

# Family Matters

Stepping *up*  
to help your family  
or friends in need



Allegheny County Department of Human Services

*Office of Children, Youth and Families* | 412-350-5701



*Thank you* for taking the time to review this booklet produced by the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF). For more information or to offer your help, please call:

**CYF Caseworker**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

**Caseworker's Supervisor**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

**Caseworker's Regional Office Director**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

What if *you* felt alone and had:

No one to call  
No one to listen  
No one to trust  
No one to care  
No one to help  
No permanent place to call home

What would you *wish* for?  
Who would you *turn* to?



Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

– Theodore Roosevelt, 26<sup>th</sup> U.S. President

You might be *thinking...*

### **What is Children, Youth and Families (CYF)?**

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It is an office within a department of Allegheny County government that provides services to address child abuse and neglect. CYF's focus is to keep children safe and families together. If we have to place a child in foster care, we do all we can to reunify the family. At the same time, by law, we plan (called Concurrent Planning) for a permanent home for the child in the event that reunification cannot happen.

At all times, CYF is required to put a child's safety, well-being and permanence first, before anything else, including parental rights. These concepts are expressed by the term 'child's best interest'.

### **Why are you asking for my help?**

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Very simply, because relatives and friends can help in important ways that government cannot. We believe that your support can increase the likelihood of the family successfully addressing their needs.

### **What do you want me to do?**

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'Be there' for this family.

Provide any help to the family that you can offer, including emotional support – especially to the children. Connect with the family and stay connected with them. You might even consider becoming a foster parent. For specific ideas, please see the section on Family Engagement.

## **I want to help, but I can't do too much.**

You decide what your level of involvement will be, for how often and how long. You can choose to help just the children, or the parents, or both; the assistance can be either ongoing or occasional.

## **But I don't know how to do this.**

You do, more than you think. If you were raised in a family or have one of your own, you have experience that can help.

Plus, you won't be alone—CYF will coordinate all of the services, formal (professional) supports and activities. And, if you become a "Team member" (see the section on Conferencing and Teaming), you'll also be working with other relatives and friends of the family.

## **I tried to help before and it didn't work.**

We believe the problems facing this family require the help of CYF, service and treatment professionals, and family and friends, **working together**. Our combined knowledge, backgrounds and strengths can help the family work through their crisis.

## **What should I do now?**

- Read this booklet and think about what you can do to support this family.
- Call one of the CYF professionals listed on the front inside cover of this booklet with any questions that you have, and let us know if you're able to help.

## Family support— help for *all* families

Family Support starts when families first become involved with CYF and continues until the case is closed. It includes the practices of Family Finding and Family Engagement, within Conferencing and Teaming. These practices, described below, have proven effective for families active with child welfare agencies.

Together, we think these practices are the best ways to:

- Keep children safe and strengthen families
- Support children's emotional health and well-being
- Keep families together, when possible
- Reunify children with parents and siblings sooner, if placement has occurred
- Identify permanent homes for children who cannot return home

### 1. Family Finding

Family Finding is the first step in CYF's Family Support efforts and is required by federal law. We identify, locate, and contact relatives and friends and ask them to help support the family. We begin looking for family and friends as soon as CYF receives a referral, so if we do open the case, there are caring people ready to help.

### 2. Family Engagement

Family Engagement is the active involvement of relatives and friends to support children and parents once a case is opened.

*Here are some examples of support we hope you can provide to the parents or children:*

### **Emotional Support**

- Touch base
- Encourage ‘talking it out’
- Invite to ‘get together’
- Attend events & activities
- Send cards
- Share stories & photos
- Verbally encourage
- Share what you know

### **Practical Support**

- Lend a hand
- Babysit
- Share your ‘know how’
- Problem-solve situations
- Help with schoolwork
- Help with transportation
- Share what you do well

## **3. Conferencing and Teaming**

Conferencing and Teaming is the case management method CYF uses with families. Parents identify the relatives and friends they would like to be on their Team. By the 30th day of the case opening, CYF holds a Conference, to review the family’s case, agree upon the actions that Team members will take, and develop a Family Plan.

“Teaming” meetings are then held about every 3 months to review the family’s progress and update the Family Plan.

If you are a Team member, it is very important that you be able to keep your commitment to participate.

## When children *need* placement



What a child doesn't receive,  
he can seldom later give.  
– P.D. James, *autobiography*

If the Court orders placement, CYF has to find the most family-like setting that can also meet the child's individual needs. Far too often, this means 'stranger care,' which is placement in a foster or group home with people who are unknown and unrelated to the child.

But it's because you're not a stranger that we've contacted you. CYF is required by law to contact relatives and friends because they are the most natural resources there are to help and support the parents and children.

**You have a connection to this family that none of the professionals have.** This connection is real and important, even if you 'haven't talked in ages.'

**Your support can mean so much to the family,** especially if the child is in placement.

**We ask you to think about becoming a foster parent, even if the child is already placed but especially if the child is in group care.**

**Because of your connection to the family, your home may:**

- Best meet the child's needs
- Better maintain the child's connections to family
- Offer the permanency the child might need

As a relative you have the option under various laws to ask CYF to consider you as a family foster care resource for the child in care. Receiving this booklet means that CYF already had to place the child, but you can still ask us to consider recommending you to an Allegheny County Children's Court judge for permission to place the child with you.

For CYF to be able to do this you would have to be willing to become an approved foster parent. Approval is required because it helps in assuring the child's safety and allows federal and state participation in placement costs.

## What you should know about foster parenting

First, foster parents do not have to:

- Own a house or car
- Have a certain income level
- Be married
- Live in Allegheny County

**but**

They do need to meet state requirements, which:

- Help assure the child's safety
- Allows federal & state participation in placement costs

### *State requirements include:*

1. A general medical exam
2. Criminal and child welfare checks (includes other household members)
3. Background interviews
4. Needed consents (e.g., your own child's school reports)
5. Basic home safety inspection
6. References
7. A stable source of income (includes SSI and SSDI)

8. Identification of alternate caregiver
9. Annual training
10. Maintaining full approval throughout the year

*You should also know that:*

- Having a criminal or child welfare record does not necessarily prevent approval
- Approval can take as little as 2-3 months
- CYF can help with some requirements; others can be waived under limited circumstances
- You can appeal not being approved as a foster home

We understand that foster parenting can be a significant life change and may not be the right decision for you. Regardless, we hope that you can show support for the child in other ways.

### **Foster care is no place to grow up**

Foster care is supposed to be temporary. Parents are given a reasonable amount of time (as outlined in the Adoption and Safe Families Act) to address the circumstances that caused the need for placement. During this time, CYF works with the family toward reunification. Sometimes though, this cannot occur and CYF must identify a permanent home for the child and pursue adoption or legal guardianship.

To help assure that foster care is temporary, federal law established five permanency goals for children. They are listed in the order of permanence they provide. (These goals recognize the urgency for a child to have a safe, real and forever home).

CYF must identify two of these goals as permanency options for each child and plan for both at the same time. One is the ‘primary’ (the most preferred) goal; the other is the ‘concurrent’ (the next most-preferred) goal.

Primary and Concurrent  
**Planning Goals**  
(in order of preference  
and permanence)



There is no such thing as  
a perfect parent. So just  
be a real one.

– *Sue Atkins*  
*Parent Coach and Author*

### **Return to Parents**

#### **Adoption**

Parents' rights are  
terminated; foster parents  
become legal parents

#### **Permanent Legal Custody (PLC)**

Parents' rights not  
terminated but foster  
parents have custody

#### **Placement with a Fit and Willing Relative**

Relative is the foster  
parent but child remains  
in foster care

#### **Another Permanent Living Arrangement**

Child in non-relative  
foster home or group care

## Support for Foster, Adoptive, and Custodial Placements

Support	Type of Placement		
	Foster Care	Legal Custody	Adoption
Subsidy <sup>1</sup> & Medical Assistance <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓	✓
Extended subsidy & MA <sup>3</sup>	Conditional	Conditional	Conditional
Finalization reimbursement <sup>4</sup>	NA	✓	✓
Adoption Tax Credit <sup>5</sup>	NA	✓	✓

<sup>1</sup> Subsidy is a monthly payment that covers some costs in providing care; it includes a clothing stipend. The amount is based on the child's age and level of care provided (e.g., regular or medical foster care; most children are in regular foster care). Submitting receipts to CYF is not required. Generally, subsidy is not counted as income, so you do not have to report it to the IRS and is often excluded when determining benefit eligibility.

Foster care subsidy is paid for the time the child resides in the foster home. PLC and Adoption subsidy continues until the child turns 18.

<sup>2</sup> Medical Assistance (also called MA or Medicaid) is government-funded health insurance. Nearly all children in foster care are covered by MA; if not, coverage is usually through a parent's insurer.

<sup>3</sup> Extended subsidy and MA may be available for youth ages 18-21 to help their transition to adulthood. The youth must still be in foster care at age 18 (or the adoption or custodianship must have been finalized at age 13 or older) and meet an eligibility condition during the extension period.

<sup>4</sup> Finalization is the completion of the adoption or custodial process; allowable costs you might pay are reimbursed.

<sup>5</sup> An amount deducted from your federal tax liability provided to encourage adoption.

Type of Placement

Support	Foster Care	Legal Custody	Adoption
Government benefits for eligible child <sup>6</sup>	No	✓	✓
Help with home approval <sup>7</sup>	✓	✓	✓
Daycare to age 13 <sup>8</sup>	If eligible	If eligible	No
Help with summer camp, holiday gifts, & school prom	✓	No	No
Respite care <sup>9</sup>	✓	No	No
Family Support Center help <sup>10</sup>	✓	✓	✓
Post-permanency help <sup>11</sup>	✓	NA	✓

<sup>6</sup> Generally, these are earned benefits (e.g., a parent's Social Security) a child might be eligible for.

<sup>7</sup> CYF can help you meet the approval requirements for foster, adoptive, or custodial care.

<sup>8</sup> Must meet eligibility requirements; many caregivers do.

<sup>9</sup> Respite care is the child's short-term stay in another home, arranged by CYE, usually for a week or less.

<sup>10</sup> Core and optional services for families, located in over 20 neighborhoods throughout Allegheny County.

<sup>11</sup> Post-permanency is after custodianship or adoption; advocacy, support, & respite help is from SWAN (State-Wide Adoption Network).

## Placement responsibilities and rights

Foster, custodial, or adoptive applicants and parents have certain responsibilities and rights. *These include:*

Responsibility	Type of Placement		
	Foster Care	Legal Custody	Adoption
Be the primary caregiver	✓	✓	✓
Provide a safe home & meet child's needs	✓	✓	✓
Do no less for the child as you do for your own	✓	✓	✓
Support child's emotional connection to parents & family	✓	✓	Usually preferred but not required
Support visits & contact with parents & family; comply with visitation orders	✓	✓	No, all contact is optional
Regular contact with child's caseworker & provider	✓	NA	NA
Regular contact with foster care worker <sup>12</sup>	✓	Limited	Limited

<sup>12</sup> If the child is in custodianship or is adopted, annual contact will occur up to the child's 18th birthday. If the youth is under extended subsidy, contact will be several times a year.

————— Type of Placement —————

<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Foster Care</b>	<b>Legal Custody</b>	<b>Adoption</b>
Adhere to CYF policies	✓	Preferred	Preferred
Work cooperatively with CYF & providers	✓	✓	NA
Provide required updates & information to CYF	✓	✓	✓
Maintain confidentiality	✓	Preferred	Preferred
Maintain full approval	✓	✓	NA

————— Type of Placement —————

<b>Rights</b>	<b>Foster Care</b>	<b>Legal Custody</b>	<b>Adoption</b>
Removal notice from child's home	✓	NA	NA
Child's personal history	✓	✓	✓
Input in address release to parents	✓	NA	NA
Support services for child	✓	✓	✓
Meeting & hearing notices	✓	NA	NA

Type of Placement

Rights	Foster Care	Legal Custody	Adoption
Input in developing child's plan	✓	NA	NA
Opportunity to be heard by the Court & CYF	✓	NA	NA
Legal custody <sup>13</sup>	No	✓	✓
Help with coping if child leaves	✓	✓	✓
Information on caregiving policies & procedures	✓	✓	✓
Information to access services & contact CYF	✓	✓	✓
Open, complete, & timely CYF responses	✓	✓	✓
Confidentiality, if abuse is alleged	✓	✓	✓
Appeal of approval denial; annual review status; change in subsidy	✓	✓	✓
Appeal of child's relocation to another foster placement	✓ Per regulation	NA	NA

<sup>13</sup> Legal custody is the right to make major decisions for the child, in areas such as health and education.

## The *next* steps

### **First:**

Accept our gratitude. We sincerely appreciate your time and your consideration to help this family.

### **Next:**

Think about how you can help this family and if needed, talk things over with your own family.

Your support does not have to be limited to what is described in this booklet—if you have other suggestions, please let us know.

Also, your support can be informal (not coordinated through CYF). It can be as simple as staying in touch with the family or asking what they need.

Whatever you're able to do, please know your support is invaluable.

### **Then:**

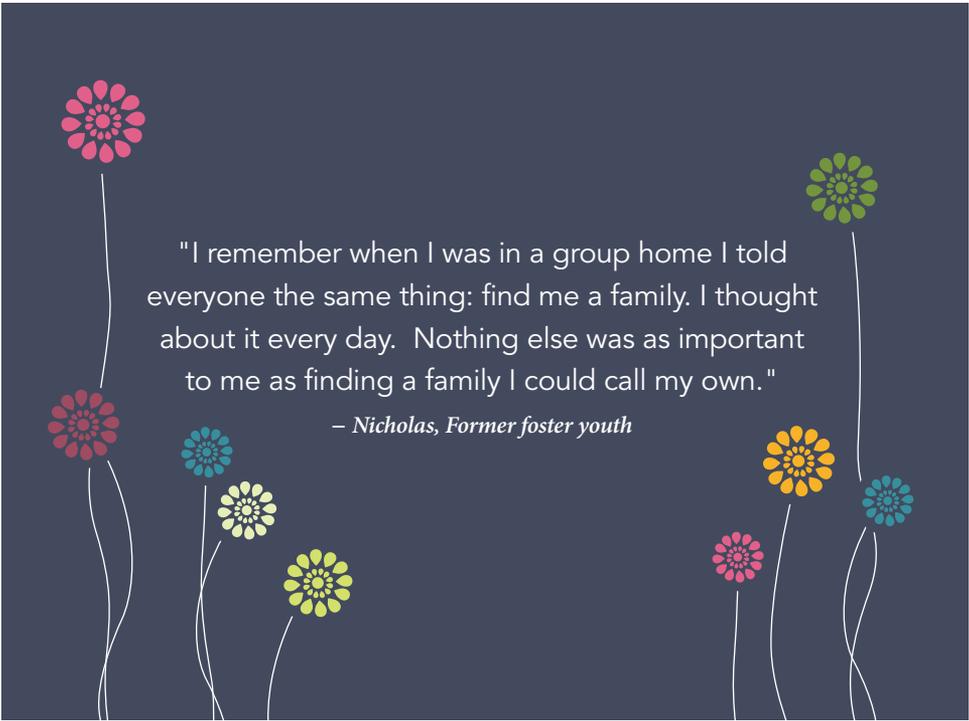
Call CYF with your questions, concerns, or a commitment to help.



It is hard to believe that the people we love are the ones who can hurt us the most—but forgiving is half the healing.

– *Adriana, age 16, Foster youth*





"I remember when I was in a group home I told everyone the same thing: find me a family. I thought about it every day. Nothing else was as important to me as finding a family I could call my own."

– Nicholas, Former foster youth

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Allegheny County Department of Human Services

*Office of Children, Youth and Families*

One Smithfield Street

Pittsburgh, PA 15222

**p:** 412-350-5701 TDD: 412-473-2017

**f:** 412-350-4004

**w:** [www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/cyf.aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/cyf.aspx)

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services is responsible for providing and administering publicly funded human services to Allegheny County residents.

Call the Director's Action Line for concerns or complaints: 1-800-862-6783

To report child abuse or neglect: 1-800-932-0313 or 412-473-2000

For information, call 412-350-5701 or visit our website at

[www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/index.aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/index.aspx)



Rich Fitzgerald, Allegheny County Executive

Marc Cherna, Director, Department of Human Services