



State of Florida  
Department of Children and Families

Jeb Bush  
Governor

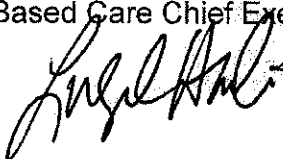
Lucy D. Hadi  
Secretary

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**Memorandum**

**DATE:** August 31, 2005

**TO:** District Administrators and Regional Director  
Community-Based Care Chief Executive Officers

**FROM:** Lucy D. Hadi  
Secretary 

**SUBJECT:** Normalcy for Children in Custody of the Department

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During the 2005 legislative session, I met with the State Youth Advisory Board, a leadership group comprised of current and former foster children. The board raised a number of issues related to normalcy for children in out-of-home care. Issues raised included requiring background screening for coaches and chaperones before being allowed to go on school related trips such as school band, sports teams and other functions, requirements for background screening on friends' parents before participating in sleepovers, and the inability to attend prom or parties because of arbitrary curfews and other informal policies. In addition, the board requested a review of the requirements that make it difficult for youth in foster care to participate in normal, age-appropriate activities.

Many children who are growing up in foster care confront barriers that do not allow them to enjoy normal age-appropriate activities that many of their peers take for granted such as overnight stays, extracurricular activities, dating, and driving automobiles. Many barriers to these normal activities are created by administration and staff who are attempting to ensure safety. These obstacles can cause children to exhibit inappropriate behavior out of frustration and may cause dangerous behaviors such as running away from their placement. This memorandum provides department administration and staff; community-based care providers, foster parents, group home staff, advocates and children in foster care, guidance in allowing teens in foster care to be provided a normal living environment.

There are current statutes and policy directives related to this topic included in:

Chapter 409.1451, F.S: (9) RULEMAKING. *"The department shall adopt by rule procedures to administer this section, including balancing the goals of normalcy*

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The mission of the department is to protect the vulnerable, strengthen families and promote individual and family economic self-sufficiency.

*and safety for the youth and providing the caregivers with as much flexibility as possible to enable the youth to participate in normal life experiences."*

Current Rule – 65C-13.010 – *"Substitute Care Parents' Role as a Team Member.*

*(1) Responsibilities of the Substitute Care Parent to the Child.*

*(a) General.*

*2. To provide the child with opportunities for normal growth and development."*

Bilateral Service Agreement – Form CF-FSP 5226 – *"The purpose of this document is to identify the expectations for both foster parents and the Department of Children and Families on behalf of the children and families that are served in the foster care program. Each foster parent and a representative of the department must sign this agreement prior to licensing and at each re-licensing.*

*Foster Parent Responsibilities to the Child – Page 2 and 3:*

*c. To treat the child as if the child is their own...*

*d. To ensure that the child has supervision appropriate to his/her age and/or developmental level.*

*i. To provide the child his/her monthly spending allowance which is included in the board payment.*

*s. To promote the following conditions for the child in the home:*

*4. Opportunities to develop interests and skills through participation in school and community activities, such as music, art, sports and special interest clubs.*

*5. Encouragement and support in making new friends and maintaining past friends who have a positive relationship with the child."*

The department is in the process of promulgating revised child welfare rules that will include sections addressing normalcy for teens in foster care. Until these rules are promulgated, administration and staff and community-based care providers should encourage and support foster parents and group home staff to make decisions regarding foster children's participation in normal activities and support the decisions made by the foster parents or group home staff. Background checks for dating, outings and activities with friends, their families and school and church groups are not necessary for participation in normal school or community activities. Allow foster parents or group home staff to use their parenting skills and familiarize themselves with the individual or group that the child wishes to spend time with and evaluate the child's maturity level and ability to participate in the activity appropriately. When appropriate and available, birth families should be included in the decision making process, although this is not always possible because decisions will many times be made at times when the birth family cannot be contacted.

This memo is designed to begin a change of thinking with respect to normal adolescent behavior and activities. Hopefully, this memo will begin the process of agencies coming

together with ideas about how they "can do" something instead of how they "cannot." An example is driver's licenses for children in foster care. The intent is to assume a child can obtain his or her license with appropriate guidance and support. There may be a grandparent, aunt or uncle or foster parent willing to assist. Staff should encourage and support the child in identifying resources and support that will allow the child to be successful in this and other age appropriate activities.

Children in foster care should be allowed to experience the same opportunities as other children in the most normal, healthy and safe method possible. The following bulleted items are activities and issues that are considered "normal" for children:

- Children in custody of the department, as appropriate, should be permitted and encouraged to engage in appropriate social activities, obtain employment, have contact with family members, have access to the telephone, have reasonable curfews, travel with other youth or adults, and participate in extracurricular activities.
- Children in the custody of the department should be supported in efforts to learn to drive a car and obtain a driver's license, depending on age and maturity level.
- Children in the custody of the department should be provided opportunities to learn skills needed for independent living such as food management, money management, consumer awareness, personal hygiene and appearance, housekeeping and personal belongings, transportation, job seeking and interpersonal relationship building.
- Children in the custody of the department should be provided training and information concerning drug and alcohol use and abuse, teen sexuality issues, runaway prevention, health services, community involvement, knowledge of available resources, and legal issues and knowledge of legal rights.
- Children in the custody of the department shall be afforded every opportunity to socialize and have normal life experiences. Such social and normal experiences may include permission to attend overnight or other planned outings as determined by the licensed out-of-home caregiver. The decision process for determining approval for such events shall take into account the provision for adult supervision appropriate to the child's age and developmental level while the child is on an outing.
- Depending on a particular child's age, maturity level, and ability to make appropriate decisions, children in the custody of the department may be allowed to take part in activities without direct supervision. This may include dating, part-time employment, babysitting, arriving home after school and social outings with friends.
- The licensed out-of-home caregiver is the primary decision-maker and familiarity with the child in the custody of the department and the circumstances in which the child shall be unsupervised shall be a factor in decision-making. The Primary Worker shall be available to provide consultation and be involved in decision-making when necessary or requested.
- Confidentiality requirements for department records shall not restrict the children's participation in customary activities appropriate for the child's age and

developmental level. Children should be encouraged and assisted in participating in activities such as having his or her picture taken for publication in a newspaper or yearbook; receiving public recognition for accomplishments; participating in school or after-school organizations or clubs; and participating in community events. Children shall be able to participate in activities that promote personal and social growth, self-esteem and independence as long as they are not identified as foster children.

- Children in the custody of the department should receive an allowance no less frequently than each month, with the amount to be determined by the current board rate schedule. The out-of-home caregiver must not expect the child to use this allowance for purchasing personal hygiene items, school supplies or other necessities. Allowances may not be withheld as a form of discipline.

These guidelines should be shared with case managers, licensing and placement staff, recruitment and retention staff, independent living staff, supervisors, administration within the department and community-based care agencies, foster parents, group home staff and administrators and contracted service providers.

It should be stressed that foster parents and group home staff must have the support and encouragement when making decisions regarding activities for teens. These are not always easy decisions, but are vital in raising healthy, well-adjusted children in foster care.

These guidelines are approved for immediate implementation.