



VIRGINIA'S
KIDS BELONG[®]

THE AMERICA'S KIDS BELONG FAMILY

LOVING ON YOUR LOVED ONES

**A GUIDE TO SUPPORTING YOUR LOVED
ONES ON THEIR FOSTER, KINSHIP OR
ADOPTIVE JOURNEY**

IN THIS GUIDEBOOK

So you're close with someone who is a foster, kinship, or adoptive parent?



THAT'S WONDERFUL!

It is a fantastic role to take on, and a huge need. There are over 5200 youth and children in the Virginia foster care system, and your loved one has opened their home to welcome some of these kids for a few months or years.




This Guidebook will teach you how **YOU** can care for **THEM** and the children coming into their lives.

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-  Challenges all foster families face

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-  Little Survivors

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1. UNDERSTANDING THEIR ROLE

There are different versions of being a "foster parent." And often, people do multiple types of fostering. Caring for children in foster care breaks down into 5 major categories.

FOSTERING

What Does it Mean?

Traditional fostering is when a "family" (can be an individual, couple, family with children, etc) opens their home to a child with the intent of providing a safe, loving environment until they can be returned to their biological family.

Timeline: (typically) Anywhere between a couple of months to 1 year

Common challenges:

- Even though parents foster knowing the child will leave their care, strong bonds usually form which makes for a tough transition.
- Parents who only foster can sometimes feel less significant to their social workers or children they care for because they are not "adoptive homes"

FOSTER-TO-ADOPT

What Does it Mean?

Foster to adopt is when a family takes in a child from foster care whose parents have had their parental rights terminated (TPR) and are eligible for adoption. The family starts off as a foster family, but the intent is to legally adopt the child(ren).

Common challenges:

- There are cases where the original plan for a child is adoption, they are given to a family for foster-to-adopt, and then the plan changes. Sometimes the biological parents apply for and are granted reinstated parental rights, sometimes the foster-to-adopt family and child are simply not as good of a "fit" as originally assumed.
- Even once adopted, it takes time for the family and new child to adjust to the new family dynamic

TREATMENT FOSTER CARE

What Does it Mean?

"Treatment" Foster Care parents go through a higher level of training to care for children with "specialized" needs (such as having medical conditions like a severe allergy or a mental health diagnosis). These children all have a "treatment plan" and a therapeutic counselor who works with the foster parents to help the child(ren) reach their treatment goals

Common challenges:

- Taking in children from hard places is already challenging. Adding the responsibility of helping a child not only heal from their traumatic past, but also achieve goals in their treatment plan can easily become overwhelming.
- Foster parents already have to document much of what goes on in their foster children's lives. Administering and keeping track of special medication is that much more to have to keep organized and up-to-date.

RESPITE CARE

What Does it Mean?

Respite Care families are the "relatives" of the foster care world. They have similar training as foster parents, but offer short-term care of children. Typically this looks like weekend or week-long care, so that foster parents can go out of town over the weekend or go on a vacation without their children.

Common challenges:

- Respite care families might get a call at the last minute and not have much time to prepare before the child(ren) need to visit
- Sometimes respite care needs to happen because there was an incident in the other foster home

KINSHIP CARE

What Does it Mean?

Kinship Care is not technically foster care. It is something in-between. When children are removed from their home, government workers first try to find a reliable relative or close family friend who can take the child into custody instead of having to place the children in foster care.

Common challenges:

- Because Kinship care does not "qualify" as foster care, there is no financial, educational, or counseling support from the government like for foster care cases. So while these individuals have the advantage of already knowing the child, this puts Kinship families at a major disadvantage in every other area of care.

1. UNDERSTANDING THEIR ROLE

COMMON CHALLENGES FAMILIES IN THE FOSTER CARE WORLD EXPERIENCE

1

FEELING ISOLATED AND MISUNDERSTOOD

Fostering, becoming a kinship parent, and adoption simply aren't as culturally understood or sought after as forming a biological family. Because foster care is not well known to many, people who foster or adopt often feel disconnected, personified, or even negatively judged for their choice.

2

BEING "IN CRISIS"

As you'll learn, children and youth coming from foster care are all healing from a traumatic past, which changes their brain structure. While all parenting is challenging, parenting these children usually means dealing with intense behaviors and secondhand trauma that take a great deal of mental and emotional energy.

3

LACK OF SUPPORT FROM "THE SYSTEM"

Foster Care System professionals (social workers, lawyers, judges, counselors, etc) partner with foster parents to ensure the safety and well being of the children in their care. However, these workers are chronically understaffed, underpaid, and overworked. Because of this, many foster parents feel unsupported by the workers with whom they must rely on for the various needs of their children.

4

JUGGLING RESPONSIBILITIES UNIQUE TO FOSTER CARE

Unlike traditional parenting, foster parents have a great deal of documentation they have to keep up with about the children they are caring for. What's more, in addition to responsibilities like doctor's visits, there are also court appointments, therapy sessions, and often birth family visitations that have to be coordinated. This can all be incredibly overwhelming.

5

ASKING FOR HELP

Foster/adoptive parenting, by default, takes someone who is passionate about helping others. This wonderful character trait, however, has the dark side of not wanting to ask for help, feel like a burden, etc, even when a person is in serious need of help.

2. UNDERSTANDING THEIR KIDDOS

The children and youth placed in the care of your loved ones are going to have very different pasts, behaviors, and thought patterns than children from safe, stable backgrounds.

How are they different?

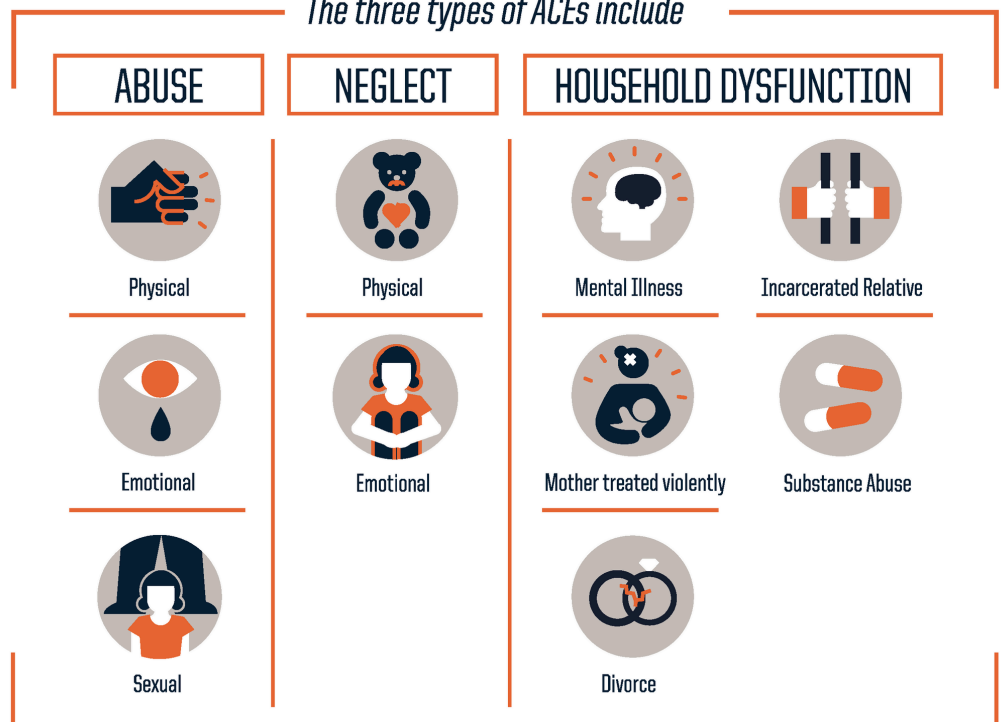
A child's ACE number plays a huge role in the way they behave, process information, and develop. Children in foster care typically have much higher scores than other children.

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Each Adverse Childhood Experience = a traumatic incident.

The higher the number of these experiences a child has had directly relates the amount of trauma they need healing from.

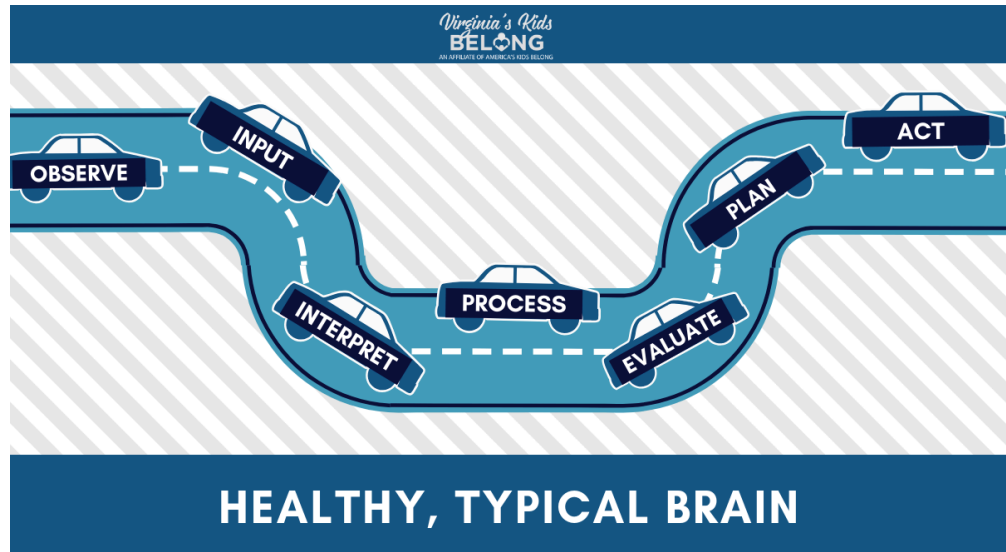
The three types of ACEs include



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

2. UNDERSTANDING THEIR KIDDOS

This image shows the brain under typical conditions. Generally, in a new situation, each of us observes, takes in information, makes meaning and chooses a fitting response. Example: We hear a loud noise, pause, eventually recognize it's only a car alarm going off outside, and then go about our business.



When danger strikes, the brain shifts. Faced with danger, our brains skip over some of the processing steps to allow us to make split-second judgments. This lets us react quickly and ensure a return to safety.



When someone is exposed to trauma (a literal and/or perceived threat to their safety/well-being) over and over again, their brains end up "stuck" in survival mode. Their brain cannot tell the difference between safe and dangerous situations. All children in foster care have been through serious trauma in their lives.



2. UNDERSTANDING THEIR KIDS

Below are examples of behaviors that showcase a trauma-impacted brain, and how these behaviors may be constant or set off suddenly by someone else:

Triggers

A "trigger" is a signal that there is danger nearby and causes the brain to jump into survival mode. Triggers are based on an individual's past experience with danger.

Common Triggers for Children in Foster Care

- Feeling powerless
- Too much or not enough physical contact
- Too much or too little sensory input
- Feeling shame
- Feeling rejected
- Feeling abandoned
- Fear of basic needs not being met
- Unforeseen change
- Getting too much or not enough attention
- Direct reminders of a past traumatic event

Survival Mode Behavior

People in "survival mode" behave in seemingly strange ways, but are doing so because past experience has continually sent the message that they are constantly at risk.

Examples of "Survival Mode" Behavior in Children in Foster Care

- **Hoarding**
 - For fear of going back to basic needs like hunger or safety not being met
- **Stealing**
 - A habit learned to ensure physical needs are met
- **Over-friendliness**
 - From the inability to tell who truly cares for them and who does not
- **Manipulating**
 - A habit learned to ensure emotional needs are met

3. UNDERSTANDING HOW YOU CAN MAKE AN IMPACT

"Not everyone is called to foster or adopt, but everyone is called to care"
- Janet Kelly

Fostering can be an incredibly rewarding journey OR an overwhelming, exhausting experience.

What makes all the difference is YOU.

Be the Difference in 3 Easy Steps

1

Get Wrapped!

Just like traditional families who just had a baby, foster, kinship and adoptive families need loved ones to "wrap around" them and help out with all kinds of basic needs.

Need inspiration?

Check out the [Wrap Around Support Model](#) and see where you could jump in!



2

To help in any way that involves the actual children (babysitting, carpooling, etc) you must pass a basic background check.

3

Get started!

It's never too soon to start! Even if your fostering loved one is hesitant (again, they're used to *helping*, not being helped), be bold in your intention to support them. They are worth it!



Thank you for your
commitment to your fostering,
kinship and adoptive loved
ones and your foster care
community!

For more resources visit us at
www.vakidsbelong.org



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