Children's Home Society of North Carolina

Decision Making for Foster Parents in North Carolina

WHAT *YOU* CAN DECIDE AND *WHEN* DSS OR THE COURT MUST APPROVE

Being a foster parent often means holding two truths at the same time: You are the day to day parent—the one who comforts a child after nightmares, packs lunches, helps with homework, enforces bedtime, celebrates milestones, and manages big feelings.

And yet, you are not the legal parent. Legal custody remains with the Department of Social Services (DSS), and certain decisions—especially those with long term, medical, or legal impact—must go through systems that are not always quick or simple. This tension can be one of the hardest and least talked about parts of foster care.

Why the System Works This Way

When a child enters foster care, the court gives legal custody to **DSS**, not because foster parents are untrusted, but because the state is temporarily responsible for:

- **Protecting parental rights**
- **Ensuring due process**
- **Making decisions that may have permanent or legal impact**

That structure can feel frustrating in daily life, especially when a child's needs are immediate and real.

North Carolina law emphasizes normalcy through the *Reasonable & Prudent Parent Standard.*

The Reasonable & Prudent Parent Standard (RPPS)

RPPS means you may make decisions the way a careful parent would, considering:

- **The child's health & safety**
- **The child's age, maturity, & development**
- **The child's trauma history & needs**
- **Encouraging emotional & social growth**

When applied correctly, RPPS protects foster parents from liability and promotes normal childhood experiences.

Decisions Foster Parents MAY Make Independently

Daily Life & Activities

RPPS applies

- Sleepovers, birthday parties, playdates
- School clubs, sports, field trips (some clubs/sports may require additional approvals)
- Camps & overnight activities lasting up to 72 hours
- Recreational outings (movies, fairs, amusement parks)
- Dating & social events (age appropriate)
- Jobs (part time, age appropriate)

Routine Care & Appearance

RPPS applies

- Basic grooming — ***Note:*** haircuts require DSS approval
- Clothing choices
- Non permanent hairstyle changes (braids,

School Related

RPPS applies

- Sign routine school forms
- Parent teacher communication
- Attend school events & meetings

Decisions That REQUIRE DSS Approval

Hair Care & Appearance

- Haircuts or coloring

Travel

- Out of state travel
- International travel
- In state trips over 72 hours

Religious Decisions

- Changes to the child's religious practice or affiliation (if inconsistent with prior practice)

Medical & Mental Health

- All medical consent (foster parents do NOT legally consent)
- Surgery or invasive procedures
- Psychotropic medications
- Counseling, psychiatric care requiring informed consent
- DSS may consent or must seek parental consent or a court order, depending on the service.

Decisions That REQUIRE Court Approval

Permanent or Legal Decisions

- Body modifications (tattoos, piercings beyond basic ear piercing*)
- Marriage
- Name change
- Enlistment in armed services
- Adoption or guardianship acts

**Basic ear-piercing policies can vary by county—always check with DSS first.*

Best Practice Tips for Foster Parents

- When in doubt, contact the child's DSS social worker
- Document major decisions & approvals
- Apply RPPS individually to each child
- Different counties may have different approaches to RPPS
- Remember: Normalcy is the goal, safety is the boundary

For foster parents licensed with Children's Home Society, log in to your Sky Prep account for additional trainings.

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