

# Families First

a newsletter for Nebraska Families

May / June 2026

N F A P A

## THE VALUE OF A FOSTER PARENT SUPPORT GROUP

Written by: Dr John

It can be challenging caring for children who are filled with anxiety, who have issues of trust and attachment, and who struggle with so much on a day-to-day basis in your home and as part of your family twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why up to 50 percent of foster parents quit after the first year of opening up their home to children in foster care. Today's foster parents lack support and a support network.

The truth is that as foster parents, we need and we deserve a network of support from those who truly understand what we do, why we do it, and the difficulties we may face as foster parents. Perhaps the best thing my caseworker did for my wife and me after we completed our foster parent training was help us create a foster parent's support group in our county. We began meeting once a month, at a local church, and my wife and I quickly grew to not only look forward to each meeting but really embrace and value the members in the support group. The other members of our support group understood what my wife and I were going through as foster parents because they, too, were foster parents. They too had had similar experiences.

As a support group, we could lean on one another during

difficult times, laugh at some of the absurdities that only come with foster parenting, and gain valuable knowledge and skills from those foster parents who had already gone through similar experiences as they had walked the foster parenting journey as well. Most important, we could surround ourselves with people who would not judge us as "those strange foster parents."



Foster parent support groups, or foster parent associations as they are sometimes also known by, offer so much for both the new and veteran foster parent. Support groups and associations offer you the opportunity to develop relationships with other foster parents. These relationships are wonderful occasions for you to validate your own experiences and emotions you feel as a foster parent. Fellow foster parents will also be able to discuss common experiences and common concerns related to the foster children living in their homes, as well as share ideas and resources with one another.

When you join a foster parent support group, you quickly come to the realization that you are not alone. There are others who have had similar experiences, and this realization often turns to relief. Along with this, when you are surrounded by others who have walked the same path you have as a foster parent, you can truly express yourself with others without fear of judgment or ridicule.

*(Continued on page 3)*

**Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association**  
**Families First**  
 a newsletter for Nebraska Families  
**N F A P A**

*Families First* is published bimonthly.  
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This publication is supported by Grant #93.566 under a sub-grant from HHS

Administration for Children and Families and Nebraska DHHS.

# Attention Foster Parents!

## Earn Your In-Service Hours While Getting the Chance to Win a Great Prize!

Answer these 10 questions correctly and you will not only earn .5 credits toward your in-service hours, but your name will also be put in a drawing for a prize. For this issue we are offering a \$10 Walmart gift card.

There are a variety of ways to do this. You can email the information to [Felicia@nfapa.org](mailto:Felicia@nfapa.org), send the questionnaire to the NFAPA office at 3601 N. 25th Street, Suite D, Lincoln, NE 68521 or you can complete the questionnaire online at



[https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NFAPA\\_May-June\\_2026](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NFAPA_May-June_2026)

We will then enter your name in the drawing! We will also send you a certificate for training credit to turn in when it is time for relicensing. Good Luck!

1. What is a benefit of belonging to a foster parent support group
2. When kids are overwhelmed by feelings, the \_\_\_\_\_ side of the brain isn't communicating with the rational side.
3. When pursuing our teen children we need to start with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
4. True/False. The brain records events and experiences, then learns and shapes itself in response to the environment.
5. What are three signs of burnout in foster parents?
6. \_\_\_\_\_ is a powerful tool for helping kids calm down by communicating that you understand and accept what they're feeling.
7. True or False Rewards are the most powerful tool parents have in influencing behavior.
8. What are two imaginative play activities
9. True/False If a child persistently has trouble sleeping, cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia can be effective
10. True or False. Exercising right before bed will wear your child out and make them fall asleep faster.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_

(Continued from page 1)

Support groups offer just that, a supportive environment where you will very likely feel comfortable enough to share your feelings, concerns, frustrations, and doubts within a safe space. Doing so can be both therapeutic and even healing for you. In addition, as you share with others who support you, the stress of caring for children in crisis and in need can be reduced considerably.

One wonderful benefit of belonging to a foster parent support group is the opportunity to surround yourself with others you can learn from. Indeed, you will learn so much about how the foster care system truly works from those who have been involved in it for some time. In addition, you will also learn practical and real-life tips on how to deal with difficult situations you might be experiencing currently or may experience in the future. This can better help prepare you in advance for those challenging moments, as well as grant you a better understanding of what you might experience caring for children in crisis. Finally, foster parent support groups allow you to share resources. Perhaps you have a new baby being placed in your home and do not have the proper resources needed. Others in your foster parent support group may be able to help, providing cribs, car seats, age-appropriate toys, and so forth. Indeed, foster parents are quick to share not only knowledge, wisdom, and experiences, they are also often quick to share needed physical items.

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<https://www.drjohndegarmofostercare.com/blog/the-value-of-a-foster-parent-support-group>



# 5 THINGS YOU NEED TO SURVIVE AS A FOSTER PARENT

Written By: Dr. John DeGarmo.

## Taking in children from foster care into your house can certainly be a challenge.

It isn't always easy. Taking care of kids, that is. As a father of three biological children, and three children from adoption, there are those days when I am a little worn out.

Know what's even harder? Taking care of children in foster care. As a foster parent of over 55 children from foster care, there are those days when I am a whole lot worn out! Now, don't get me wrong, it is the most important "job" I have ever done, and it has made me a better person.

In truth, though, taking in children from foster care into your house can certainly be a challenge. Behavioral issues, learning disabilities, emotional trials; all can be exhausting and trying for a foster parent. Yet, what many foster parents often overlook is the risk factor that goes along with taking a foster child into a home. As a foster parent, you become vulnerable to many possibilities, and it is important that you protect yourself and your family from the possible implications and investigations. Just as important is making sure you do not become overly exhausted and even burned out.

### 1. Handling Burnout

One of the keys to preventing burnout is awareness. Once you are aware that you are truly exhausted and facing burnout, you can then take steps to better care for yourself. If you are feeling exhausted, run down, depressed, unmotivated, hopeless or powerless, or even feel like running away, you may be experiencing burn out. Changes need to be made, otherwise you will not only suffer, but your marriage, your family, your children, and even your job will suffer, as well. There are a number of other ways to help reduce stress and burnout, including lifestyle changes, diet, exercise, support groups, and even respite care. If burnout is left untreated or ignored, there can be serious complications for not only the foster parent, but for the foster child, as well. After all, if you are too exhausted and feeling burn out, you will have a difficult time giving the love and support a foster child sorely needs.

### 2. Time for Yourself

As a foster parent, this will be difficult, as you will be required to take care of a child full time. Along with this, you may also need to care for your own children, as well as your spouse. You may have a full-time job that requires a great deal of your energy, plus there are those other commitments you have, such as church, volunteering, and other organizations you might be involved in. Finding time for you will not be easy, but it is very essential. Make time to do something you

enjoy, and that you find relaxing. Spend time with some friends, perhaps over lunch or dinner. Do not neglect your own personal health; make sure you get plenty of exercise regularly and eat healthy.

**You are making a difference. Now, take care of yourself, as well!**



### 3. Your Marriage

Sadly, many marriages suffer during the foster process. When you are putting much of your energies and time into your foster child, you may be so drained and exhausted that you soon neglect your spouse. Further complication this, some foster children are skilled at pitting one parent against the other, bringing some heated and very unproductive arguments to your home. Make sure that you and your spouse are on the same page with your parenting, and ensure that the two of you are consistent when it comes to all decision making with your foster child. Finally, do not neglect the needs and concerns of your spouse. Instead, make your marriage the cornerstone of your home, and work to make it a productive and happy one.

### 4. Your Children

If you have children of your own, you may find that you are not giving them the attention and love they need. Instead, your

attention is many times on the needs and behavior of your foster child. As a result, your relationship with your biological children will suffer. Make sure you spend one on one time with each of your own children. Go out on a “date” with them, take them for a drive, have a picnic. During this time alone, allow them to talk to you about how they are feeling about the foster child in your home. If they are frustrated, encourage them to tell you about how they feel. Listening to your child is important to your relationship. After all, they may be worn out and exhausted, too, just like you might be.

### 5. Foster Parent Support Groups

There are a number of foster parent support groups and associations across the nation. A few of these organizations may be national ones, while many others are, comprised of foster parent, like you. Either way, you will benefit by being in a support organization, as they will provide you with not only support, but information, fellowship, and important insight that will help you be a better foster parent.

My friend, I am thankful for what you do each day. I am thankful that you are making sacrifices in your life in order to care for children in need, children in foster care. I am thankful that you have opened up your home and your family to children who need help, who need stability, and who need love. You are making a difference. Now, take care of yourself, as well!

*Dr. John DeGarmo is an international expert on foster care and TEDx Speaker. He has been a foster parent for 17 years, now, and he and his wife have had over 60 children come through their home. He is a consultant to legal firms and foster care agencies, as well as an empowerment and transformational speaker and trainer on many topics about the foster care system. He is the author of several books, including *The Foster Care Survival Guide: The Essential Guide for Today's Foster Parents*, and writes for several publications. Dr. John has appeared on CNN HLN, Good Morning, America, ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, PBS, and elsewhere. He and his wife have received many awards, including the Good Morning America Ultimate Hero Award. He can be contacted at [drjohndegarmo@gmail.com](mailto:drjohndegarmo@gmail.com), through his Facebook page, Dr. John DeGarmo, or at The Foster Care Institute.*

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<https://medium.com/@drjohndegarmo/5-things-you-need-to-survive-as-a-foster-parent-f3b76af6a9c0>



# 10 REASONS WHY I AM THANKFUL TO BE A FOSTER PARENT

*Written By: Dr. John DeGarmo*

**“My home is one that has been filled with more love than I could ever have imagined.”**

It seems that as I grow older, I become more and more appreciative and more grateful for all the blessings in my life. I imagine that is simply a progression of age, and simply shows that I am getting older.

Indeed, as I do grow older, I have begun to appreciate my fifteen years plus of being a parent to children from so many different backgrounds; children in foster care. With that in mind, I wanted to share with you why I am grateful, in no particular order mind you, for being a foster parent.

**1) I am thankful for the love in my home.** When a child is placed into my home, they become family the very first day. To be sure, each placement is different, and there are those placements that are more difficult than others. Yet, my home is one that has been filled with more love than I could ever have imagined. And now, I have a “grand child” originating from foster care, as I am now a grandfather to a child who used to live with us. How blessed am I!

**2) The laughter is often contagious.** Watching a child smile or even laugh for the first time after a life of abuse and neglect is heartwarming. I have had the privilege of watching a child who had suffered unimaginable abuse learn how to play and learn how to laugh while playing with the other children in my home. That laughter is often healing for all involved.

**3) A community rallies together.** Without a doubt, I could never be a foster parent without the support of others. As I have written countless times, not everyone can be a foster parent. Yet, everyone can help in some way. It has been a joy to watch the small community I live in come together to help our children in foster care.

**4) Helping birth parents heal.** As a foster parent, I sometimes need to remember that my children from foster child’s biological parents are people in need, and they deserve my kindness and sympathy, not my anger. By working with them, and by showing them kindness and compassion, I can not only help them, I can show their children an important lesson in love and humanity, and help them in their own walk towards healing.

**5) There is never a dull day.** I often joke with my fellow foster parents that I go to work to rest, as the needs and responsibilities of so many children in need can, at times, be a little exhausting. Yet, there has never been a dull moment or a boring day in my home. Quite the opposite, as each day

is an adventure and holds new surprises. Some days, I just have to look at the mayhem around me and smile.

**6) A lesson in service. 15 years of foster parenting.** My oldest child is 20 years of age. You can quickly see that being a foster family is the norm for my own children. I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to teach my own children that we are here to help others, to serve others, and to put others before ourselves.



**7) Forever Family.** Three of the children that were placed into my home from foster care have become forever family members of ours through the gift of adoption. Without a doubt, adoption has made my family stronger.

**8) Learning never stops.** I love to learn new things, as I am a curious person, in general. As a foster parent, I find that I am constantly learning something new, on a daily basis. To be sure, this constant learning process continues to grow me as a parent, and as a person.

**9) My own heart is full.** Through the tears of grief and sorrow and the joys and laughter, I have found that my own heart is rather like the Grinch’s. Remember in the classic 1966 Christmas cartoon *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, when his heart grew so large it burst out of the x-ray device? That is how my own heart is. I have experienced so many diverse and intense emotions through the years that my heart is flowing over with love for all.

**10) The rewards are unending.** Yes, foster parenting has been the most difficult “job” I have ever done, and the hardest thing I do. Yet, it is by far the most rewarding thing I have ever done, as well. Without a doubt, I am a far better

person for each experience, and a far richer person for each child that has come to be a part of my life.

*Dr. John DeGarmo is an international expert on foster care and TEDx Speaker. He and his wife have had over 60 children come through their home as foster parents. He is a consultant to foster care agencies, child welfare organizations, and legal firms, as well as a speaker and trainer on many topics about the foster care system. He is the author of several foster care books, including *The Little Book of Foster Care Wisdom: 365 Days of Inspiration and Encouragement for Foster Care Families*, and writes for several publications. Dr. John has appeared on CNN HLN, Good Morning America, ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, PBS, and elsewhere. He and his wife have received many awards, including the Good Morning America Ultimate Hero Award. He can be contacted at [drjohndegarmo@gmail.com](mailto:drjohndegarmo@gmail.com), through his Facebook page, Dr. John DeGarmo, or at The Foster Care Institute.*

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# HOW TO HELP CHILDREN CALM DOWN

WRITER: CAROLINE MILLER

CLINICAL EXPERTS: LINDSEY GILLER, PSYD ,  
STEPHANIE SAMAR, PSYD

## Techniques for helping kids regulate their emotions and avoid explosive behavior

Many children have difficulty regulating their emotions. Tantrums, outbursts, whining, defiance, fighting: these are all behaviors you see when kids experience powerful feelings they can't control. While some kids have learned to act out because it gets them what they want — attention or time on the iPad — other kids have trouble staying calm because they are unusually sensitive.

The good news is that learning to calm down instead of acting out is a skill that can be taught.

### What is dysregulation?

“Some children’s reactions are just bigger than their peers or their siblings or their cousins,” explains Lindsey Giller, PsyD, a clinical psychologist. “Not only do they feel things more intensely and quickly, they’re often slower to return to being calm.” Unusually intense feelings can also make a child more prone to impulsive behaviors.

When kids are overwhelmed by feelings, adds Dr. Giller, the emotional side of the brain isn’t communicating with the rational side, which normally regulates emotions and plans the best way to deal with a situation. Experts call it being “dysregulated.” It’s not effective to try to reason with a child who’s dysregulated. To discuss what happened, you need to wait until a child’s rational faculties are back “online.”

### Rethinking emotions

Parents can start by helping children understand how their emotions work. Kids don’t go from calm to sobbing on the floor in an instant. That emotion built over time, like a wave. Kids can learn control by noticing and labeling their feelings earlier, before the wave gets too big to handle.

Some kids are hesitant to acknowledge negative emotions. “A lot of kids are growing up thinking anxiety, anger, sadness are bad emotions,” says Stephanie Samar, PsyD, a clinical psychologist. But naming and accepting these emotions is “a foundation to problem-solving how to manage them.”

Parents may also minimize negative feelings, notes Dr. Samar, because they want their kids to be happy. But children need to learn that we all have a range of feelings. “You don’t want to create a dynamic that only happy is good,” she says.

### Model managing difficult feelings

“For younger children, describing your own feelings and modeling how you manage them is useful,” notes Dr. Samar. “They hear you strategizing about your own feelings, when



# MOBILE CLOSET <sup>2026</sup>

## SEASONAL SHOPPING EVENT

SPRING/SUMMER

<b>APRIL</b>	<b>BEATRICE</b> SATURDAY, 25	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 1025 N 16TH ST. 11 AM-3 PM   FIRST 50 REGISTERED YOUTH
<b>MAY</b>	<b>SIDNEY</b> FRIDAY, 01	ELKS LODGE, 1040 JACKSON ST. 3 PM-7 PM   FIRST 30 REGISTERED YOUTH
	<b>SCOTTSBLUFF/GERING</b> SATURDAY, 02	CALVARY MEMORIAL CHURCH, 265 18TH ST. 11 AM-3 PM   FIRST 50 REGISTERED YOUTH
	<b>FREMONT</b> SATURDAY, 09	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 505 N C ST. 11 AM-3 PM   FIRST 80 REGISTERED YOUTH
	<b>NORFOLK</b> SATURDAY, 16	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 404 W BENJAMIN AVE. 11 AM-3 PM   FIRST 80 REGISTERED YOUTH
<b>JUNE</b>	<b>LINCOLN</b> THURSDAY, 28	NEBRASKA KNOCKERBALL, 2350 JUDSON ST. #1 3 PM-7 PM   FIRST 80 REGISTERED YOUTH
	<b>NORTH PLATTE</b> FRIDAY, 12	FIRST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN, 305 W 5TH ST. 3 PM-7 PM   FIRST 60 REGISTERED YOUTH
	<b>KEARNEY</b> SATURDAY, 13	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 3610 6TH AVE. SUITE 2 9 AM-1 PM   FIRST 80 REGISTERED YOUTH
	<b>GRAND ISLAND</b> FRIDAY, 19	THIRD CITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH, 4100 W 13TH ST. 3 PM-7 PM   FIRST 80 REGISTERED YOUTH
	<b>LINCOLN</b> THURSDAY, 25	CHRIST PLACE CHURCH, 1111 OLD CHENEY RD. 3 PM-7 PM   FIRST 80 REGISTERED YOUTH
<b>AUGUST</b>	<b>LINCOLN</b> SATURDAY, 08	ST. MARKS UNITED METHODIST, 8550 PIONEERS BLVD. 11 AM-3 PM   FIRST 80 REGISTERED YOUTH

### REGISTER TO SHOP!

REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED WITH A MASTER CASE NUMBER.



Questions?

Contact Us at (402)853-9990 or [fostercarecloset@fostercarecloset.org](mailto:fostercarecloset@fostercarecloset.org)

We are passionate about restoring dignity to youth in crisis by bringing the joy of choice through tailored shopping experience.

you're nervous or frustrated, and how you're going to handle it, and they can use these words."

For kids who feel like big emotions sneak up on them, you can help them practice recognizing their emotions, and model doing that yourself. Try ranking the intensity of your emotions from 1-10, with 1 being pretty calm and 10 being furious. If you forget something that you meant to bring to Grandma's, you could acknowledge that you are feeling frustrated and say that you're at a 4. It might feel a little silly at first, but it teaches kids to pause and notice what they are feeling.

If you see them starting to get upset about something, ask them what they are feeling, and how upset they are. Are they at a 6? For some younger kids, a visual aid like a feelings thermometer might help.

### **Validate your child's feelings**

Validation is a powerful tool for helping kids calm down by communicating that you understand and accept what they're feeling. "Validation is showing acceptance, which is not the same thing as agreement," Dr. Giller explains. "It's nonjudgmental. And it's not trying to change or fix anything." Feeling understood, she explains, helps kids let go of powerful feelings.

Effective validation means paying undivided attention to your child. "You want to be fully attuned so you can notice their body language and facial expressions and really try to understand their perspective," says Dr. Samar. "It can help to reflect back and ask, 'Am I getting it right?' Or if you're truly not getting it, it's okay to say, 'I'm trying to understand.'"

Helping kids by showing them that you're listening and trying to understand their experience can help avoid explosive behavior when a child is building towards a tantrum.

### **Active ignoring**

Validating feelings doesn't mean giving attention to bad behavior. Ignoring behaviors like whining, arguing, inappropriate language or outbursts is a way to reduce the chances of these behaviors being repeated. It's called "active" because it's withdrawing attention conspicuously.

"You're turning your face, and sometimes body, away or leaving the room when your child is engaging in minor misbehaviors in order to withdraw your attention," Dr. Giller explains. "But the key to its effectiveness is, as soon as your child is doing something you can praise, to turn your attention back on."

### **Positive attention**

The most powerful tool parents have in influencing behavior is attention. As Dr. Giller puts it, "It's like candy for your kids." Positive attention will increase the behaviors you are focusing on.

When you're shaping a new behavior, you want to praise it and give a lot of attention to it. "So really, really focus in on it," adds Dr. Giller. "Be sincere, enthusiastic and genuine. And you want it to be very specific, to make sure your child



understands what you are praising."

When helping your child deal with an emotion, notice the efforts to calm down, however small. For example, if your child is in the midst of a tantrum and you see them take a deep inhale of air, you can say, "I like that you took a deep breath" and join them in taking additional deep breathes.

### **Clear expectations**

Another key way to help prevent kids from getting dysregulated is to make your expectations clear and follow consistent routines. "It's important to keep those expectations very clear and short," notes Dr. Samar, and convey rules and expected behaviors when everyone is calm. Dependable structure helps kids feel in control.

When change is unavoidable, it's good to give advance warning. Transitions are particularly tough for kids who have trouble with big emotions, especially when it means stopping an activity they're very engaged in. Providing a warning before a transition happens can help kids feel more prepared. "In 15 minutes, we're going to sit down at the table for dinner, so you're going to need to shut off your PS4 at that time," Dr. Giller suggests. "It may still be hard for them to comply, but knowing it's coming helps kids feel more in control and stay calmer," she explains.

### **Give options**

When kids are asked to do things they're not likely to feel enthusiastic about, giving them options may reduce outbursts and increase compliance. For instance: "You can either come with me to food shopping or you can go with Dad to pick up your sister." Or: "You can get ready for bed now and we can read a story together — or you can get ready for bed in 10



# NFAPA

## FREE VIRTUAL

### IN-SERVICE TRAINING



*For Foster, Adoptive, Kinship,  
Guardianship, & Relative Parents*

Registration Required! [https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NFAPA\\_In-Service\\_Oct\\_2025-Sept\\_2026](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NFAPA_In-Service_Oct_2025-Sept_2026)

9:00 am-11:00 am

**SAT  
JUNE 13,  
2026**

#### **Permanency Planning 101: Navigating All Things Permanency**

This training provides an overview of permanency options, including adoption, guardianship, APPLA and B2i. Participants will learn key timelines, and requirements!

*By Cydney Volker, Adoption/Permanency Program Specialist  
with Division of Children & Family Services*

**SAT  
JULY 18,  
2026**

#### **When Everything Feels Like an Emergency: What to Do When Your Child Is in Crisis**

When your child is melting down, escalating, or doing something that feels unsafe, it can be terrifying and overwhelming. Aggression, self-harm, property destruction, or running away aren't just "behaviors", they're moments when everyone's safety matters and caregivers are often left asking, What do I do right now?

This session offers practical, real-world guidance for foster and adoptive parents navigating behavioral crises. Grounded in trauma- and brain-based understanding, this session helps caregivers respond with calm, clarity, and compassion, even in the hardest moments.

*By Barb Clark, FASD/Behavior Consultant with FASD Mosaic, LLC*

minutes and no story.”

“Giving two options reduces the negotiating that can lead to tension,” Dr. Samar suggests.

### Coping ahead

Coping ahead is planning in advance for something that you predict may be an emotionally challenging situation for your child, or for both of you. It means talking, when you are both calm, about what’s coming, being direct about what negative emotions can arise, and strategizing how you will get through it.

If a child was upset last time they were at Grandma’s house because they weren’t allowed to do something they get to do at home, coping ahead for the next visit would be acknowledging that you saw that they were frustrated and angry, and discussing how they can handle those feelings. Together you might come up with something they are allowed to do at Grandma’s that they can have fun doing.

Talking about stressful situations in advance helps avoid meltdowns. “If you set up a plan in advance, it increases the likelihood that you’ll end up in a positive situation,” Dr. Samar notes.

### Problem solving

If a child has a tantrum, parents are often hesitant to bring it up later, Dr. Samar notes. “It’s natural to want to put that behind us. But it’s good to revisit briefly, in a non-judgmental way.”

Revisiting an earlier event — say a meltdown at the toy store — engages the child in thinking about what happened, and to strategize about what could have been done differently. If you can come up with one or two things that might have led to a different outcome, your child might remember them next time they’re starting to feel overwhelmed.

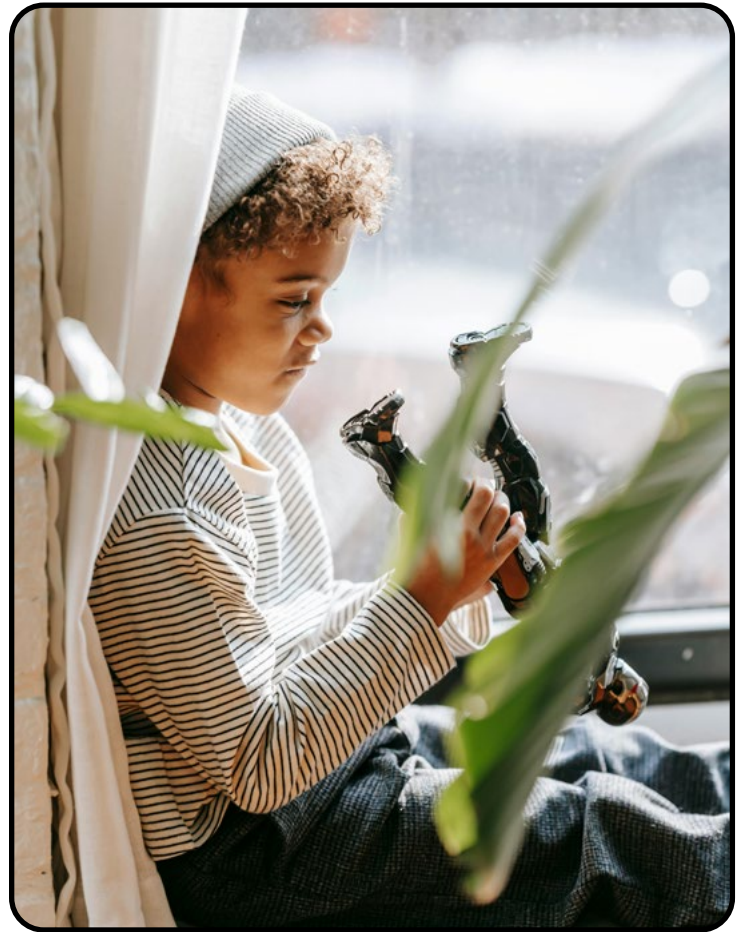
### Five special minutes a day

Even a small amount of time set aside reliably, every day, for a parent to do something chosen by a child can help that child manage stress at other points in the day. It’s a time for positive connection, without parental commands, ignoring any minor misbehavior, just attending to your child and letting them be in charge.

It can help a child who’s having a tough time in school, for instance, to know they can look forward to that special time. “This five minutes of parental attention should not be contingent on good behavior,” says Dr. Samar. “It’s a time, no matter what happened that day, to reinforce that ‘I love you no matter what.’”

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[https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-children-calm-down/?fbclid=IwY2xjawRKL9pleHRuA2FibQlXMQBicmlkETFLZmxmMkRCOGtI23htY3U0c3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODlwMDg5MgABHhcYgAnF-9jkhCL3cgIWDawmyhv7J0aFO6olvTTFkD5y0YjwnwNM\\_7gBE7wzd\\_aem\\_164ChGUOqQHnmqlwnoQlhA](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-children-calm-down/?fbclid=IwY2xjawRKL9pleHRuA2FibQlXMQBicmlkETFLZmxmMkRCOGtI23htY3U0c3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODlwMDg5MgABHhcYgAnF-9jkhCL3cgIWDawmyhv7J0aFO6olvTTFkD5y0YjwnwNM_7gBE7wzd_aem_164ChGUOqQHnmqlwnoQlhA)



## HOW IMAGINATIVE PLAY CAN HELP YOUNG CHILDREN HEAL FROM ADVERSITY

*Play can help children become fluent in the language of the nervous system, learning what their bodies and brains need in times of distress and dysregulation.*

*By Lori Desautels*

Early childhood represents the miraculous years of neuroplasticity and imagination. Our imaginations develop through play and make-believe with trusted adults and other children. Emotional trauma and adversity can negatively impact a young child’s imagination by disrupting emotional regulation, where their nervous system gets locked into a survival state. It is so hard to play in imaginative ways when you must work hard to protect against anything that feels unfamiliar, unsafe, or threatening.

The brain doesn’t simply record events and experiences; it learns from these and therefore shapes itself in response to the environment. When a child’s brain and body are surrounded by unpredictability, the brain builds itself around protection, not connection. This can lead to a loss of joy and creativity, withdrawal from activities, or a preoccupation with reliving the traumatic event through repetitive behaviors or thoughts.

Imaginative play can provide an opportunity for sustainable, flexible, and healthy changes in the developing brain.

## NERVOUS SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT AND IMAGINATIVE PLAY

In this time of early childhood, understanding nervous system development is critical in assisting how we address the neurodiversity of the developing brains and nervous systems in our young students. Nervous system development is complex, and even today, we know very little about how individual regions of the brain work collectively through neuronal connections and projections. We do know, however, that human brains are not complete at birth. By design, they continue to develop throughout a person's life. Creative imaginative play is a driver in nervous system development.

From utero through the first five years of life, the brain is in its greatest phase of maturation. During this time, an infant's nervous system is also developing. Stimuli from the social environment enter the brain stem, where attunement and attachment with a caregiver is critical for regulating the sensory and motor systems that are so important for emotional, social, and physiological well-being. According to Peter Levine and Maggie Kline, "The fetal period through the first two years of life creates the blueprint that influences every system in the body from immunity to the expression and regulation of emotion, to nervous system resilience, communication, intelligence, and self-regulatory mechanisms for such basics as body temperature and hormone production."

Imaginative play is deep learning, preparing the mental skills (executive functions) of problem-solving, creativity, working memory, sustained attention, emotional regulation, and predictability to develop through these play-filled experiences and safe environments. These predictable and playful routines modeled during the school day counteract the chronic unpredictability that these children often face in their day-to-day experience.



## IMAGINATIVE PLAY ACTIVITIES

There are a variety of imaginative activities and practices that early childhood educators and caregivers can integrate as predictable moments of the morning or afternoon routine. These activities allow children to reclaim their imaginative play, social connection, and emotional healing inside a safe and supportive environment. They are especially important for our children who do not always experience a sense of felt safety. These children may benefit from one-on-one with an adult, small groups, and opportunities to practice imaginative play more often. Here are some examples.

**Ice cream shop:** In this activity, children are the creators of the most unusual ice cream flavors in their own ice cream shops! They can draw, color, or use a variety of materials and props that are already in their centers and classrooms. Ice cream analogies are wonderful ways to teach and reinforce the language of the nervous system and the body: sensations. Our young children have not been conditioned out of their bodies, and they understand sensations such as cold, creamy, sharp, gooey, light, etc. Describing the colors, shapes, and tastes of their ice cream provides an opportunity to integrate sensations. "How would you describe ice cream? Soft, crunchy, smooth, mushy, creamy, cold, and sometimes it can feel numb on our tongues. What flavors will we create and sell today?"

Taki ice cream

Butterfly ice cream

Trash truck ice cream

Vanilla monkey ice cream

Slithery snake ice cream

Green sprinkle frog ice cream

What are other flavors that would be fun to make? This can also be a wonderful partner activity, building ice cream towers with different shapes, colors, and decorations.

**Magic carpet ride:** This activity can be initiated on carpet squares, on towels, or by using large sheets of paper or cardboard so that children can decorate their own carpets. Children can personalize their magic carpets with special names and even create maps of where they will fly. There are no limits, as children fly to both real and imaginary places.

We can brainstorm with our children the different places they can travel to—a particular friend's or family's house, clouds, water, stars, planets, the zoo; a specific town, city, state, or country. Maybe they would like to fly and visit a superhero, favorite Disney character, or Netflix show. Maybe children would like to fly to imaginative places they create! As the children prepare for their magic carpet rides, the following questions could be helpful prompts for their magical adventures:

What will you bring with you? (Food, clothing, favorite toys, blankets, stuffed animals, or people?)

What will you fly by and see from your magic carpet? How do you think you will feel?

Will your magic carpet go fast or slow? Will the ride be

bumpy or smooth?

What will you do when you arrive at your special place? How long will you stay?

**Animal moments:** In this activity, students choose an animal, insect, or imaginary creature they would like to be for the morning or afternoon. In preparation for this transformative creature day, children learn about the foods their animal eats, places they live and sleep, the ways they move and talk. They can share everything unique about this animal. They can also draw, paint, and record their findings if writing is not an option. Children can use household items, nature materials, paints, crayons, clay, pieces of material, buttons, and anything that feels appealing as they begin creating their animals, bugs, or creatures. Students can also choose to dress like their animals or create puppets as well.

### **BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS AND ADULTS**

Not only are these activities fun and enjoyable for our children, but adults have the opportunity to learn deeply about the children's perceptions, priorities, thoughts, feelings, joys, and fears. An example of knowledge learned from an activity would be to see sad faces on the sock puppets and a repetition of sad or angry words as they played with their puppets. Children might not be able to tell us how they are feeling, but they can express their feelings and sensations through this type of play.

We can tap into their agency and creativity, validating the strengths of their hearts and minds, while teaching them about the language of the nervous system, sensation. When children become fluent in the language of the nervous system, they can begin listening to their bodies, knowing what their bodies and brains need in times of distress and dysregulation. These activities provide an opportunity to learn about the language of their bodies.

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[https://www.edutopia.org/article/imaginative-play-helps-children-trauma?utm\\_content=linkpost1&utm\\_campaign=weekly-2025-12-17&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=edu-newsletter&fbclid=IwY2xjawP3XdtleHRuA2FibQlxMQBicmlkETEyZIBPTUwwaExtYzJob0tzc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODlwMDg5MgABHsEbFpTQ\\_JBIBgT5ybE4C193P\\_wmurwoAr7wZDMuYnG7-HKrUO6A8MHbV6F\\_aem\\_dEddZLo7p3Rdw9CLw--vrg](https://www.edutopia.org/article/imaginative-play-helps-children-trauma?utm_content=linkpost1&utm_campaign=weekly-2025-12-17&utm_medium=email&utm_source=edu-newsletter&fbclid=IwY2xjawP3XdtleHRuA2FibQlxMQBicmlkETEyZIBPTUwwaExtYzJob0tzc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODlwMDg5MgABHsEbFpTQ_JBIBgT5ybE4C193P_wmurwoAr7wZDMuYnG7-HKrUO6A8MHbV6F_aem_dEddZLo7p3Rdw9CLw--vrg)



# **HEY MOM, PLEASE KEEP PURSUING ME**

**“Hey Mom,**

**Please keep pursuing me. When my door is shut, keep knocking. When my words are few, keep talking. When my mood is low, keep smiling. When I snap at you, stay. When I walk away, stay close behind. Please don't give up. Please keep pursuing me. I need you now more than ever.**

**~ Your teen”**

Despite the pulled-up hoodies, eye rolls, and turned backs, our teens really do want us to remain close.

**They want us to stay interested in their lives and remain engaged in what lights them up regardless of this apparent new “Do Not Disturb” sign feeling we get in every exchange with them.**

As they stretch and grow into adulthood, as they teeter back and forth from independence to reliance, they desperately need the assurance that their unpredictable moods, attitudes, and behaviors are not going to run us off.

And this is our job, after all. We certainly pursued them as babies.

No matter how exhausted we were, we dragged our bodies out of bed at all hours of the night to feed them, re-bundle them, and make sure they were safe and protected. We pursued them as toddlers as we followed them around while they learned how to use their legs to walk and then to run. We blocked danger with our words and our bodies for them. We made sure they got sunlight and rest and conversation even though they battled naptime and threw their bodies on the supermarket floor in complete protest when they didn't get their way.

**We continued to pursue them no matter how messy, frustrating, difficult, unpredictable, or exhausting they were for us. We pursued them because we knew their lives depended on it. We pursued them because we love them.**

Unfortunately, when our kids become teenagers, we begin to take their attitudes and behaviors personally. As if somehow, suddenly, they are supposed to have acquired the skills and maturity to have mastered navigating their emotions, to be nicer, and to make our lives easier.

We sometimes mistakenly believe they should know how to be more like us by now – more adult-like. We want respect and communication. We expect them to excel and keep their room clean and to willingly and gracefully share with us what

is going on inside their adolescent brains whenever we feel like listening. And this is a lot to expect.

Our teens are just as messy a species as toddlers – just in bigger bodies.

**They are just as in awe of the world as they were as toddlers. They are just as inexperienced in understanding the dangers that threaten their safety. They are just as determined to explore new freedoms and opportunities. They are just as prone to frustration, confusion, fear, and disorientation of their direction as our feisty toddlers once were.**

And trust me when I say this: They still want to be pursued.

Many of us might remember a time when our toddlers would not come to us when we asked them to.

Maybe we were at the store, the park, or at a friend's house, and they simply refused to come to us when we asked them to.

As our last resort, we would pretend to leave them behind. "Bye," we'd say as we waved our hand to them in all of their busyness. "Mommy is leaving now". They would look up, watch to see if we really meant it, and when they saw us begin to walk away they came running (and often crying) toward us in a panic that they were going to be left there alone.

They could feel in that brief instant, even though it was pretended, that they were not being pursued by us. It felt frightening and they weren't equipped to deal with it. They needed us no matter what. They needed us to keep coming after them in all of their imperfection. And so do our teens.

**So, how do we do this? How do we pursue these big kids who are displaying attitudes and spewing words that are telling us the opposite? Where is the line between over-pursuing and under-pursuing? How do we protect our own dignity in this process? Where does respect come into the equation of the pursuit of our teens?**

I think it begins with compassion and empathy.

These emerging adults really don't know how to manage much of anything yet. They are learning about relationships and feelings. They are learning about responsibility, boundaries, and respect. They are experiencing their changing bodies, and trying to understand and cope with new desires and emotions. They are confronted with new choices and opportunities and they have to do this while peer pressure, social media, and the internet are all feeding them conflicting messages. They are trying to measure up to our expectations and the expectations of the fastest-paced, noisiest society in the history of all time.

And, just like our toddlers, they think they can do it "all by themselves." But they can't.

Pursuing someone we love in a healthy manner takes some finesse. The pursuit of our teens is really a decision of the heart.



It doesn't mean that we will follow them everywhere they go and just put up with their moods and attitudes that they are not yet equipped to regulate. It doesn't mean that we embrace slammed doors, broken rules, or disrespected boundaries.

**It means we are going to stay. It means that we are committed to loving them and guiding them through the biggest transformation of their lives as they emerge from childhood into adulthood.**

It means that our teens will know that no matter how messy things get, no matter how many mistakes they make, no matter how unlovable they feel – we will stay. It means that in those moments when they think they don't even need parents – we will be there. We are not going anywhere and there is nothing they can do to make us leave them. Nothing.

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[https://raisingteens.today.com/hey-mom-please-keep-pursuing-me/?fbclid=IwY2xjawRUfEVleHRuA2FlbQlXMQBicmlkETFxVIBTYXBXdKpHdjJdXM0JLc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMjM0MDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHrPwuavdCkGBPYPGO-CgzylfZvP\\_P33PDN1tsqHqavawUu3O-3Y0\\_CRhN-VII\\_aem\\_xcb9MJX9cIZlwJ5SVWW9\\_w](https://raisingteens.today.com/hey-mom-please-keep-pursuing-me/?fbclid=IwY2xjawRUfEVleHRuA2FlbQlXMQBicmlkETFxVIBTYXBXdKpHdjJdXM0JLc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMjM0MDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHrPwuavdCkGBPYPGO-CgzylfZvP_P33PDN1tsqHqavawUu3O-3Y0_CRhN-VII_aem_xcb9MJX9cIZlwJ5SVWW9_w)





## THE FEATHERED NEST BLOG'S POST

There's a group of kids in foster care that almost no one talks about.

The biological children in foster homes.

The kids who didn't choose foster care...

but opened their lives to it anyway.

They share their parents.

Their space.

Their routines.

Sometimes their toys.

Sometimes their bedrooms.

Sometimes the attention they used to have all to themselves.

They watch children come into their home carrying pain and trauma.

They watch their parents pour everything they have into helping those kids heal.

And they do something incredibly quiet and incredibly brave.

They make room.

They learn to be patient when things feel unfair.

They learn that some kids need more attention for a while.

They learn compassion in ways most children their age never have to.

But they also carry things people don't always see.

Secondhand trauma.

Compassion fatigue.

The emotional weight of loving children who may leave.

They say goodbye to friends they made at their own dinner table.

And often... no one talks about their sacrifice.

But I see them.

The kids who help pack bags.

The kids who sit beside a foster sibling when they're hurting.

The kids who open their hearts again and again, even knowing goodbye might come.

They are learning something powerful.

How to love people who are hurting.

How to share when it costs something.

How to show compassion in real life, not just in words.

And those are the kinds of lessons that shape the kind of adults they will become.

So tonight I just want to say this.

To the biological kids in foster homes...

You matter too.

Your kindness matters.

Your patience matters.

Your sacrifices do not go unseen.

You are part of the healing happening in those homes.

And that kind of love is a really beautiful thing.

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**May is set aside as National Foster Care Month honoring the foster parents, families, and those who support children throughout their journey to find a permanent home.**



You're Invited to an  
**NEAPA**  
**Support Group**

**In-Person: RSVP Required**

- **Kearney: Roots & Resilience (Relative & Kinship Families):**
  - First Friday in May and July
  - 7:00–8:30 PM (CT)
  - Training & support
  - RSVP to Vicki: [vickienfapa.org](mailto:vickienfapa.org) or 308–352–6079
- **Scottsbluff: Roots & Resilience (Relative & Kinship Families):**
  - First Friday in June & August
  - 7:00 –8:30 PM (MT)
  - Training & support
  - RSVP to Vicki: [vickienfapa.org](mailto:vickienfapa.org) or 308–352–6079
- **Lincoln (Families Parenting Across Color Lines):**
  - Fourth Tuesday in May, July & August
  - 6:15–8:00 pm (CT)
  - Support for the whole multiracial family
  - RSVP to Jessica: [Jessica@nfapa.org](mailto:Jessica@nfapa.org)

**Virtual:**

- **Facebook: Foster & Adoptive Families:**
  - Tuesdays at 9:00 pm (CT)
  - Support, must have Facebook account
  - Contact Robbi for link: [Robbi@nfapa.org](mailto:Robbi@nfapa.org)
- **Zoom: All Foster families:**
  - Second Thursday in May, June, July, & August
  - 6:30–8:00 PM (CT)
  - Training & support
  - Contact Vicki for link: [vickienfapa.org](mailto:vickienfapa.org)



Please contact the office for any questions: 402–476–2273

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## JOIN NFAPA ....your support will enable NFAPA to continue supporting foster parents state-wide!

### Benefits

- Ongoing trainings/conferences at local and state level
- Networking opportunities with other foster families, adoptive families, and relative caregivers
- Opportunity for all foster families, adoptive families and relative caregivers to be actively involved in an association by serving on committees and/or on the Executive Board
- Working to instigate changes by alertness to legislation affecting the child welfare system
- An advocate on your behalf at local, state and national levels
- 25% of membership dues goes toward an NFAPA Scholarship

### Thank you for your support!

Please mail membership form to:  
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Lincoln, NE 68521.

Questions? Please call us at 877-257-0176.

NFAPA is a 501c3 non-profit organization comprised of a volunteer Board of Directors and Mentors.

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

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City: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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I am a Foster/Adoptive Parent. I have fostered for \_\_\_\_\_ years.  
(circle one)

I am with \_\_\_\_\_ agency.

I wish to join the effort:

- Single Family Membership** (a single foster or adoptive parent), \$25
- Family Membership** (married foster or adoptive parents), \$35
- Supporting Membership** (individuals wishing to support our efforts), \$75
- Organization Membership** (organizations wishing to support our efforts), \$150
- Friends of NFAPA**, \$5 billed Monthly

My donation will be acknowledged through Families First newsletters.

- Gold Donation, \$1,000       Silver Donation, \$750
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