

Key Competencies of Foster Families/Caregivers

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1. What is the role and expectations for the foster families/caregivers?

“A lot is expected from the foster families, perhaps more than from the birth parents in general population” (Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001).

These expectations are, possibly, because the children cared for, often have specific needs and circumstances that require a great level of competencies and skills to care for.

Therefore, foster parents need to be skilled, competent, and well trained in a variety of domains.

2. How are the competencies of foster families and the success of foster care defined?

Competencies, in the context of Foster Care, are defined as:

- The combination of knowledge, interest, and skills needed to perform, accurately and successfully, the tasks implied and the role of the foster families in the foster care (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1993).

Success in Foster Care is defined by:

- Children whose needs are being met and their development is promoted and encouraged within a safe, nurturing, and secure family environment;
- Actualization of the permanency plans and avoidance of unneeded/unplanned changes of the childcare;
- Foster families capable of managing the challenges of fostering, by providing care, without compromising the well-being of the foster family members and the quality of the interpersonal relationships (Buehler et al., 2006).

3. What are the foster families' key competencies and in which domains are they organized?

There are 12 key competencies that a foster family must possess for foster care to be successful (Buehler et al., 2006). These can be organized into three main domains:

3.1. Managing and promoting the child's needs and well-being:

- Promote a safe and secure care environment;
- Promote a nurturing care environment;
- Meet physical and mental health care needs;
- Promote educational attainment and success;
- Promote social and emotional development;

- Value diversity and support the child's cultural needs.

3.2. Managing the relationships of the child with others:

- Supporting permanency plans;
- Supporting the relationship between the child and the biological family or family of origin;
- Work as a team member.

3.3. Managing personal competencies and feelings:

- Manage ambiguity and loss;
- Growing as a foster parent;
- Manage demands of fostering on personal and family well-being.

Note: The next sets of competencies aren't specific to kinship caregivers. Although some competencies might be similar, the experience of caring for a relative is different from caring for an unfamiliar child.

3.1. What are the competencies involved in managing and promoting the child's needs and well-being?

- **Promote a safe and secure care environment** (Buehler et al., 2006; Kelly, 2017).

Often, children in out-of-home placements have been exposed to disruptive, dysfunctional relationships and harmful (physical) environments.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to provide:**

- ✓ Freedom and protection from abuse and neglect;
- ✓ A home that avoids or decreases the chances of accidents/injuries;
- ✓ A safe neighborhood and school for the child;
- ✓ A family environment that promotes emotional security.

- **Promote a nurturing care environment** (Buehler et al., 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2014).

Most children in foster care may have difficulties trusting adults and establishing a healthy, affectionate relationship with their caregivers.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to:**

- ✓ Pay attention to the child's needs, signals, and behaviors;
- ✓ Demonstrate availability to satisfy those needs;
- ✓ Be tolerant, accepting, and able to deal with possible challenging behaviors;

- ✓ Encourage the child to build a trusting relationship with them.

- **Meet physical and mental health care needs** (Buehler et al., 2006).

Some children in foster care may manifest adjustment or physical difficulties and can be medically fragile.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to:**

- ✓ Be aware of the need to dedicate more time, patience, and energy to the child;
- ✓ Develop effective parenting strategies, skills, and competencies;
- ✓ Have specialized training to develop these additional competencies to deal with the uniqueness of the child (pre-training and in-service training);
- ✓ Keep organized records of the child's medical history or care;
- ✓ Enquire about and have access to specific support services for the child (e.g., mental health professionals, physical therapists).

- **Promote educational attainment and success** (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP] & Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2019; Buehler et al., 2006).

Sometimes children that come into foster care had previous situations where they were unable to attend school, or their education wasn't valued.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to provide an environment:**

- ✓ Where the child's educational needs are met (e.g., going to school every day);
- ✓ Where academic education is encouraged up to an advanced level (e.g., encourage the child/teen to seek higher education, go to university...);
- ✓ Where the child's educational achievement is valued, praised, and celebrated.

- **Promote social and emotional development** (Buehler et al., 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2014).

Children with previous experiences of adversity, abuse, or neglect may have lacked the opportunity to have their thoughts and feelings acknowledged by their caregivers.

This means that the child may not have had the opportunity to learn in a safe environment how to express and regulate emotions and how to maintain social interaction with others.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to:**

- ✓ Promote the child's "normative" social and emotional development;
- ✓ Know about the normative child development and important developmental tasks/stages;

- ✓ Have information about how this development can be compromised in children in out-of-home care.
- ✓ Adapt and use parenting strategies to promote psychosocial development (e.g., strategies acquired in pre-training or in-service training).
- **Value diversity and support the child's cultural needs** (AAP & Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2019; Buehler et al., 2006).

Some children in foster care come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds from their foster families.

If the child is placed with a family from different cultural or ethnic identities, might feel very different, alone, and like doesn't belong.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to:**

- ✓ Be receptive to the role that culture and/or race plays in the child's life;
- ✓ Allow and plan activities that support and enhance the child's cultural identity;
- ✓ Have cultural awareness training, especially when the child has a different culture from the foster family.

3.2. What are the competencies involved in managing the relationships of the child with others?

- **Supporting permanency plans** (Buehler et al., 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2014).

Children in foster care have different permanency/life projects, such as reunification with the biological family or family of origin, permanency in foster care, adoption, among others.

There is a need to plan and organize the implementation of different types of life projects and living arrangements for the child.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to:**

- ✓ Plan and facilitate the implementation of future life projects with the foster care management institution;
- ✓ Promote the relationship, connection, and sense of belonging to the biological family or family of origin (when reunification is established or when there is a relationship with them);
- ✓ Promote independent living skills (when an autonomous life project is established).

- **Supporting relationships between the child and the biological family or family of origin** (Buehler et al., 2006).

When children are in short-term care and are expected to go back to the biological family, there is a predominant need to promote a sense of connection and facilitate the relationship with the birth family.

This is considered one of the most challenging tasks for foster families.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to:**

- ✓ Regulate personal thoughts and feelings regarding the biological family or family of origin to facilitate the relationship and promote the child's sense of belonging;
- ✓ Teach and model good parenting skills;
- ✓ Provide information regarding the child's progress and the resources that are being used to promote it;
- ✓ Cooperate with the biological family or family of origin in the context of visits and schedules.

- **Work as a team member** (Buehler et al., 2006).

Successful foster care implies communication and collaboration with a lot of intervening institutions, not only the institution that manages the foster care and that the children are affiliated.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to:**

- ✓ Work in partnership with several types of professionals (e.g., therapists, teachers, judges...);
- ✓ Work and collaborate with the biological family or family of origin;
- ✓ Have good communication and good problem-solving skills;
- ✓ Have a strong commitment to work in partnership.

3.3. What are the competencies involved in managing personal competencies and feelings?

- **Manage ambiguity and loss** (Buehler et al., 2006).

Some foster children are meant to reunify with the biological family or family of origin, which means that the foster care is temporary, and children will, eventually, return home.

This is another of the most challenging aspects to manage from the foster families' perspective.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to:**

- ✓ Have the capacity to manage feelings of ambiguity towards the child fostered:
 - The child they care for is under the jurisdiction of other authorities (Social Security Institute) which causes feelings of ambiguity;
 - Although they can give their contribution to the situation of the child, ultimately the decision will be made by the professional team that oversees the foster care and/or the courts;
- ✓ Be aware, prepared, and accepting of feelings of loss, regarding the end of the foster care and the child leaving the foster home, and facilitate this transition.

- **Growing as a foster parent** (Buehler et al., 2006).

For foster care to be successful, there is a need to keep up with new information, parenting strategies, and competencies.

Pre-training and in-service training are fundamental in this domain.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to:**

- ✓ Know the foster family's responsibilities and rights (pre-training);
- ✓ Have a clear view regarding the expectations of the role of the foster family (role clarification);
- ✓ Invest and develop new skills that facilitate the fostering process (in-service training).
- ✓ Maintain interest, motivation, and effort in foster care.

- **Manage demands of fostering on personal and family well-being** (Buehler et al., 2006).

Stress and tension may arise in some situations associated with foster care, whether they relate to relationships, the inherent tasks, or the child itself.

So, **the foster family/caregiver needs to be able to:**

- ✓ Manage potential feelings of stress and tension;
- ✓ Manage conflictual relationships and the conflict situation in family functioning;
- ✓ Manage the relationship between the foster child and its biological family or family of origin (including difficulties in visits, etc.);
- ✓ Have a strong social support network (to minimize the negative effects on family relations and well-being).

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