

A GUIDE FOR COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY STAFF WORKING WITH STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE



INTRODUCTION: This document was created by students at the Alliance for Children’s Rights. It is not a complete guide to the needs and rights of students in foster care. (For more complete information, visit kids-alliance.org.) This document covers frequently-asked questions that our students believe will help you understand the foster care experience and protect their privacy.

We welcome feedback and suggestions about how we can continue to improve this document! Comms@Kids-Alliance.org.

What is Extended Foster Care?

If you are in a college or university setting in California, you may encounter students in “extended foster care.” Foster care is a legal system that steps in to provide for a young person when a court finds that their birth parents are unable to care for them. In California alone, there are about 65,000 young people in foster care. About 2,000 “age out” of foster care each year, reaching adulthood without being reunited with their birth family or being adopted.

Once they reach age 18, they have the option, under California law to remain in what is called “extended foster care” until age 21, to help them become independent and pursue college, employment, and more. So a student in “extended foster care” is being supported by the foster care system in meeting some of their needs in the same way that other students are supported by their parents as they grow into adulthood.

Only 10 percent of young people in foster care attend college, and only 3 percent actually graduate. This happens because simply being in foster care causes kids to have to change homes and schools repeatedly. This disrupts their education, causing them to fall behind. **YOU can help change these statistics by learning about the unique needs of students who have been in foster care and helping them overcome obstacles and achieve their goals in college!**

What Might Be Different For A Student in Extended Foster Care?

Students in foster care or extended foster care may wish to keep that information private. It can be painful and difficult to have to explain to teachers and administrators what happened in the past that resulted in their entry into foster care. You can use this document to better understand some of the circumstances that might affect them, so that you can support them without intruding on their privacy.

- A student in extended foster care may not have parents in his or her life (no support system and/or no immediate or extended family members). This is through absolutely no fault of theirs. They may not wish to share the circumstances with you, so allow them to decide what and how they want to share.
- Not every student in extended foster care will have a *foster or adoptive parent* in their life. There is a great shortage of foster and adoptive parents for kids in foster care, especially if they enter foster care when they are older. That is why so many “age out” without a permanent connection to a caring adult.
- Some young people in foster care are overcoming trauma. Trauma has long-lasting effects that can manifest in many ways: a person recovering from trauma may seem distracted, withdrawn, or tired. This is temporary, as they process what has happened in their life. All students go through periods of adjustment as they acclimate to college. But because students coming from foster care have lived through a lot of upheaval and change earlier in their life, they may require more time and patience to adjust. You can help by supporting them and being patient with them.
- Young people in foster care have always encountered and overcome significant challenges in their lives. As a result, they are very often exceptionally resilient, compassionate, and reflective. Take the time to get to know them, and you will uncover their strength and wisdom.
- A young person in foster care has a choice about whether to remain in extended foster care from age 18 to 21. Even if they choose not to be in extended foster care, they can

change their mind at any time up to age 21 and get benefits that can help with basic needs. You can help by offering to refer a student to the Alliance for Children's Rights if they were in foster care prior to age 18 and are now struggling to make it on their own.

How Can You Help?

You can help students who have been in foster care by understanding that this student may not have a parent in his or her life. You can help avoid putting them in an awkward situation by making accommodations to allow them to fully participate in school activities without requiring parental involvement. You can also help overcome some of the stereotypes and biases that surround foster care by getting to know these students and becoming familiar with the resources available to them.

Students in extended foster care do not "have problems." They have simply grown up with an extra level of challenge due to the fact that their biological parents were unable to care for them. These students are often very resilient, tenacious, resourceful, and responsible because they have already had a lot of experience overcoming obstacles and establishing their independence. When in doubt, it is better to ask the student what he or she needs, rather than assume that you know, or press for personal details.

What are some areas where they will need assistance?

Financial Assistance: They will most likely need help finding options to pay for tuition, room and board. Foster youth have sources of funding available to them including the Chafee grant, the Pell grant (*FASFA*), and Board of Governors (BOG) which is a fee waiver for tuition expenses at community/city colleges ***ONLY***. You can find more information about financial resources for students in foster care at <http://knowb4ugo.org/paying-for-college>.

Academic Resources: The average child in foster care in California changes schools 8 times during their elementary and high school years, falling behind in their learning by an average of six months each time. The student may have experienced trauma, abuse or neglect during their childhood. This can affect their academic achievement. Due to these factors, they may lack confidence in their abilities, and they may not have had the chance to fully achieve their potential. You can help them identify tutoring and other services to support them in developing academic habits of success. You can also show them that you believe in their potential help and offer to help develop that potential.

Housing Assistance: The student may have spent some time being homeless, living in shelters, staying in group homes, or otherwise struggling. For this reason, they may or may not know how to live on their own. They may struggle to adjust to college at first. You can help by providing them with friendly advice about independent living skills, like budgeting, getting along with roommates, and finding time for rest and relaxation. The website KnowB4UGo.org is a great resource.

Please keep in mind that college or university students in extended foster care may not have a place to go during school holidays. While other students may return home to stay with their parents, a student in extended foster care may not have a parent or family member who can host them during school vacations. Especially if they live in a dorm and the dorm closes during breaks, this can create a problem. You can help by anticipating this possibility and asking if they

are covered for school breaks. If not, you can help them find short-term housing options during school breaks.

What is the government's role in the life of a student in extended foster care?

Foster care is a complex mix of county, state and federal law and policy. A student who is over age 18 may be independent now and may not receive any government assistance. A student in extended foster care (in California), may receive various forms of support from age 18 to 21, which is usually arranged and provided through the county social worker who oversees their case.

It can be very frustrating for a student in foster care to access these benefits. Social workers tend to have very heavy caseloads, and the court that oversees extended foster care is also very busy. You can help by not making assumptions, and encouraging others to avoid making assumptions. While in theory, extended foster care provides support for young adults who are trying to become independent, in the day-to-day, the student is likely to encounter confusion, frustration, and delay in trying to access these benefits and this may cause them to experience stress in piecing together what they need to survive. You can help them persist and identify backup options to help them meet their needs, such as on-campus employment.

How can you help protect the privacy of a student in foster care?

Students in foster care often report that they feel very exposed and even embarrassed because, in order to access support, financial aid, and more, they must continually reveal their foster care status. You can help by minimizing the number of people/places where the student has to share their status, and by making sure that those who do gain access to this information have read this FAQ document and understand what foster care means.

Keep in mind that students in foster care have been removed from their birth parent through no fault of their own. Often the system has moved them multiple times in and out of different homes, and each time, they have had to share their personal information with new people. Make sure that if you have to talk to them about their foster care status, you do so in a way that protects their privacy and keeps any information they share with you confidential. This will allow for them to feel more comfortable, and respected by those in authority. Also, it is normal to have students working in offices around campus that hold important and private information about any student. Try to minimize the need for a student in foster care to reveal their status to a fellow student working in your office.

What else do I need to know?

Often, young people in foster care say that they feel like people think that they are in foster care through some fault of their own. People who do not understand how foster care works may think that young people in foster care "have problems" or that they did not find a permanent connection to a foster or adoptive family because they were difficult. In fact, children enter foster care because their birth parents are unable to care for them, and for that reason alone. They had no control over their situation while they were in the system. They might have been moved many times because the system required it. Now, they are trying to overcome the challenge of growing up without their parents in their life by attending college. You can help by celebrating their commitment and resilience!

You can also help by believing the best of the student and forming your opinion of them based only on your own first-hand experience with them. Don't assume that you understand the student's past or that it determines who they are today and what they are capable of. Chances are they are eager to move beyond the past, and prove themselves with your help.

Reflect their strengths and abilities back to them so you can help them see themselves in a positive light. You are likely to find that life has taught them some exceptional skills, including resilience and how to cope with change and you can help them carry those qualities forward as they gain a college education and beyond.

