



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

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Pennsylvania Courts Highlight “Normalcy” for Children in Foster Care

Video focuses on new laws and creating normalcy for foster youth

HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer says a new educational video released today highlights the benefits of a new child welfare law giving foster youth the same opportunities to participate in “normal” activities as their friends, without the unnecessary involvement of case managers, provider agencies or the court system.

The normalcy initiative is part of the federal Strengthening Families Act, which requires states to comply with this act by modifying or enacting new law. Pennsylvania’s legislature recently passed legislation, which took effect immediately.

The [*Establishing Normalcy for Foster Youth* video](#) was produced by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), a unit of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC). The video is intended for judges, hearing masters, attorneys, child welfare professionals and foster families.

“Normalcy is a critical factor in child development as we strive to raise good, productive, healthy and happy citizens,” Justice Baer said. “Every day experiences help youth navigate childhood and adolescence, and ultimately, transition into adulthood. Many times, foster youth miss out on these rites of passage due to barriers created by the system.”

“Participating in sports or clubs, going to the prom, attending community events, working a summer job, getting a driver’s license or hanging out with friends are all critical to a child’s well-being – not only emotionally, but in developing valuable life-coping skills,” said Sandra Moore, director for OCFC.

Opportunities to participate in age and developmentally appropriate activities (collectively referred to as “normalcy”) help promote a foster youth’s well-being by teaching responsibility, encouraging the development of healthy decision-making skills, increasing a sense of belonging and preparing youth for a successful transition to adulthood. The video highlights these benefits and other important issues, such as:

- What it means to promote normalcy
- Why the increased focus on normalcy
- In their own words...clips from young adults previously in foster care
- How being treated “differently” impacts foster youth
- What the courts, legal and child welfare professionals can do to help.

For years foster youth and foster parents have faced real and perceived barriers that involved complicated procedures and time-consuming approval processes, and ultimately resulted in missed opportunities.

“Repeatedly, we’ve heard from youth in Pennsylvania that their foster care experience was completely different than their friends who were not in foster care, which has impacted these young people well into their adult lives,” said Moore.

The “Reasonable and Prudent Parent” standard incorporated into the law removes obstacles and red tape by empowering foster parents, rather than caseworkers or the legal system, to make the same types of decisions they would make for their own children, such as joining a school athletic team, getting a driver’s license or going out to eat with friends.

“Children come into the dependency system for a variety of reasons, typically for reasons that are out of their control,” said Moore. “But time doesn’t stand still. They continue to grow and mature while in foster care. And if we want them to develop the skills needed to become productive members of society, they need opportunities similar to those youth not in foster care.”

Courts, legal advocates, child-welfare professionals and foster families are encouraged to watch the video and examine local practices that impact the scope of opportunities provided to foster youth.

“Many of us take for granted these ‘normal’ experiences, but, for many youth in foster care, ‘normal’ is often out of reach,” added Justice Baer. “It’s an understatement to say that normalcy matters greatly to every child in the dependency system. As judges, we have to remain vigilant in our resolve to ensure that all of Pennsylvania’s foster children have ongoing opportunities to be involved in activities that enhance their physical, emotional and spiritual growth.

“Each case should be treated as if it’s the only child you’re going to see that day. Judges carry the ultimate responsibility. The buck stops with us. It’s our job to make sure that the youth are not penalized for being in foster care.”

[Watch the video online](#) or obtain copies by contacting the Office of Children and Families in the Courts at 717-231-3300 ext. 4255 or elke.moyer@pacourts.us.

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Editor’s Note:

Since 2006, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, along with the Department of Human Services and other partners, has reduced the number of dependent and delinquent children in temporary foster care homes by more than 7,000, or 33 percent. Placing these children into a permanent family setting greatly improves their chances to succeed and significantly reduces the cost of institutional care, saving an estimated \$117 million annually.