

Foster Care Process Step-by-Step: From the Interest to the Fostering in Portugal

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1. Where can families manifest their interest in becoming foster families?

Where can they go to do this?

Portuguese families who want to apply as foster families, should contact the Social Security Institute (or SCML in Lisbon district) through email or go to the services in their residential area to manifest their interest. Then, the technical team will contact the person or family to schedule the first session with them.

2. How does the process of becoming a foster family works? Which steps do foster families/caregivers need to take to become a foster family?

There are four main steps in the Foster Care Process to become a Portuguese Foster Family.

The first step is an **informative session**, which is scheduled before the formalization of the application, and within 30 days of the manifestation of interest in becoming a foster family.

This can be an individual or group session, and the aim is to provide information regarding procedures for the application, selection, training, and assessment of the family.

Candidates with previous foster care experience can be dismissed from this session.

Some of the subjects addressed in this session are:

- Requirements and conditions for the application to become a foster family;
- Stages of the foster care process;
- Rights and responsibilities of the fostered children/youth;
- The biological family or family of origin, and the foster family;
- The training process;
- Nature of the supports and incentives;
- Common profiles and characteristics of the fostered children;
- Foster family requirements and the importance of safeguarding children's wellbeing and protection;
- The main challenges of the foster care process;
- The importance of the biological family or family of origin in the fostering process.

The second step is the foster family candidates' assessment itself, which comprises an informative interview, a psychosocial assessment, and a home visit. After all these procedures, there is the acceptance or rejection of the candidates.

The third step is the initial training of the family, which is followed by continuous training, throughout the foster care.

3. How is the evaluation of the foster family done? What is considered during the evaluation? What information is asked for during this evaluation?

The foster family candidates assessment includes an informative interview, a psychological assessment, and a home visit. Next, we will address these three procedures in detail.

- **Informative Interview:**

These interviews aim at two goals.

First, it intends to inform about the:

- Preconditions and objectives of foster care;
- Requirements and documents needed to formalize the application;
- Characteristics and profiles of the fostered children and youth;
- Possibility of wavering during the selection process;
- Procedures to follow in the case of becoming a selected foster family;
- Monthly retribution for the services and child's maintenance allowance;
- Rights and responsibilities of the foster family and the biological family or family of origin;
- Training and development activities;
- Information regarding the technical monitoring during foster care.

The second goal is to evaluate:

- Expectations and motivations of the foster family;
- The degree of knowledge about foster care;
- The availability for the foster care process demands regarding selection, activities, duration...
- General information regarding the family environment, family background, social support, and social and economic conditions.

There is also an individual questionnaire to fill out with personal questions related to their own family of origin, life path, health status, housing, and economic conditions, as well as a summary of personal history, and information regarding their interest in foster

care (e.g., how the interest emerged, what motivated them, did they foster someone before, how did their own family react...).

- Psychosocial Assessment:

The psychosocial assessment is conducted 10 days after the application acceptance. In this stage, evaluation scales, questionnaires, and inventories can be administered to better assess the family conditions to foster children. The goal of this assessment is to evaluate:

- Family dynamic and structure;
- Health status of the family members;
- Economic status;
- Family and social support network;
- The degree of motivation of the family and the individual members;
- Detect potential inconsistencies in terms of acceptance of this decision (e.g., between the couple, or parents and children);
- Parental competencies and parental styles;
- The availability to connect with the biological family or family of origin and for the temporary nature of the care.

- Home Visit:

The home visit is conducted 10 days after the psychosocial assessment, and its goal is to evaluate housing conditions, such as:

- Accessibility;
- Type of house;
- Basic sanitation, water, electricity, and gas conditions;
- Number and type of rooms in the house;
- Conservation state of the house;
- Hygiene;
- Living space management and organization, in terms of family members (e.g., attention to the access to specific spaces);
- Conditions of the surrounding environment of the house (e.g., security, accessibility, problems in the surroundings...);
- Degree of family integration in the community;
- Conditions to house the child/teen (e.g., number of rooms, shared or separated, luminosity, heating...).

4. How is the training of the foster families done?

The training of the foster families is conducted before their selection as a foster family.

Families with experience in foster care on the two years previous to the application are dismissed, or when the institution that manages the foster care perceives the foster family as already competent.

This training aims to:

- Organize and systematize the knowledge of the foster families about foster care;
- Manage the expectations of foster families;
- Clarify the differences between fostering a child/adolescent or a family member;
- Prepare the foster family for providing the services of foster care;
- Enhance the motivation of the foster family;
- Promote foster family's self-confidence;
- Reinforce the relationship between the foster family and the management institution;
- Create a supportive dynamic with the foster family.

After this initial training, continuous training takes place, and families attend training sessions at least once a year. It aims to tackle specific training necessities of each foster family, that can be identified by the institution or the foster family itself. These sessions may be held as individualized training, group training, informative sessions, workshops, and discussion groups with other foster families.

4.1. Which subjects and questions are considered?

The initial training sessions address specific issues related to the fostering process, such as:

- Information about the Promotion and Protection of Children's Rights System;
- Legal and Social Framework of foster care (including ethical guidelines and principles);
- Previous situations and concerns associated with children in the promotion and protection system (e.g., neglect, physical/psychological abuse, sexual abuse, dysfunctional families...);
- Role of foster care and the importance of foster families;

- Impact of the integration of the child in the foster family life dynamic;
- Main characteristics and needs of children and youth fostered;
- The importance of attachment for the fostered child;
- Child development;
- Psychosocial development of the child and the role of the foster family in its stimulation;
- Emotion regulation and conflict management;
- Importance and promotion of the involvement of the biological family or family of origin in the process of foster care;
- Basic principles of childhood and youth health (safety, health, and nutrition);
- Domestic accidents prevention and first aid;
- Role of the foster care institutions and the technical teams that accompany foster families and fostered children.
- Articulation and communication between institutions that work with foster care (e.g., courts, ...).

On the other hand, the continuous training focuses on specific needs of the fostered children, such as children with special needs, or challenges that the family faces regarding the child-rearing tasks. Some examples of addressed issues are:

- Child psychomotor development;
- Parenting styles;
- The school's role in personal and social development;
- Intimacy experience in adolescence;
- The relevance of the peer group in adolescence;
- Strategies for preparing and supporting the transition of the youth to an active and autonomous life;
- Strategies for functional and adaptative support and reorganization of the biological family or family of origin.

4.2. Which institutions promote and manage the training?

The training is provided by the foster care management institutions (Social Security Institute, *Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa* – SCML, and other Private Social Solidarity Institutions – IPSS).

4.3. Is it given (for free) to the family or do families need to pay for the training?

Since the training is provided by the foster care management institutions it is free of charge for the families that apply.

5. When do families start to foster a child? What process do they go through (after the evaluation and training)?

After the assessment and initial training, if the family is considered adequate, will be integrated into the Foster Family Database and become available to foster children and/or youth.

6. How are the families and children selected for the specific child/family?

When there is a child in need of alternative care, the families in the Foster Family Database are analyzed. If there is a family whose profile is adequate to the child's needs, they will be selected and contacted to ask about their availability to foster the child. Then, the child and the biological family or family of origin are asked if they agree with the decision (in cases of older children). If the child and the family agree, the integration of the child in the foster family will begin.

References

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Note: These documents are available only in Portuguese.

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