

While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

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Becoming Your Own Advocate: Learning to be Assertive

As you start the process of becoming a foster, adoptive, or resource parent, you begin your journey of becoming an advocate for yourself and the children you will parent. Before you begin, it will be to your benefit to develop assertiveness skills. Assertive people take the time to know

Assertive people know who they are, what their values are, and how to ask for and work for what they want.

who they are, assess their needs, and determine the kind of support they will most likely need to succeed as parents. They show confidence, and are forthright and respectful of themselves and others. They stand up for their beliefs, express their needs and feelings, but also listen and respond to the needs

of others. People who have learned to be assertive are often more successful in presenting themselves—their skills, abilities, and their needs—to their workers.

Workers are often burdened with heavy caseloads and you will be only one of many clients. To get noticed, make sure you do everything that is asked of you, such as attending and actively participating in training, completing assignments, turning in paperwork, and showing the initiative to learn more. When you do this, you will stand out to your worker and your progression toward getting a placement will be more effective and efficient. This will also help you establish and develop your partnership with your worker and the agency.

If you think you lack assertiveness skills, check to see if there are classes in your community. While you work toward becoming assertive, it is important to be aware of the difference between assertiveness and aggression, and avoid aggression. Aggressive people tend to annoy those around them because they forcefully push their own agenda, and they are generally too focused on themselves to listen to or respond to the needs of others.

Knowing Yourself

Assertive people have an easier time getting their needs met because they are focused; they know who they are, what their values are, and how to ask for and work for what they want. If you want to begin to become more assertive, you will first need to know yourself better. Start by making a list that describes all aspects of your personality. Make a second list



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of the 10 things you value most in life. Then list 10 reasons why you want to foster or adopt. Does this list intersect with either of your other lists? Finally, list your 10 greatest strengths and 10 areas where you could make improvements. If you are co-parenting, share lists with your partner and compare your values, strengths, and areas for improvement.

Part of advocating for yourself is looking for ways to strengthen your weaker areas or learning to accept help when you need it. Address possible problems proactively. If you are co-parenting, maybe your partner's strengths complement your weaknesses. If you will be a single parent, think of the friends and family who will support you as you parent.

If you are young, highlight your maturity and experience caring for other peoples' children. If you are

single or a gay or lesbian couple include references from members of the opposite gender who will serve as role models for your children. If you are older, emphasize your experiences in life and the wisdom you have gained from them. Sometimes the best parents for a child with special needs are parents who have overcome a disability or a difficult time in their lives. Don't let the preconceptions or judgments of others sway your confidence in your abilities.

Knowing the System

You won't get very far as an advocate for yourself if you don't understand the system in which you are operating. You might want to compare different agencies before you choose one, so you pick one that is right for you. Find out what the protocol is when a parent and a worker don't get along. Ask

how the agency helps to resolve or address conflicts or disagreements. Find out how long training takes and what the average wait is for a referral or placement. Ask big picture and detailed questions.

Keep in mind that each county or agency is a little different and that some might be better suited to your needs. Also note that all workers operate within a system of rules and regulations, and those rules might limit what you and your worker are allowed to do. Often workers within the same agency have their own personal style for doing things too. Some workers are comfortable working as partners with their families and others are not.

If you have chosen an agency, take time to learn more about it. Ask what your worker is comfortable letting you do during the process. If you plan to adopt, ask if you are allowed to actively look for children, or read your home study and update it as you gain experience.

Ask your worker how often you can call. Some workers feel one call a month from you is the most productive, but also understand that parents often want more contact than this. Some workers are open one call or e-mail a week if parents are contributing relevant information to their case. It is important for you to follow your worker's lead regarding your role in the process.

Building a Relationship with Your Worker

Finding the right amount of assertiveness will be important when you develop your rela-



Checklist for Tracking Your Progress

As you wait, there are things you can track to make sure your part of the work is completed in a timely manner:

- Carefully document each step in the process—when you made your first inquiry call, attended orientation, signed up for training, etc.
- Make sure you attend all your training sessions.
- Be an active participant in the sessions and complete all training assignments.
- Keep a journal of your thoughts, new information, and questions. When you have questions, be sure to ask them.
- Complete and return all your paperwork right when you get it.
- Tell your references the agency has their name and contact information and to be prepared to receive a call or a form to fill out and to send it back immediately.
- Make follow-up calls:
 - Make sure your county or agency received your home study or licensing paperwork after you mailed it.
 - Check to see that your worker has the needed medical documents and information from references.
 - After being fingerprinted, confirm that your fingerprints were sent to your worker and make sure your worker received them.
- If you are adopting, call periodically and ask if your worker has sent out your home study.

tionship with your worker. If you are too passive and appear uninvolved, you can be overlooked. If you are too aggressive, you can annoy a person who wants to help you become a foster or adoptive parent. When you contact your worker, think about how you present yourself. Do you only call to ask what your worker has done for you lately? Instead, think about letting your worker know what you have done to prepare to parent children with special needs. Maybe you read a book on attention deficit disorder (ADD) or you volunteered at a crisis nursery.

Think how different this approach might feel to your worker. You are initiating time with your worker, but more importantly, you are informing your worker that you are becoming more prepared for your future role. When you are assertive and take the initiative to learn more, you show your worker you are serious, committed, and hard working and have the time and energy to meet the needs of a child. When you commit to doing more than is required of you, you become more skilled and ready to parent children who have experienced significant loss and trauma.

Advocating in Partnership with your Worker

When you have developed a good working relationship with your worker, your initiative and your worker's expertise can only enhance your chances of bringing a child into your home within a reasonable amount of time.

If you are planning to adopt, ask if your worker is open to letting you actively look for children. Some workers are happy to have parents look through web sites or books that list waiting children as long as parents keep them informed and have their worker make the con-

What to Do When You Can't Reach Your Worker

The following list of solutions has been adapted from an article written by Teresa McElroy, director of 4-R-Kids, a new foster parent licensing agency in Sioux City, Iowa.

- Leave a thorough phone message. Include your full name, telephone number, what you are calling about, and indicate the degree of importance to your message. If you have left more than one message, indicate what number message this is. Remain professional and be assertive, not aggressive. Make sure an emergency is a true emergency.
- Give a time or times when it will be best for your worker to call you back.
- If you don't have any luck reaching your worker, send a message in writing and keep a copy for yourself. Record your messages and the number of attempts you have made.
- If you have access to the Internet, e-mail your worker. A printed copy of each e-mail correspondence includes the date and time of each letter and helps you keep accurate records of your communication.
- If at all times you have been professional, honest, calm, and respectful, and you have tried all of the above and not been successful, you can follow the chain of command. In your last written correspondence, let your worker know you plan to notify his supervisor if you do not hear by a certain date. (This is good documentation for a problem that wasn't originally urgent but is now because of a lack of response.)
- If this does not elicit a response, use the same procedures with the supervisor's superiors. (Between each correspondence allow a two-day turn around period.)

tacts. Other workers want more control as they match parents and children. Once you know what your worker is comfortable letting you do, begin to organize your time and efforts within those parameters.

Social workers meet monthly to discuss waiting children and look for matches from their approved individuals. Ask your worker about statewide and regional meetings and other ways workers match children with families. If you are allowed to search for children, let your worker know when you have found children from your community that you are interested in. Remember your worker may see strengths you haven't yet recognized in yourself and be open to your worker's suggestions.

If you are getting licensed to be a foster parent, you can be assertive

in a different way. During the licensing process, discuss the specific foster children in your community who need families and plan for how your family can prepare to take care of them. When your worker approaches you about accepting a child or sibling group, it is your responsibility to know what you can handle, and only accept placements that you believe will allow everyone to succeed. Don't accept a mis-matched referral just because you fear you won't get another, (although that is a possibility).

The best practice is to be very specific about why you need to turn down the referral. For example, if you are a single parent, you may decide that a sibling group is more than you want to handle for your first time. If you are offered twin toddler girls but you know you are

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gifted relating to teenage boys, explain that to your worker. When you are clear about why you are accepting or turning down a referral—and you are not being unreasonable—you gain the trust and respect of your worker.

Finding Peace

Waiting for a child can seem to take forever. There is a lot to do to become a foster or adoptive parent and sometimes parents feel that pressure and focus too much on what they should do. An important aspect of waiting is allowing each moment to unfold and bring you closer to the union with your child. Rachael Huyck, education and recruitment worker for Children's Home Society says, "I think families also really need to come to an attitude of peace about the process, trust in their social worker (assuming trust has been earned), and have faith that the right match will be coming in the right timing."

You may be ready, but remember you are a complex person with many aspects to your life beyond waiting for a child to join your family. Although becoming a parent may be in the forefront now, make sure you don't lose sight of the other important aspects of who you are. Remember to live your life

This is the third in a series of newsletters for Minnesota prospective foster and adoptive parents produced by the North American Council on Adoptable Children's Minnesota Recruitment Project, funded through a grant by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

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A Journey toward Parenthood

Mary McGowan began the process of becoming a licensed foster parent 18 years ago as a single parent. Her volunteer work as a Big Sister had been rewarding but after many years, it wasn't enough. Seeing a child once a week was fun, but she wanted to have a greater impact in the life of a child. Her years as a paramedic helped prepare her to take even medically fragile children who are hard to place, and she couldn't understand why two years had gone by without getting a foster child. Mary's worker suggested that she become a respite care provider, which wasn't a bad idea, but Mary wanted to be a parent. She wanted a family, not an occasional child care job.

When Mary did get a referral, she was torn. The needs of all three siblings were extremely serious and Mary knew a first placement of deeply disturbed children would be too much for her. She wanted to succeed as a parent, but she also worried about turning down this referral, afraid she wouldn't get another.

She did turn it down and did have to wait even longer for the right placement. Now, many placements later, Mary is an adoptive mother of three daughters. She is also parenting with her partner Danielle, both of whom proudly finalized the adoption of their youngest daughter on January 25th.



Posing after Monae's adoption: (left) Rachael, Danielle, Monae, Mary, Judge Reilly, and Journey.

Over the years, Mary has had a lot of experience waiting. As she looks back on what she has learned, she offers the following advice to prospective parents:

- Find a foster or adoptive parent to be your mentor. The process can be scary and it is comforting to have a knowledgeable guide.
- Do something you have always wanted to do, such as taking a trip to a place you have always wanted to see.
- Get out of your routine and try new things.
- Take time to get to know yourself better.
- If you are co-parenting, learn about each other's strengths and needs.
- Keep a record of your thoughts and feelings as you begin the journey of becoming a parent.
- Write down three things that are part of your life now that you don't want to lose (such as a close relationship with your partner, regular daily exercise, going to movies, camping etc.) and make a promise to yourself to keep them. ☼