

Historically, the belief has been that foster children needed to be sheltered and protected in order to keep them safe. This meant anyone who was going to be around the children had to be cleared through the background screening process, foster children could not be left at home alone or go out unsupervised and the children couldn't get a job or a driver's license. Ultimately, it was recognized that these restrictions and the lack of freedom afforded to foster children, were, in effect, punishing the children for being involved in circumstances beyond their control. While it was their parents who made poor choices that led to them being placed in foster care, which caused significant trauma, the children were further traumatized when they weren't allowed to do the "normal" things that children do: go to the movies with friends, have sleepovers, play at a friend's house or attend prom. Not only did this lack of freedom cause dissatisfaction with the children's experiences in the child welfare system, but it also resulted in increased incidents of disruptions and runaway episodes.

In response to this long-time issue, on 9/3/2010, Secretary George Sheldon issued a memo regarding normalcy for foster children in an effort to begin to establish some guidelines for affording foster children some freedom and for giving their caregivers the authority to allow foster children to be children, too.

Since 2010, Circuit 5 has made great strides towards normalizing life for children in foster care. Normalcy training is provided to caregivers and staff on a regular basis. Caregivers are encouraged to allow the children placed with them to do the same things they would allow their own children to do using the same good judgment they would use with their own kids. Some of the things to be taken into consideration are: the maturity of the child, whether the child has shown he/she is capable of accepting responsibility, the type of activity the child wants to engage in, who else will be present and how long the child will be gone. Just as a child earns allowance by completing chores, a child should also be able to earn the privilege of increasing freedom by demonstrating he/she can handle the responsibility that comes with it. Normalcy should not be considered an entitlement for all children...it is a privilege to be earned. Children should be encouraged to have and attend sleepovers, to go on play dates, to find jobs, to get a driver's license, to go to camp and even to date, as age appropriate.

As with everything in life, though, there are no guarantees that bad things won't happen. There is no amount of planning or good judgment that can prevent accidents from occurring or prevent the most responsible of children from making the occasional bad decision. For this reason, it's important that the foster parents and all professionals working with a child communicate regarding what is appropriate for a child and then support each other in the decisions made.

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