



## Emerging Adults as Foster Parents

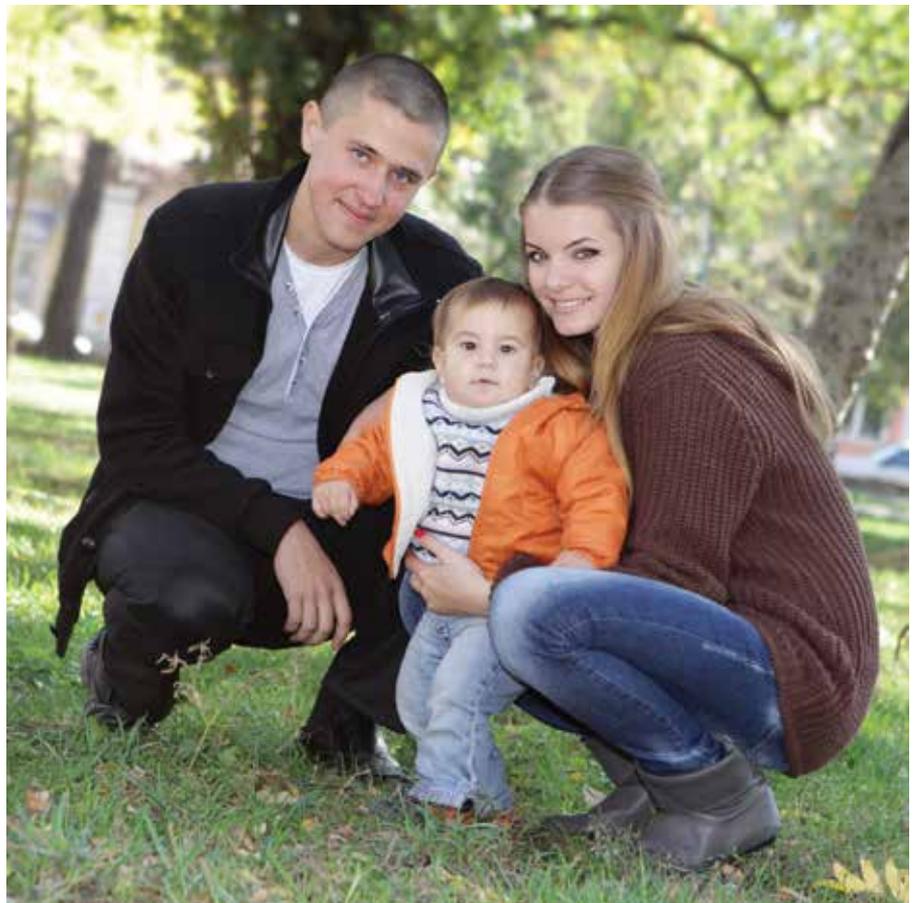
In New Jersey, you can be a foster parent before you're able to buy a cigarette. The minimum age to buy cigarettes—19; the minimum age to be a foster parent—18.

In Alabama, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, and New Jersey, you can be a foster parent before being able to purchase alcohol.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway, in its document, *The Home Study Requirements for Prospective Foster Parents* (2010)<sup>1</sup> reports that, "Adults of any profession and background may apply to be foster parents. In approximately 35 States and the District of Columbia, the foster parent applicants must be at least age 21.<sup>2</sup> In four States, the applicant must be at least age 18.<sup>3</sup> In Alabama and Nebraska, the parent must be at least age 19 (p. 2)."

Foster parents are the primary care providers for the vast majority of children in state custody. While acknowledging that available foster placements have not kept pace with demand, is there any hesitation in tapping young adults to be foster parents?

The status of "emerging adulthood," identified as late teenage to mid-20s, is described as follows: "Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and world-views. Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other



period of the life course (p. 469).<sup>4</sup> This characterization of emerging adults as self-focused and feeling "in-between" is supported by data: "Often emerging adults are struggling with big identity questions about who they are and how they fit into the world. Their lives are in flux as they try to make their way toward building a foundation for adulthood." (p. 6)<sup>5</sup>

As much training, support, and monitoring as an agency is willing and able to provide, are emerging adults generally able to supply the safety, educational, mental health, and attachment needs of a foster child?

Because foster children remain in the legal custody of the state this question is particularly compelling for departments of human services.

Mick Polowy, one of the original architects of the Parent Resource for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE) model family assessment component, notes that the focus is on a prospective parent's ability and willingness to fulfill the following five competency categories:

- ♦ Protecting and nurturing children;
- ♦ Meeting children's developmental needs and addressing developmental delays;

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- ♦ Supporting relationships between children and their families;
- ♦ Connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime; and,
- ♦ Working as a member of a professional team.

These competencies drive the entire mutual assessment, selection, preparation, support, and development process of resource families. Age is not the critical requirement.

Meredith Takahashi, an attorney in Texas, recalls “numerous occasions where I fought for certification of young adults who wanted to take on the job of parenting their younger siblings or extended family members in an effort to keep their families together—and they did a wonderful job. Though nervous, in time, I felt not only confident in those foster parents, but grateful for their strength and perseverance.”

This sentiment is echoed by Karyn Purvis, director of the Institute of Child Development at Texas Christian University: “With purposeful intention

and preparation, young, teachable adults can become an invaluable resource as foster parents. They become the foundation for a lifetime of service for vulnerable children in the foster care system. My personal experiences as a foster mother began when I was 20.”

New Jersey attorney Bari Z. Weinberger sums up the challenge: “Age is only one of many factors. Also taken into consideration are qualifications such as the individual’s ability to provide a safe home environment, their willingness and ability to complete foster parent training, and their successful completion of a thorough home study.”

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### Reference Notes

1. [https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/homestudyreqs.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/homestudyreqs.pdf)

2. The word *approximately* is used to stress the fact that states frequently change their laws. This information is current through October 2010. The states that require foster care applicants to be at least age 21 are Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.
3. Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, and New Jersey.
4. Arnett, J.J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of adulthood from the late teen through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480.
5. Arnett, J.J. (2012). *The Clark University poll of emerging adults*. Available at [http://www.clarku.edu/clarkpoll/pdfs/Clark\\_Poll\\_Peer%20Inst.pdf](http://www.clarku.edu/clarkpoll/pdfs/Clark_Poll_Peer%20Inst.pdf)

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physical buildings and technology infrastructure, and investing in social media with blogging and tweeting—almost every decision is disruptive. From an HHS perspective, when I look at the way we serve and support some of our most vulnerable populations, I see an era for reform that is purposefully and deliberately changing the way we do business. The Patrick Administration has consciously disrupted the silos in government, and created or continued many interagency councils that provide a platform for key administration officials, cabinet

secretaries, agencies, legislators, and community organizations to tackle some of the commonwealth’s most challenging social issues.

### **Little Known Facts About Me:**

I commanded a U.S. Army Black Hawk Assault Helicopter company during military operations that culminated in the takedown of former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. I also ran the high adventure program for our Boy Scout troop and led trips to Philmont where we hiked more than 100 miles in the Sangre de Cristo range

of the Rockies, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota, and canoed the Allagash in Maine.

**Outside Interests:** I enjoy taking my Harley Davidson, Fat Bob, out for rides on weekends, and this summer participated in the Holyoke Soldiers’ Home Motorcycle Run and Boston’s Wounded Vet Run. I also enjoy golf when I can find the time, and take pride in being a fan of Boston College and West Point Army sports—schools my children attend. 📖