

Normalcy: Letting Kids Be Kids

What is normalcy?

In 2014, Congress enacted a law that promoted “normalcy” for children and youth in the child welfare system. Normalcy means allowing children and youth in care the same opportunities to participate in age-appropriate activities as any other child. In other words, normalcy is “letting kids be kids”.

The law not only allows for normalcy for children and youth but also for kinship and resource parents. It empowers you to use your own judgement in making decisions about the day-to-day activities of your children and youth in care, using the Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard. The standard encourages you to protect your child’s best interests while encouraging their emotional and developmental growth and helping them learn how to handle the freedom and responsibility that comes with age so that they can have experiences similar to their peers who are not in care.

As a kinship or resource parent, what decisions am I allowed to make?

You can make decisions about whether a youth can participate in enrichment, social, and cultural activities. You can make these decisions on your own, without getting the permission of a Worker or going to court, but keep in mind communication with the Worker is important, so keep them up-to-date on any decisions made.

Examples of activities you may now decide on include, but are not limited to:

- Community events and activities
- Family events
- Most travel outside of the county or state

- Camping/hiking
- Sporting activities with use of appropriate protective gear
- Swimming and water activities with appropriate supervision and safety equipment for water activities
- Day/sleepover camps
- Field trips
- School-related activities
- Youth organization activities
- Sports activities
- Attending a movie, going to the mall, or other social outings with friends
- Spending the night away from the caregiver’s home at the home of friends or as part of a planned activity
- Obtaining employment or internships
- Dating
- Travel in cars with peers and/or peers’ parents
- Access to a telephone for phone calls with family members and peers
- Access to the internet and social media

While some young people may take simple things like going out to the diner after the big game or attending a sleepover for granted, for children and youth in care these everyday experiences act as a buffer against the trauma of being separated from family, familiar communities, and support systems. They also help young people prepare for adulthood by fostering the development of social skills and sound decision making.

Even with normalcy, are there certain decisions, as a Kinship or Resource Parent, that I cannot make?

While decisions around these types of activities are important, it should be noted that the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard does not apply to all decisions about children and youth in care. Reasonable and prudent parenting decisions cannot interfere with therapy or with

required schedules, nor can they go against any existing court orders. They also may not violate existing laws applicable to other areas, such as medical or educational statutes or administrative rules. These include, but are not limited to:

- Court-ordered visitation
- Medical approvals/Other medical laws
- Medication authorizations or approvals
- Disciplinary and control policies, regulations, and rights
- Confidentiality policies
- Education-related decision

What if my child in care gets hurts during an activity I approved?

According to New Jersey law, you are not to be held liable for harm caused to a child who participates in an activity you approved, provided you have been trained in and acted in accordance with the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard. This protection allows you to let your decisions be guided by your own good judgement and parenting skills instead of fear.

Normalcy decisions should:

- Encourage the child’s formation of healthy, age-appropriate social relationships and bonds
- Permit the child’s participation in age-appropriate social activities and events
- Allow the child to exercise age-appropriate autonomy and decision-making authority within reasonable limits
- Allow the child to maintain an age-appropriate degree of personal privacy
- Avoid imposing upon the child’s conduct any unreasonable burden not generally imposed upon other children of the same age and maturity level

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You may also be left wondering what would happen if you are sued after a child becomes injured during an activity you approved. The Division of Children and Families (DCF) would provide you an attorney to represent you, as long as you made your decision using the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard.

Is my child in care able to have a cell phone?

DCF supports the use of electronic devices and access to the internet by children and youth in care. You can determine access and use for in accordance with the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard. The Division of Child Protection & Permanency (CP&P) encourages open communication between caregivers and their youth in developing rules and safety plans regarding social media and electronic devices. You can explain rules surrounding access and use of electronic devices to the youth in your care and consult with the Worker if any conflict should arise or they need assistance.

If a child or youth enters your care with a cell phone or other electronic device, and it is determined they will have access to it, the monthly maintenance cost is the responsibility of the paying party. If the paying party ceases to continue payment, or the youth does not have their own device, and you believe they should, you can opt to provide a cell phone or electronic device to the youth and absorb the cost or arrange for payment in consultation with the youth's case planning team. Regardless of any house rules established regarding electronic devices, children or youth in care must always have access to a phone and a private location within your home to contact parents, siblings, law guardians and their Worker.

Who can I contact for resources for activities for my child to participate in?

As a caregiver, you may need to get creative in finding free and low-cost activities for children and youth. Websites and social media pages for your town, county and chamber of commerce are great places to start. Libraries also offer a plethora of free programming for children of all ages, along with local and state parks. Networking with other resource parents at embrella's Connecting Families meetings is a good way to get reliable information on what is available in your area; see our website for a listing of upcoming meetings. You can also

reach out to your embrella Family Support Advocate for additional help finding local resources.

For more information, register for our kinship and resource parent course Normalcy: Letting Kids Be Kids. Visit www.embrella.org to learn more.