



YOUTH LINK:

YOUR FOSTER CARE JOURNEY

Your Guide To The Child Welfare System In Louisiana And Your Link To A Better Future

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YOUTH LINK WAS MADE JUST FOR YOU

If you're in foster care, or about to be placed into foster care, we know it can be a little scary. We're here to tell you that you are not alone. Youth Link can help answer all your questions about foster care.

This booklet was created by caring Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) staff, social workers in other states, kids who are in foster care right now and older youth who were at one time.

If you still have questions after reading this booklet, please ask your case manager, caretaker, Independent Living Skills provider or another adult you trust. Or, go online to: youthlink.la.gov.

This is your life, and you need to know what's going on so you can make the best of your time in foster care and have a chance for a better future.

THE BASICS

What is foster care?

Foster care is when children live in a place that is not their regular home. The care can be with a foster family, a relative or in a non-family home to keep them safe and meet their needs.

Why am I here?

Children enter foster care for many reasons. Sometimes parents abuse or neglect their children or can't take care of them.

When someone reports that you are being abused or neglected, or that they think you are in danger, someone from DCFS will come to see if you are safe in your home.

If the person from DCFS finds you are not safe in your home, they will contact a judge to let them know about the situation.

If the judge agrees that you are unsafe, they will order DCFS to take custody of you and put you in foster care.

Once you enter foster care, DCFS will choose a case manager for your family. Your case manager will make sure you have a safe, nice place to live and have all the things you need. The goal of DCFS is to keep children in the community safe.

No matter why you enter foster care, you need to remember that you are not to blame, and you didn't do anything wrong.

We know being removed from your home can make you feel angry, confused, sad, afraid – or possibly even relieved. All these feelings are okay. Your case manager and caretakers are available to answer your questions and talk with you about how you feel.

What will happen to me?

We know sometimes children want to go home to be with family, but that is not always best for them.

If you cannot return home, your DCFS case manager, your parents and others will make other plans with you and help find the best place for you to live.

These plans are called permanency plans. Some of these plans are:

- **Reunification**

This means to come together, and it's what will happen when it's safe for you to go home to your parent or parents.

- **Guardianship**

This is when you are put in the care of a family member or someone else you know, so they can "guard" you and make sure you're safe.

- **Adoption**

If it is best for you, you may be adopted, which means you legally become the child of the family who adopts you.

- **Alternate Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA)**

This means you would stay in foster care until another permanency plan is in your best interest.

Six months after you enter foster care, the court will look at your case to see if things have improved.

If you stay in foster care, a permanency hearing will be held in another six months.

At that time, the judge will see if it is safe for you to go back to your parents' custody. If you and your family cannot reunify at this point, the judge will decide which of the other permanency plans is best for you.

At any point from the day you come into foster care, DCFS can recommend returning to your parents once it is safe.

Later, if going home is still not what's best for you, the court may order a Termination of Parental Rights. This means that your parents will no longer have any say about your care, and DCFS will help you decide which of the other plans would be best.

Depending on the situation, your foster parents or a family member who cares about you may be able to adopt you or get guardianship of you.

If the court agrees, your caretakers will be able to take care of you all the time, and your case with DCFS will be closed.

Where will I live?

If you are not able to live with your parents, your case manager's main goal is to find a place for you and your siblings to live.

Your case manager wants to keep you close to where you live now, so tell them if you have other family or friends who live nearby that you can live with.

Here are some other possible places to live while in foster care:

- **Relative or Kinship Caretaker**
Your case manager will first try to help you move in with other family members like grandparents, aunts or uncles, or friends of your family who are able to help you.
- **Certified Foster Home**
There are many caring adults who open their homes to children who need a safe place to live. Foster homes may have one or two parents and may have other children living in the home. These children may be in foster care like you, or they may be the foster family's own children. DCFS makes sure these foster parents have learned how to take care of you and to make sure your needs are met.
- **Group Home**
This is when other foster children live together as a group and are cared for by adults they can trust.
- **Emergency Shelter**
These are places that will care for you for a short time while your case manager finds another place for you to live.
- **Transitional Living Placement**
Sometimes older children live in an apartment, group setting or their own home with an adult close by in case they need help. This is a good way for them to learn how to take care of themselves.

Keep in mind that wherever you live, you will have rules and a list of things you need to know about your new foster home. These rules will help keep you safe and will help you feel better. If you have any questions, you can always ask your case manager or the people taking care of you.

Can I see my family and friends?

While you are in foster care, DCFS will plan visits with your family members and friends so you can stay in touch with them. Your case manager can approve in-person visits and phone calls, depending on what the judge approves.

Another visit you will have is when your case manager comes to your foster home and speaks to your caretakers to make sure you are safe and have what you need.

Your case manager will visit you at least once a month, but sometimes more often.



RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

What are my rights while I am in foster care?

As a child in foster care, you have the right to know:

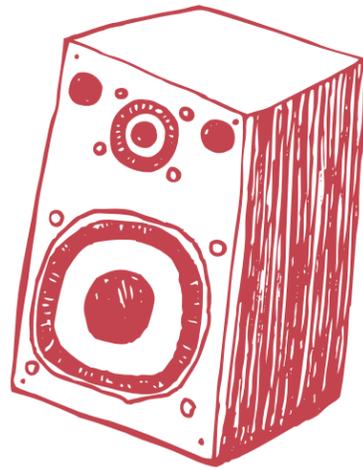
- Why you are in foster care
- What will happen to you
- Why you are not able to live with your brothers and sisters if you can't
- What is happening with your parents, brothers and sisters
- How DCFS will help you plan for your future
- The rules about when your caretaker can look at your things
- Why you cannot have some things
- All services and programs that can help you when you leave foster care, like educational training vouchers, Medicaid and others

As a child in foster care, you have the right to:

- Good care and treatment that meets your needs
- Live in a safe and healthy place where you won't get hurt
- Be by yourself when you want to be alone
- Be told the rules for the place where you live
- Be told by your case manager about the place where you will live before you go there
- Take your things with you if you move
- Be treated fairly
- Have your case manager try to find a home where you and your brothers and sisters can be together, unless it isn't safe for you to do so
- Visit with your family, unless the court says it's not safe
- Visit with other people like your teachers, people from your church and friends
- Speak and be spoken to in your own language by your foster caretakers, or have DCFS give you a plan to meet your need to talk to others
- Get an education that fits your age and learning needs
- Go to church

- Take part in things after school that are right for someone your age, like playing sports, playing in the school band, going on field trips and spending time with friends
- Get and send mail without anyone opening it, make phone calls without anyone listening in and write things down without anyone reading them
- Things you need to stay clean and healthy, like a toothbrush, toothpaste, comb and other things
- Things to wear that you like and to choose some of your clothes
- Clothes that will keep you cool in the summer and warm in the winter
- Get extra things you may like, if your case manager says it is okay and your caretaker can afford it
- A place in your bedroom where you can put your clothes and other things
- Write down and report to your case manager if some of your things have been taken away from you
- Food that is good and healthy for a person your age
- Look for a job
- Get paid for work done at your foster home (except for regular chores)
- Earn and keep your own money
- Have your own bank account in your own name, if you are old enough
- Decide for yourself whether or NOT it is ok to have your picture taken or appear in a video
- Keep your baby and live together if it is safe
- Not be shaken, spanked, hit or made to be alone for a long time
- Not have anything done to you that is mean or hurtful or makes you feel unsafe
- Have reasonable punishments and be told why you are being punished, as long as the punishment doesn't harm you
- Be shown the rules about Emergency Behavioral Intervention Policies, which means
 - How you will be taken care of if you cannot control your behavior
 - How your caretakers will keep you and those around you safe
- Contact your case manager whenever you ask
- Meet a DCFS case manager, in private, at least once a month
- Receive a complete plan that has a list of all the things you need now and things you will need as you get older

- Regular Youth Transition Planning (YTP) meetings to plan for your future
- Ask someone to help you make your plan and to have others plan with you
- Ask two or more people (if you are 14 or older) to meet with you when you make your plan
- A copy of your plan that you can keep
- Have people help you learn about things you will need as you get older
- Good medical, dental and vision care, and other health services that you may need
- Not be made to take more medicine than you need
- Choose your own medical treatment. If you are 16-years-old or older, and if it is okay with a judge or your healthcare provider, you can make your own choices to get help for things like drug or alcohol abuse, abuse of your body or mind, medicine for diseases or if you are pregnant
- Talk alone with your case manager, lawyer, probation officer or CASA at any time
- Go to court hearings and talk to the judge about where you are living and what you would like for you and your family
- Keep your records private and only talked about when it is about your care
- Have your own credit report done each year, starting when you are 14 years old, and ask for help so that you understand everything in your report
- Get help with your:
 - Driver's license
 - Social security card
 - Birth certificate
 - State ID card (if you are 16 or older)
- Thirty days before you leave foster care, get all of the things that you will need:
 - Immunization records (a list of all the vaccinations you have received)
 - Proof that you have signed up for Healthcare Power of Attorney
 - Information on how to set up a Healthcare Power of Attorney
 - School and medical records
- Make any calls or reports to:
 - The Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services hotline at 1-855-4LA- KIDS (1-855-452-5437)
 - Your case manager, his/her supervisor or his/her manager
- Make calls or reports and not be afraid someone will punish you



What do I need to do?

When you are in foster care, there are a lot of people working very hard to make sure you are safe and have the things you need. You can help them by doing the following:

- Work with your case manager on your permanency plan
- Work with your case manager and caretaker to learn the rules where you live
- Tell your case manager when you do and don't want visits with your parents, so they can let the judge know
- Tell your case manager, CASA or lawyer if there are family members or friends that you would like to visit or live with
- If you do not feel safe in your foster home, or have problems where you live, tell your case manager, CASA or lawyer as soon as possible
- Do not run away, no matter how bad things may seem

What does my caretaker need to do?

Whether you are living with a foster family, group home, other facility, relative or friend, those caring for you have the responsibility to:

- Keep you safe and give you enough food, clothing and shelter to meet your basic needs
- Treat you with dignity and respect
- Keep information about you and your family confidential and share it only with people who need to know, such as your case manager
- Show understanding, give you the advice you need and completely accept you for who you are
- Support you if you want to stay in touch with your parents, brothers or sisters
- Respect your rights
- Participate in meetings about your case plan and other case-related meetings
- Get you ready for your next step in life—whether that means going home, moving to another placement or living on your own
- Support your growth by encouraging your success in school and in everyday life
- Teach you basic life skills and give you opportunities to practice them
- Allow you to participate in everyday activities and events, and to make sure you can get to these activities
- Make sure you get the medical and dental care you need and that you understand your treatment and services



GETTING WHAT YOU NEED

How does DCFS decide what I need?

Within 30 to 45 days after entering foster care, you should have your first Family Team Meeting (FTM).

This is a meeting with DCFS to talk about what you and your family need to do so you can go back home and be safe. It will also focus on what you need for yourself.

The FTM also helps find the best way for you to be taken care of until it is okay for you to go home or until other permanent arrangements can be made.

People who may be part of your team:

- Your case manager from DCFS
- Your parents
- Your foster parents
- Other friends and family members
- Your case manager's supervisor
- Your Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), if you have one
- Your lawyer
- Your parents' lawyer, if they have one

After the first FTM, you will have a meeting every 6 months, or more often if needed, for as long as you are in foster care. The meetings are held to discuss progress and make changes, if needed.

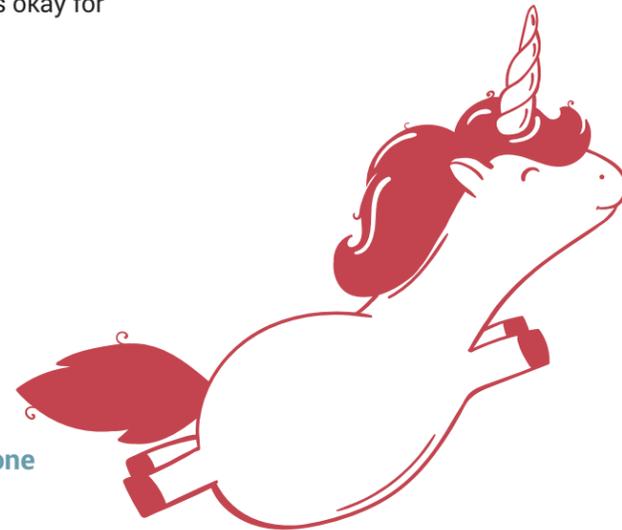
At these meetings, a written document called a Youth Transition Plan (YTP) will be made just for you. Your part of the plan outlines what is needed for you to be healthy and safe.

Your parent will have their own plan, which lists things that need to change so it is safe for you to go back home.

The main goal is to do what is best for you, while making sure you are safe.

If you are older than 14-years-old, you can make your goals with your team so that you can have a say in your future and can reach the goals you have set for yourself.

It is okay if you want to change the things on your case plan as you get older.



What about my education?

No matter what is going on in your life, and no matter where you may be living, there is nothing more important than your education!

If you have any trouble with school, talk to your teachers, case manager or caretakers so they can help you keep up with your schoolwork.

If you need special education services, the school will set up a meeting with your teachers, case manager, caretakers and others to create an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for you.

They may want you to take some tests to find out what you already know and what help you need in the classroom.

If found necessary, you can have services that will help you with your schoolwork, such as tutors, special education classes and certain therapies.

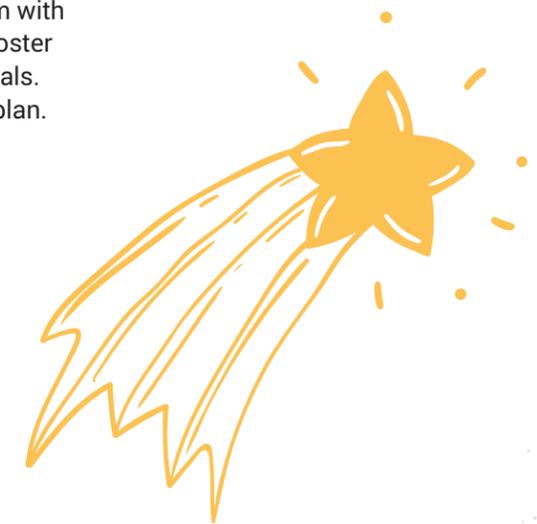
If you have any problems at all, tell your case manager. If you cannot get in touch with them right away, ask for help from another person at DCFS.

What if I am 14 or older?

If you are between 14 and 18-years-old, your case manager and others will begin helping you plan for your future. By planning ahead, you will be better prepared for life as an adult. Some things you need to think about are:

- What do I need to do to finish high school?
- Where will I live when I reach the age of 18?
- Will I be able to go to college or get other job training after high school?
- What kind of job do I want to have?
- Will I be able to get a full-time or a part-time job?

Once you have set your goals, talk about them with your case manager, lawyer, CASA worker or foster caretaker, so they can help you reach your goals. The goals you have will be part of your case plan.





What services can I use as I get older?

Your future is very important to us. We want to make sure you know about all the programs and services you can use as you get ready to leave foster care.

- **Independent Living Providers (IL)**

Wherever you are living, there is an IL provider who can work with your caretakers to make sure you start learning all the things you need to know when you leave foster care. Services such as games, videos, guest speakers, in-home visits, activities, advice from peers and field trips are there to help you learn things like:

- Goal setting
- Decision making
- Where to go in your area to get the things you need
- Education choices
- Jobs
- How to take care of your money
- How to live on your own
- How to stay safe
- Human sexuality
- Being a parent
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- How to work and get along with others
- Where to live



- **Extended Foster Care**

If you are in foster care and turn 18, you may be eligible to volunteer for a program where DCFS will continue to provide money so that you can remain in a stable place. DCFS will also continue to provide case management to you. Please discuss this with your case manager so he or she can help you sign up for the program.

- **Medicaid Until You Are 26**

If you are in foster care on your 18th birthday, you will continue to receive Medicaid services through your 26th birthday. This service is for all youth who turn 18 in foster care, so be sure to get your medical cards from your case manager as you are planning to leave.

- **Educational Training Vouchers (ETV)**

Vouchers are like tickets or coupons, and having your ETV gives you financial help for a post-secondary education (like college or a vocational school). The highest amount of ETV you may get is \$5,000 for each school year. To qualify for ETV, you must be under the age of 26, be actively in a post-secondary or vocational program and meet at least one of the following requirements. You must have:

- Left foster care on your 18th birthday
- Been adopted after your 16th birthday
- Entered a guardianship agreement after your 16th birthday
- Had any foster care experience after your 14th birthday and then returned home or to the custody to someone other than your parent

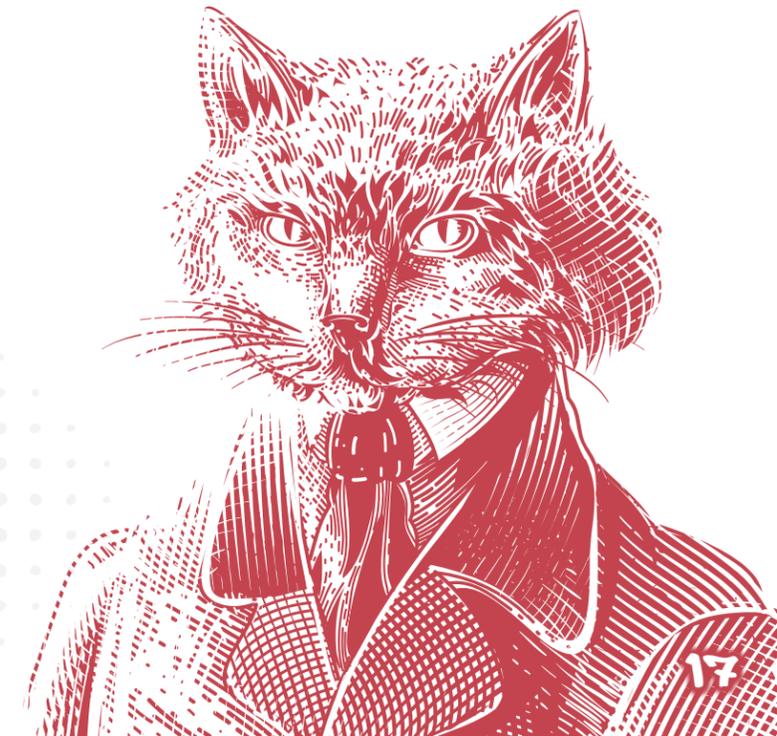
- **Educational Training Vouchers**

To get these funds, you must meet with the financial aid office at your school and ask them to help you apply for ETV. There is a five-year limit on the funds. You can also ask your case manager for help.

- **Case Management Up to Age 26**

The IL provider in your area can provide case management services for you from the time you are 18 until you reach 26. It is important for you to always stay in touch with your IL provider, so you can contact them if you need help.

More information can be found at youthlink.la.gov.





How do I stay in touch with people once I leave foster care?

Whether a child has ever lived in foster care or not, leaving home and living on your own can be a little scary. Just remember that living on your own does not mean you are alone! No one lives day-to-day without the help of others, so fill out this list and keep it with you all the time. That way, you can get in touch with people who can answer your questions and give you the support you need. Keep adding to it.

People I want to remember:

Name	Address	Phone	Email

DCFS case manager	
DCFS case manager's supervisor:	
DCFS child welfare manager	

IL provider	
Attorney	
CASA worker	
Caretakers	

TERMS TO KNOW

Who will I meet?

- Case Manager**
This is the person you will be talking to the most. They work for DCFS, and it is their job to work closely with you to keep you safe. They answer all your questions, present your case to a judge, make plans for you to visit your family and so much more. You can get in touch with your case manager anytime you need them and let them know what you are thinking or feeling.
- Attorney**
All children in foster care have an attorney (or lawyer) who is with you at court hearings. Your attorney will work with the judge and do what's best for you. Remember that no matter what you tell your lawyer it will stay private, just between the two of you.
- District Attorney**
This is the person who brings your case to court and works to help you
- Judge**
This is the person who leads the court hearings. At hearings, the judge will listen to the facts of your case and tell you if it is safe for you to stay with your parents or if there is a better plan for you, such as adoption, guardianship or others.
- Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)**
This person will help you every step of the way. Your CASA worker has learned how to make sure your needs are taken care of. They can help you with things like your education and medical needs. They let the judge know exactly what you want.



What happens in court?

Court is where everyone meets to make legal decisions about what is best for you. These meetings are called hearings, and the hearings are led by a judge. The judge will look over your case every six months for as long as you are in foster care. The judge may want to see you or talk with you about how things are going. You have the right to attend court hearings.

Some of the hearings you may have include:

- **Continued Custody Hearing**
This hearing is held within 72 hours of entering foster care and a decision is made about whether or not you will remain in foster care.
- **Adjudication Hearing**
This is when a DCFS worker reports to the judge about the safety of your home and why you need someone other than your parents to care for you.
- **Disposition Hearing**
At this hearing, the judge will decide if it is safe for you to go back home, if you should live with a family member or other adult you know or if you should stay in foster care.
- **Case Review Hearing**
This hearing is held every six months so the judge can make sure you are getting everything you need and that a permanent home is being found for you as fast as possible.
- **Permanency Hearing**
This hearing happens every year while you are in foster care. The judge will decide what your permanency goal will be by checking on everyone's progress.
- **Termination of Parental Rights Hearing**
During this hearing, if the judge determines it is not safe for you to return home, he may decide to take away your parents' parental rights. If this happens, you may be adopted or live permanently with another caretaker.



What things do I need to know?

- **Appeal**
At your hearing, if DCFS, your parents or you do not agree with the judge, any one of you can ask that your case be taken to a higher court to review the judge's decision. Asking for this review is called an appeal.
- **Confidentiality**
This means everyone working on your case—DCFS, your caretakers, your lawyer and others who help take care of you—CANNOT give your information to others who aren't involved in your case or who aren't taking care of you.
- **Custody**
During your hearings, the judge will decide where you will go and who will take care of you. The person, family or agency the judge chooses will have custody of you while you are under 18.
- **Least Restrictive Placement**
If your parents cannot take care of you, DCFS will first try to find a home for you with other relatives, friends or a foster family. If you need a special home to meet your needs, you may live in a group home or treatment center with other children.
- **Life Book**
This is like a scrapbook and should be filled with important things—pictures, report cards, stories and your thoughts—so that you can remember your life before and during foster care. Your DCFS case manager, foster caretakers and others will be happy to help you put your book together.
- **Psychiatrist**
This is a doctor who will talk to you and sometimes prescribe medicine. A psychiatrist's goal is to help you understand your feelings. They help to understand what you need.
- **Psychologist**
This person will talk with you and sometimes give you tests to see what kind of help you need, and how to help you understand and change the way you feel or act.
- **Surrogate Parent**
This is the person who will take care of you or be your foster parent, making sure you get the help you need in school and, if needed, will meet with your teachers.
- **Therapist or Counselor**
These people will talk to you and your family about any problems and help you find ways to solve them.

REMEMBER: FOSTER CARE IS INTENDED TO BE A SUPPORT TO YOU AND TO FAMILIES.

NOTES



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our special appreciation to the Child Welfare Systems in Maine, Wisconsin and Texas, to youth in foster care and to youth aging out whose input and ideas helped make this publication possible.