

Allegations of Abuse Prevention & Survival

Preventing allegations of maltreatment or neglect in foster care provider, kinship and adoptive homes?

By Jodee Kulp and Judy Howell

Foster care providers are vulnerable to charges from both the children they care for and the birth parents that have been denied custody.

Here are some steps to protect families from allegations and the resulting bureaucratic nightmare.

The first step to preventing allegations is to prevent maltreatment from happening.

Prior to placement of a foster, adoptive or kinship child in your home:

Get as much information about the child as possible before you accept a placement, write it down or get it in writing. Keep a separate notebook for each child. A bound notebook is good because pages cannot be torn out without upsetting the sequence of events. Don't use your computer because changes are too easy. Invest the time to hand write.

- Behavioural issues?
- Emotional issues?
- Physical issues?
- Medical attention needed (current doctors/previous specialists)
- How many prior foster homes and placements has the child had?
- Ask to speak to a previous foster family before the child comes into your home if possible.
- What respite (if any) is available? Is the child allowed phone calls with family?
- School issues?
- Parental visitation?

Understand normal child development. Avoid questionable situations with children.

Don't be afraid to say no to a placement that will put you at risk or if you are concerned that you are not capable of handling the child. Lay your pride down; you don't have the skills to care for every type of child.

Get all the information possible on details of caring for a child with specific special needs.

(For example Fetal Alcohol Exposed children have difficulty with cause and effect, regulatory issues, truth and stealing get as much information as you can www.betterendings.org)

Write the placing agency and ask for any history of physical or sexual abuse of the child to be documented in writing.

Ask if the child has ever made false abuse allegations and insist on a written response. If a child has a history of false abuse allegations, ask the child's worker to write a letter stating the allegations, circumstances, and how the allegations proved to be unfounded. Keep this letter in a safe place in case you ever have to show that the child has a pattern of disrupting placements through such allegations.

Foster parents and kinship caregivers keep (birth, custodial, guardian) parents and social workers informed of positive progress that their child is making and any interesting things they might like to know about their child's activities. View yourself as a part of a co-parenting team that is attempting to reunify a family, not as a competitor for their children's loyalty.

Seek outside resources and assistance immediately if behaviors or issues arise beyond abilities or desires to deal with. Avoid blaming others if possible, and actively seek a solution to resolve the problem to the benefit of all concerned.

DOCUMENT! Don't trust your memory. Keep a journal of situations, reactions, and behaviours.

Keep logs/notebooks on each child to document visitation, medical appointments, school progress/problems, medical needs, behavioural patterns, or changes and efforts to teach acceptable behaviour.

Document any changes in behaviour in children including severity and length of these changes, especially after visitation or any changes at school. Include any action taken to deal with inappropriate behaviour. Also document any unusual behaviour the child may have regarding social workers, police or medical personnel.

Always document any serious conflicts with parents, children, social workers, teachers, etc., and keep these records in a file. Request copies of these to be kept with the agency.

Identify conflicts that arise with parents, children, teachers, social workers, etc., because of value differences. Be respectful of individual rights to their own point of view. Negotiate and work toward a compromise.

Have a visitor sign in page in the notebook. Many times a biological parent will claim a foster parent won't let them visit their child. A dated list with signature will do two things - protect you from false allegations of non-compliance and provide support for reunification of family by proofing the child and parent have been working on the relationship.

Invest in a Polaroid camera. If you have a child that visits mum and dad on weekends take before and after pictures. Make sure the camera has data function if possible. This is also handy for positive relations for the child to have pictures of parents coming to get them and visiting if things are progressing positively.

If you accept a special high risk child for placement in your home:

Talk with the child about his or her history of being abused, and of making false allegations.

Tell the child that you plan to protect him or her and yourself.

Enlist the help of a competent professional experienced with abuse survivors and foster or adoptive family therapy. You *and* the child will need ongoing therapeutic support from a person who knows you well.

Pay careful attention to supervision and safety issues, especially for younger children. Make sure family members understand safety issues - not leaving curling irons unplugged, seat belts fastened, medicine cabinets locked, and routinely do checks to assure the well-being of ALL members of the household.

Closely supervise children at all times.

It is unwise to allow children to play unattended at any time.

Do not have too many places where children can hide.

Leave bedroom doors open and periodically check on children during nap times.

Develop family policies and follow them concerning, discipline, children's developing sexuality, toileting, sleeping routines, and how babysitters will be hired. File a copy of these with the agency if it is felt necessary.

Conduct daily safety checks and make sure all hazardous materials are put away. Safety guidelines cannot be compromised.

Never use, or threaten to use, corporal punishment as a means of discipline. This form of discipline cannot be delegated to non-parent guardians, and is prohibited by agency regulations.

Do not use discipline prohibited by your agency. A foster parent is a model of appropriate behaviour and a teacher of problem solving and communication skills to the children they care for. If methods of discipline vary between birth children and foster children, discuss the variances with the social worker. With older adoptive children, we also recommend using foster care principles in discipline techniques.

Carefully screen all helpers/substitutes including relatives and friends; make sure they understand fostering regulations, house rules, and any specific restrictions about individual children because of court orders, etc.

Safety with sexually active, reactive and provocative children

Do not be alone with a child who is sexually reactive, acts out sexually, or has provocative behaviour. Advise adults and older children in the household to have another adult nearby or in the same room for the protection of the parent and the child.

Sexually abused can be more likely to become victims again. Even if a child has a history of making false allegations, *always take new allegations seriously*. The child may become a victim of sexual abuse again. It is the duty of the foster or adoptive parent, working with professionals, to protect the child and give her or him functional boundaries and self-protective strategies.

Discipline issues

Never use physical punishment.

Get help as soon as you can and only restrain a child until he or she regains some control.

Do not restrain a child if you haven't been trained in proper restraint techniques. At least one adopted child has been killed while his much larger and stronger adoptive parent restrained him.

Steps a foster family can take to prevent maltreatment:

Understand and follow all foster care regulations. When a provider is accused of neglect or abuse and has not been in compliance with regulations, then the likelihood of a negative outcome is increased.

Know and follow all department and agency regulations as they apply to foster care providers. A foster care provider needs to have and understand current regulation.

Maintain a positive relationship with the child's caseworker. Make sure any predetermined variance from regulation is approved IN WRITING beforehand. Call the social worker when positive things happen with the child. Don't make all your calls to the agency sound like problems or complaints. Let them enjoy the good days you have along with you, they also need a smile in their days.

Be a team member. Work for the best interest of the child in your care. Build a support system. Foster parenting cannot be done in isolation.

Get involved with the child's professional support team -- therapist, counselor, teachers, and medical professionals.

Get all the education and training you can. Share the information with the support team.

Always report suspected child abuse to local child protection authorities or the social worker assigned to the case, especially after parental visits.

Join and become an active member in your local association. Read the information they send you.

Call your local association or the NZFFCF, if you have a question you do not dare ask your social worker. Even if you are not a member of the organization it is more important to get help

than to worry about non-membership. Once you have made contact with the association, you can decide to join and become active. The association is available to help you!

KEEP YOURSELF HEALTHY

No one can be a perfect parent every day and under every circumstance. There is no way to completely avoid allegations. Understanding your own personal needs and the needs of family members is crucial in being able to develop a supportive and strong foster family.

Be the best parent you can be.

Avoid being stretched. Know and respect limits. Don't overload your home. Establish appropriate boundaries. If the child is not a good family fit, ask for help before any negative situation can develop.

Take breaks from the children and the situation. Make sure to get away alone with your support team or significant other.

Say no to an inappropriate placement. Children need as much continuity of care as possible and saying yes to a potentially unhealthy placement could damage your family and harm the child.

Don't use kids to meet your own needs for affection. Foster kids usually can't give affection for a long time or possibly forever.

Because of the complex, isolated, and personal nature of foster care, it is important that providers develop strong communication and documentation skills to protect themselves, their families, and the children for whom they are caring. There is no guarantee your family will NOT face allegations. No one is protected from this reality in the high-risk profession of caring for other people's children. Take the time to minimize your risk. Be the best you can be. Think of your own family first. Protect and keep your core family (spouse, bio and adopted children) healthy. Then you can bless other families and children by extending your hearts and hands in healing hurt and brokenness.

Jodee Kulp is the author of 'Families at Risk'. This section has been excerpted and developed from Chapter 3, pages 72-74 of [Families at Risk](#) by Jodee Kulp. Books are available through the www.betterendings.org website