volunteers can help everyone on the case identify which issues are creating barriers to normalcy. Then everyone can work together to prevent those barriers from adding up and keeping a child from experiencing as normal a childhood as possible while in foster care.



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Do you know what the child’s interests and goals are? Do you check in to stay up to date about new or changing interests and goals?
- ✓ How and where are you talking with the child to make them feel comfortable?
- ✓ Are you asking questions about normalcy when you talk to the child?
- ✓ Are you aware of potential community resources available to the child?
- ✓ Are you helping to motivate the child and informing them of their rights?
- ✓ Are you working with the child’s team to reduce barriers to normalcy?
- ✓ Are you talking and working with everyone in the child’s life, including their parents?

# YOUR ROLE: CASEWORKER



Young people in foster care regularly convey how dependent they are on their caseworkers to ensure that they live normal lives. Many people who were formerly in foster care say that caseworkers need to include children and youth in service planning (which is a CPS policy requirement) rather than making decisions for them. It is important that as a caseworker you are communicating with children and youth regularly and in private. Communicate with children and youth to make informed decisions that support their future success and their current well-being.

Some ways to ask about normalcy in your monthly contact with the child include:

- What is the child or youth experiencing?
- Are their physical, emotional and educational needs being met?
- What are their interests and goals?
- What needs do they have related to their culture, identity or faith and are they being met?
- Do they want to do after-school or weekend activities they are not able to do, currently?
- What barriers to normalcy do they have?

Getting this information may involve communicating with children and youth in non-traditional ways so they feel comfortable and engaged. You can try completing surveys or looking online for resources and activities to give them a better idea of what is available to them. These activities can also help you get a sense of their interests and goals. For more information about your role in ensuring normalcy for children and youth in care, you can read the normalcy provisions in the [CPS Handbook](#).<sup>31</sup>

## ■ BE AWARE OF LANGUAGE

You have a lot of power in making a culture of normalcy, both for the youth you serve and for the parents, other professionals and caregivers in the child's life. Use neutral, inclusive language and consider each child's specific interests. Make sure you are talking with the youth about what they can do, not what they cannot do. This may require finding innovative ways to give children access to the activities and experiences that provide them normalcy.

## ■ COMMON BARRIERS

**Transportation can be a major barrier to normalcy.** If the caregiver or youth identifies lack of transportation as the reason that participation in normalcy activities is not occurring,

<sup>31</sup> Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Child Protective Services Handbook. Accessed June 12, 2021. Available online at: <http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/default.asp>

# CASEWORKER

strategize ways for the child to be transported to activities. Additionally, if there is a financial barrier preventing a child or youth from participating in a normalcy activity, work with your local community such as the child welfare board, CASA program, or faith-based programs to determine if funding is available to help support normalcy.

## ■ WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

**It is important to establish a partnership with the child’s parents, caregiver, Attorney ad Litem, child placing agency (CPA) or facility case manager, and other child advocates to ensure everyone is supporting and promoting normalcy.** Considerations include:

- Can visits to the child’s placement be scheduled to occur on the same day to limit interruption of school activities?
- What about participation in court hearings via video conferencing?
- Can visits with siblings and parents happen outside of school and/or work hours?
- Can the child remain enrolled in the school of origin and have continued access to peers and supportive adults? What about therapy and other required appointments?

While some conflicts may not be avoided, you can help everyone on the case identify which aspects of the child welfare system itself might be creating barriers to normalcy. Then everyone involved can work collaboratively and creatively to prevent those barriers and allow the child to experience as normal a childhood as possible while in foster care.



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Are you communicating with the child in a way that makes them feel comfortable?
- ✓ Are you asking questions about normalcy when you talk to the child?
- ✓ Are you aware of potential community resources available to the child?
- ✓ Do you use positive or neutral and open-ended language?
- ✓ Are the child’s transportation needs being met? If not, have you spoken to the caregiver?
- ✓ Does everyone on the child’s team know who you are and how to reach you?
- ✓ Are you working with the child’s team to reduce barriers to normalcy?

# YOUR ROLE: EDUCATOR



The success of a student in foster care is dependent on communication and collaboration between educators, parents, family and child welfare professionals. Together, you can ensure educational continuity, expedited enrollment and withdrawals, and streamlined transitions in the event of a school change. All efforts should be made to keep a child or youth in foster care in their school of origin, which provides stability, relationships and emotional support. However, sometimes this is not possible—for example, when their placement is a far physical distance from their home. Whether the student can stay in the same school or must transfer, you as the educator play a key role in the success of the process.

Sometimes, students can feel stigmatized and different because they are in foster care. Treat them the same way you treat other students, especially in front of their peers. Avoid instances that would isolate or single them out. Be mindful of drawing attention to the student's living or family situation, as this information is confidential, and it is the student's choice to share their circumstances.

As an educator, you play a big role in helping students participate in age-appropriate activities and creating bonds with peers and adults. These experiences create positive memories and connections and build resiliency in children.

## ■ GET STUDENTS INVOLVED

Support the student's participation in electives and after school activities such as choir, band, sports, field trips and other school-sponsored activities. This involvement helps the student develop connections with peers, build self-confidence, and provides them the opportunity to experience school as a student who is not in foster care would. If the student attends a school that does not have elective activities, or if the student has interests outside of what the school offers, try to find ways to support those interests, for example, through community-sponsored activities.

## ■ ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISION-MAKING

Youth engagement in decisions about their education is important in respecting them. Meaningful involvement and control are psychologically and emotionally beneficial for the student. Asking them about their interests can help develop post-secondary pathways. Students should be able to meaningfully participate in their educational planning, including their enrollment conference and/or Admission, Review & Dismissal (ARD) meetings if they receive

special education services, so they feel included in the decision-making process regarding their educational needs. Discuss their educational needs in terms that are clear and developmentally appropriate, and encourage the student's participation during these meetings. Also, be aware of things that might impact behavior, and do not negatively respond to any trauma response of the child. Using a trauma-informed approach, rather than the use of school discipline, seclusion or singling them out in front of their peers, can make a huge difference in a child's education and development. Remember that a child's status in foster care must be considered during disciplinary decisions.

## RESOURCES

[Foster Care and Student Success: Texas Systems Working Together to Transform Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care](#)

## STAY INFORMED

Some places that offer resources and programs to assist students in foster care include:

- The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS);
- The Texas Education Agency (TEA);
- Foster care liaisons at every local education agency (school districts and open-enrollment charter schools);
- The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board;
- Texas public institutions of higher education; and
- Disability Rights Texas, the federally designated protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities.

Work to understand and stay informed about the resources and laws that exist to help students in foster care.



## CHECKLIST

- ✓ Are you sensitive to and confidential with the child's information?
- ✓ Does everyone on the child's team know who you are and how to reach you?
- ✓ Are you striving to get the child involved in activities?
- ✓ Are you encouraging students to get involved in decision-making about their education?
- ✓ Are you informed about the laws and resources to support students in foster care?

# YOUR ROLE: MENTOR



As a mentor to a child or youth in foster care, you have many opportunities to make an impact, develop a relationship with your mentee and talk with them about their interests and goals. As you build on your relationship, you can become a supportive, positive, trusted adult for your mentee. This relationship provides a unique opportunity to model normalcy for them using the time you spend together. Many children and youth in foster care do not get the same experiences as their peers, and you can help bridge the gap. The goal is for your mentee to feel they can come to you with questions and concerns, as well as share their dreams and successes.

## ■ NORMALCY CONSIDERATIONS

For children in foster care, normalcy can be hard to achieve, but is important. Normalcy includes not only activities for a child but also relationships, cultural and religious needs, traditions and other interests. When working with your mentee, consider ways you can build on your relationship while including normalizing experiences. Make sure, also, that you are engaging with them in a way that does not feel forced. Ask questions about their likes, dislikes and other information to help you get a good idea and picture of their needs. While respecting the boundaries of your mentee, explore their needs with compassion and without judgement.

For example, you could work with them to look online for activities and resources near where they are living. Many children in foster care are not living near their homes, schools, or communities, and can feel overwhelmed and isolated. If possible and within your ability as a mentor, talk to the child's caregiver to identify potential barriers to normalcy activities. Knowing about programs designed to help address these normalcy barriers (see "Community Partners") will help you support the child and their caregiver.

## ■ ENCOURAGE CHILDREN & YOUTH TO SPEAK UP FOR THEMSELVES

An exciting part of being a mentor is the ability to help encourage children and youth to advocate for themselves. Encourage your mentee to talk to you and the other adults in their life and advocate for their own needs that provide normalcy. Your support can help prepare them to talk to their parents, family, teachers, caregivers, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteer, attorney or judge about their needs. If you will not be at meetings with the other adults in the youth's life where normalcy discussions are taking place, try role playing and practicing with the youth on how to broach this subject and share their ideas.

## ■ WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

As a critical member of the youth's team, it is important to have a partnership with the child's parents, family, caseworker, caregiver, attorney ad litem and other child advocates to ensure everyone is supporting and promoting normalcy. You will hear information from the child about their wishes and, with the child's consent, it is beneficial for you to share this information with the rest of their team. If a child or youth shares that something is important to them, make sure the rest of the team knows about that and helps you to make it possible. As a mentor, you will often learn more about the youth than their professional team has access to. You are an asset to your mentee and can help advocate for them when they need help to do so. Always be mindful of maintaining confidentiality of both the information the child shares with you, and the information that you are privy to in your mentor role.



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Have you asked the child questions about their goals, interests, hopes and dreams?
- ✓ Are you aware of potential community resources available to the child?
- ✓ How are you encouraging the child to speak up for themselves? Has this been successful?
- ✓ Have you identified the barriers to normalcy present for the child, and are you working with their team to address them?
- ✓ Do you feel connected to the individuals in your mentee's life, and are you communicating and collaborating with them regularly, including the child's parents?



# YOUR ROLE: RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE & CONTRACT MONITORING STAFF

Foster parents and general residential operation (GRO) staff members across the state often express apprehension about their liability related to normalcy activities. As a staff person who works to enforce minimum standards and contracts, you can play an important role in dispelling this fear and promoting the importance of normalcy for children and youth in foster care. As you visit with foster parents or congregate care staff, ask them about their efforts to ensure that normalcy is a key part of the culture of their home or facility. While child safety is the first concern, you can help foster parents and GRO staff also understand the importance of child well-being. Explain the “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard” to caregivers and remind them that normalcy activities are essential for healthy child/adolescent development and are required by law, contracts and minimum standards.



## ■ SET NORMALCY EXPECTATIONS

Caregivers often express confusion about who is responsible for investigations when a child in foster care is injured while participating in a normalcy-related activity (like playing football or riding a skateboard). They may not understand the difference between Child Protective Services (CPS) Contracts, Child Care Investigations, and Residential Child Care Regulation. It is important that you explain who you are, why you are there, and reassure them that normalcy is expected and important even if someone needs to come speak with them sometimes when a child is injured. If appropriate, provide examples of normalcy activities.

## ■ SERVICE PLANS

Remind caregivers who are designated to make decisions about a child’s participation in an activity that it does not have to be listed in a child’s service plan for them to participate. For example, a child may decide that they want to wrestle rather than play basketball. It is reasonable for them to change their mind and participate, even though their service plan mentions basketball. Because you are viewed as an authority figure, you have significant power in establishing a culture of normalcy, both for children and for the other professionals and caregivers in the child’s life.



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Are you asking about normalcy when you visit a home or facility?
- ✓ Are you educating caregivers and staff about the “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard”?
- ✓ Do you explain your role and reassure caregivers when it is appropriate?
- ✓ Are you reminding caregivers and staff that as long as there is not a limitation or prohibition within the child’s service plan as to a specific activity, the caregiver may determine which normalcy activities the child can participate in?

# YOUR ROLE: ATTORNEY AD LITEM



A child's quest for normalcy in foster care is a factor in the courtroom, so as an attorney you have a powerful opportunity to initiate a culture of normalcy in the child's life. This is true not only for a child's attorney, but also for a parent's attorney. Whether you are representing the child or the parent(s), it is essential that you help establish normalcy for the child as a priority in the courtroom.

## ■ BE AN INFORMED ADVOCATE

As a child's attorney, you can help prepare the child or youth for hearings, so you are both ready for the judge's questions. Try to learn what types of activities the child is currently doing, those they want to do and any barriers to their participation. Also determine the child's cultural, educational, religious and identity needs. Learn about local programs (see "Community Partners") that may be able to offer the child access to their desired activities through funding or transportation support. Encourage children and youth to attend each of their permanency hearings so that they may express their needs and desires, either in person or via video conferencing, unless the court specifically excuses their attendance.<sup>32</sup> If they cannot or do not want to attend in person or virtually, work to clearly communicate their needs to the court by discussing with them what they want the judge to know.

## ■ ADVOCATE FOR MEDICAL RIGHTS

As an attorney ad litem, you are required by law to inform youth 16 years and older about their right to ask judges to allow them to be their own medical consentor. Additionally, it is important for you to inform your clients that federal law allows anyone enrolled in Medicaid (as are all children and youth in the conservatorship of the state) to have confidential access to family planning services, including contraception methods of their choice. You can also offer advocacy around immunizations as long as the child's parent has not expressed a desire against this. When children and youth are not fully immunized, they are often prohibited from participating in a variety of normalcy activities, from childcare to sports; however, a court may not order immunization of a child over the objection of a parent.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Tex. Fam. Code § 263.302.

<sup>33</sup> Tex. Fam. Code § 263.408

## ■ THINK ABOUT NORMALCY REGARDLESS OF WHOM YOU REPRESENT

If you are representing parents involved in CPS cases, it is important to have a discussion with them about allowing their child to maintain as much normalcy as possible during their time in foster care. This helps the parent to not unintentionally hamper the child's opportunities to engage in activities such as spending time with friends and appropriate family members, dating or participating in school activities. Besides the child themselves, parents are the most important experts on their child's interests. Involving them in the conversation about maintaining normalcy for their child can encourage parents and help to support their child's participation in normalcy activities. (See "Parents" section for more information.)



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Have you prepared the child prior to any hearings?
- ✓ Have you encouraged the child to attend the hearing and speak on their own behalf?
- ✓ Have you made sure the child's voice is heard in court by advocating for what the child wants, regardless of what that is?
- ✓ Do you know what types of activities the child is in, what activities the child wants to do and any existing barriers to participation?
- ✓ Do you advocate for the child's educational needs to be met?
- ✓ Have you helped advocate for the child's medical rights?
- ✓ Have you informed youth that if they are 16 years or older, they can ask the judge to be their own medical consentor?
- ✓ As a parent's attorney, have you talked to the parents about the importance of supporting their child having normal experiences while in care?

# YOUR ROLE: JUDGE



There are many things that you can do from the bench to support normalcy for children and youth in foster care. You are in a position to set expectations in your court related to normalcy, which can have a positive effect in a child's life and help to convey the importance of normalcy to the child's team. Requiring updates about normalcy experiences and activities in court reports from CPS and CASA is one impactful way to include a discussion about normalcy in the courtroom. Additionally, if the child appears in court, you may conduct an interview with the child in chambers or ask them questions in addressing normalcy issues in court. Possible questions might include:

- What activities does the child participate in?
- What activities does the child wish to participate in?
- What kinds of interests do they have?
- What barriers have the caregiver and child faced when trying to access normalcy activities?
- Does the child have any requests about support for their identity, race, ethnicity, cultural or religious needs?

## ■ TALKING WITH THE CHILD OR YOUTH

Chapter 263 of the Texas Family Code requires that all children in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) attend permanency hearings unless excused by the court.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, children in care age 10 and over are entitled to notice of each hearing.<sup>35</sup> However, many children and youth report not knowing about their court dates. This can create barriers for judges who wish to determine whether the physical, emotional and educational needs of children and youth in care are being met and whether they have access to normalcy activities.

Reminding everyone involved of the [Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care](#), which include notifying them of their court dates, is one way to address this barrier. DFPS and the child's attorney should make arrangements so that a child has an opportunity to participate in their court hearings. If the child does not feel comfortable coming to court either in person or virtually, or would rather not miss school, try to establish an alternative line of communication with them. For example, child advocates can work with your court to arrange for the child

<sup>34</sup> Tex. Fam. Code § 263.302.

<sup>35</sup> Tex. Fam. Code § 263.0021.

# JUDGE

to participate in the hearing or speak to you in chambers via video conferencing rather than having the child miss a substantial part of their school day.

If they are filed with the court, you may also review a child's Child & Adolescent Needs & Strengths (CANS) assessment, CPS permanency reports or CASA reports to learn more about the child's expressed interests.

## ■ COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

You can support normalcy efforts by becoming familiar with the available community programs and supports. By understanding what community programs are available to the child or youth, you will be better able to issue a court order that can help secure specific community services, or the required funding or transportation for normalcy activities. Leveraging community partnerships is an important tool in securing and funding a diverse selection of activities for children in care. Bringing people from the community together to strategize about services and resources to better serve children and youth in foster care is a powerful approach for creating a cultural shift that prioritizes normalcy across the entire child welfare system.



### CHECKLIST

- ✓ Do you help to create a culture that prioritizes normalcy within your courtroom and community?
- ✓ Have you established lines of communication with the children in foster care in your court?
- ✓ Have you asked the parents, caregivers and advocates about children's interests and desires regarding normalcy activities?
- ✓ Have you engaged with the community about potential services and resources to promote normalcy for children and youth in care?

# YOUR ROLE: POLICY MAKER



**As an appointed or elected state leader, you have a unique role in understanding the needs of children, youth and young adults in foster care and advocating for them.** Children and youth in foster care have multiple vulnerabilities. The responsibility to ensure that law, policy and practice support their well-being is intensified when the state of Texas is their legal parent.

Creating, supporting and monitoring policy that helps children in foster care to pursue normalcy activities is one of the most powerful ways to ensure normalcy is prioritized. Even if you are not working on policy that is directly related to normalcy, it is important to consider if any law or policy regarding foster care could impact normalcy opportunities.

## ■ INVOLVE YOUNG PEOPLE

**When you are drafting and reviewing laws and policies, there are many important reasons to include a diverse and representative group of stakeholders in the process.** The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), as well as several child welfare advocacy organizations, have coalitions of youth currently or formerly in foster care that can serve as a resource to you in policy creation. These groups should be involved in the policy-making process early, so that their ideas are integrated into the policy or law. If you ask groups of young people to review policies after they are drafted, the engagement may not feel authentic to them. Additionally, requiring agencies to include young people in the process of implementing laws and policies can help ensure they are implemented as intended, and do not have unintended consequences that could limit opportunities to experience normalcy.

## ■ LOOK TO THE COMMUNITY

**Be familiar with the local resources available to children and families in the district you serve.** Consider supporting policies and funding that will help organizations in your community to continue to provide services and support to children, youth and families, including those involved with the child welfare system. The “Community Resources” section of this guide is a good place to start.



## CHECKLIST

- ✓ Are you including a diverse and representative group of stakeholders, especially young people, early in the policy-making process?
- ✓ Are you monitoring policy implementation and including young people in that process?
- ✓ Are you thinking through any unintended consequences that could limit normalcy for children and youth in care when you draft policy ideas?
- ✓ Do you know who your local community organizations are, what they do and how you can support them?



# CONCLUSION

**The value of normalcy goes far beyond improving the daily quality of life for children and youth in foster care.** It affects their long-term life outcomes. Normalcy allows young people in foster care to build supportive relationships and learn valuable skills, thus giving them a meaningful chance to achieve well-being and permanency. Youth who cannot participate in age-appropriate activities and are placed in overly restrictive environments do not develop the skills they need to navigate the adult world. These critical skills include how to identify and maintain healthy relationships and avoid those that are unhealthy or dangerous.

A foster care system that does right by the children it serves should keep them safe from harm and help facilitate healthy connections and growth. As people who care for these vulnerable youth, we know that their safety is, and should be, paramount. But just because their circumstances are different, does not mean their desires to connect and fit in with their peers, pursue their hobbies, participate in fun activities, learn life skills and *just be kids* should fall by the wayside. On the contrary, those desires are worthy of celebration and support, and exploring them is crucial to building the framework for a successful adulthood.



# APPENDIX: COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO SUPPORT NORMALCY

There are many resources and organizations both in Texas and nationally that are dedicated to helping children and their caregivers access normalcy activities. Caregivers should not be afraid to ask for help if they need it. Caregivers and child advocates should get to know their local community partners and organizations. You can find just a few examples of some resources available in Texas below:

- **TEXAS COUNCIL OF CHILD WELFARE BOARDS:** A council of local child welfare boards that collaborate to develop programs that meet a community's needs. You can find a list of the boards in your area here: <http://www.tccwb.org/boards/>
- **CAREPORTAL:** A resource that connects churches to child welfare providers. Child welfare providers can reach out with a message (anything from "I need an extra bed" to "I need a mentor") and they will be connected with churches that can help: <https://careportal.org/>
- **RAINBOW ROOMS:** Rainbow Rooms are 24/7 resource centers usually located within local Child Protective Services (CPS) offices. In the Rainbow Room, CPS caseworkers can get supplies for children entering state care—clothing, school supplies, diapers and much more: [https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child\\_Protection/Rainbow\\_Rooms/default.asp](https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Rainbow_Rooms/default.asp)
- **COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS:** The mission of Communities in Schools is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. Their staff work inside schools, providing a range of supports, including individual counseling or support groups, basic life skills, tutoring, mentoring and enrichment opportunities: <https://www.cisoftexas.org/>
- **TICKET TO DREAM FOUNDATION:** Ticket to Dream is dedicated to providing hope and opportunity for children in foster care across the nation, so they can just be kids. They partner with businesses and local communities to ensure children in foster care of all ages have the school supplies, holiday gifts, properly fitting clothing and shoes that all children need to thrive: <https://www.tickettodream.org/>
- **TOGETHER WE RISE:** The mission of Together We Rise is to improve the lives of children in foster care across the country. Their foundation has allowed them to provide thousands of youth in foster care with new bicycles, college supplies and suitcases so that children do not have to travel from home to home with their belongings in a trash bag: <https://www.togetherwerise.org/>
- **WANT MORE?** Contact Your Region's DFPS Volunteer & Community Engagement Coordinator.

While the resources listed above are a great start, it is important to understand the resources in your specific community. You can ask your region's DFPS Volunteer & Community Engagement Coordinator about these. Coordinators in each region can provide lists of local agencies that might be able to provide funding or support for normalcy activities:

<https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Community/Volunteer/local.asp>



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