

## The Positive Impacts of Fostering

Parenting has often been called the most difficult job you'll ever love. And, as all parents know, the job comes with countless surprises, joys, and, yes, challenges. We often hear from foster parents that they feel "called" to do this particular kind of parenting. That, despite knowing the circumstances and situations will likely be stressful, they volunteer for the task.

As foster parents, you are provided with the opportunity of making a positive and profound impact on the lives of children. As foster parents, you provide hope for a brighter future and comfort in times of uncertainty. You are responsible for creating positive relationships that can last a lifetime.

Taking a look at the many positive impacts being a foster parent can have on not only the children in your care, but also on you, as a foster parent, can be a helpful reminder of why you do what you do, even when the days are tough. For example, have you noticed any of the following?

- **A larger world view.** For many foster parents, welcoming children into their home has helped educate them on life experiences

that they never could have imagined. Their compassion for others has grown by building relationships with people different from themselves.

- **Being more giving.** Caring for children, particularly children who have experienced trauma, forces foster parents to recognize that it is not about them, but the child. Foster parents turn their lives upside down to care

for the children in their homes and the rewards are tremendous.

- **Increased understanding about the brain, trauma, maltreatment, discrimination, and addiction.**

As a foster parent, you often have to educate yourself about what the children in your care have experienced so that you can best care

for them. Foster parenting is a commitment to lifelong learning.

For those of you who have biological children living at home, your family becomes a fostering family. As a fostering family, there are countless opportunities for your children to gain positive life lessons and insights. Following are some examples:



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- Learning **communication and interpersonal skills** regarding how to get along with others is one benefit for the fostering family. We learn from one another and we grow from all of our interactions and experiences with each another. We all have had to learn a variety of communication skills to assist us in getting along with others and the fostering family experience will teach these skills to one and all.
- **Caring for and about the lives of others** are often revealed as motivational factors for families who have chosen to journey into fostering. As foster parents, you have witnessed firsthand the impact of traumatic events have had and continue to have on the lives of children and youth who you welcome into your home. For your children, however, these insights will most likely be new and enlightening experiences.
- Your children will learn firsthand about **saying goodbye**. While goodbyes can be difficult, they are also important skills that can teach valuable life lessons about grief and loss. As their parents, you can guide your children through the emotional experiences associated with grief and loss by teaching coping skills.
- Learning **how to make others feel safe, welcomed, and comfortable**, as well as how to work together, find common ground, and work through challenges or conflicts, are additional life lessons that being a member of a fostering family can provide. As a fostering family, you and your children will learn the powerful impact of leading with a compassionate heart.
- For children, **learning to share** their space, toys, and time with important people in their lives goes hand in hand with the fostering family experience. Although there most likely be some “bumps in the road,” learning to share with others will be a mutually beneficial lifelong lesson for everyone,

Will there be challenges along the way? Absolutely. Will it always be easy? No. However, it will be an enormously impactful experience.

Peg, a foster and adoptive parent in Wisconsin, shared with us how being a fostering family has helped all of the children in her life: *“There have been many unexpected impacts for our family. Our children have become much more empathetic and have been a part of the healing process for the children who have been in our foster home. The fostering experience has made the children in our family more caring.”*

As foster parents, you provide nurturing, comfort, security, structure, support, consistency, and ultimately, hope to the children and youth that you foster. Hope for new beginnings, new opportunities, new experiences, new insights, and a renewed sense of empathy and compassion for all. And you also teach each of the children in your lives these same priceless qualities.

## **Resources**

### *Tip Sheets*

- [Preparing the Kids in Your Home for Fostering](#)
- [Learning to Let Go: Coping with Reunification Anxiety](#)

### *Library Materials*

- [Supporting the Emotional Healing of the Children in Your Care, Fostering Across Wisconsin, Summer 2016](#)
- *Nine Most Important Needs of Foster and Adopted Children*, by Juli Alvarado



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# How Family Events & Traditions Affect the Children and Youth in Your Care

As a foster or adoptive parent, you do your best to make the child in your care feel welcomed into your home and part of your family. A great way to do so is by including them in your family traditions and activities. While your intentions are honorable, you may find that some of your traditions may be difficult for the child in your care. Keeping the child's needs in mind as you take part in various family traditions may help avoid unexpected meltdowns.

For example, some events or gatherings may be too overstimulating for the child. There may be many people gathered in a small space. Sometimes, the noise can be too much. Or, perhaps there are just too many things going on at one time. This can be tough for many kids to manage and those with trauma histories may be particularly sensitive.

Or, perhaps some extended family members don't support or understand your decision to foster or adopt. They may make comments—either explicitly or implicitly—about the child or your decision that can be offensive. In addition, there may be other children in the family who have not been taught about foster care or adoption and therefore say mean things to the child in your care. Regardless, you would not want to purposefully put your child in an uncomfortable situation or expose them to bullying.

In addition, some holidays and traditions may be triggering to the child in your care. While most of us associate happy feelings with special days and events, some children only remember the bad things that happened on those days. Christmas

may be a reminder of the extreme poverty they experienced, or a reminder of the stress-filled fights their parents had during the holidays. Some children may experience triggers and can't even recall what they are about. They may shut down, withdraw, or become emotional during special occasions where they should be happy and celebrating.



Finding the right balance of what works for your family may take a little time. A good place to start may be a family meeting. Together you can talk about traditions that are meaningful for you, as well as for the new child in your care. What memories do you have from your own childhood that you'd like to continue or renew? What about the

children in your care—what kinds of things do they remember fondly? Are there any things you absolutely wish to continue? Which might you be okay with letting go of? Are there new traditions that you might want to explore or try as a family?

Perhaps there are relatively easy work-arounds. For example, if the child doesn't do well with lots of people around, you might change the location of a family gathering to be at your home. That way, when they feel the need to step away, they have a safe place to go. When going to another relative's home or a different location, you might consider bringing along a special toy, blanket, or other item that makes the child feel safe and comfortable even when they are not at home. Some cases may be more complex and you may need to consider larger changes. Holidays and birthdays can sometimes be triggers for children and

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youth in care (or who were adopted); reminders of the birth family they have lost or can't yet be with. In those cases, you may decide that the best thing for the child and your family is to not join in a larger family celebration.

Another step in finding the best balance is talking with members of your extended family and support circle. Share with them about the child's needs and how they can have the best, most positive interactions with them. You may need to educate your family about appropriate adoption or foster care terms or language or inform them of specific topics that are best avoided when the child is near. Such conversations can go a long way in helping members of your family feel more confident and comfortable with the children in your care.

The other side of that issue, of course, is helping the children in your care feel comfortable and safe with your extended family. There may be times when they feel on display, or as if all eyes in the room are on them. One-on-one conversations with the child can help them understand more about who they may be meeting or interacting with, as well as teach you about how the child or youth would like to be introduced. For example, one child in care expressed that what helped him

most was to slowly meet the members of his foster parent's extended family on separate occasions. He said that, at a large family gathering, there were too many people at one time and it led him to feel overwhelmed.

As parents, you may already understand or are well on your way to learning about the child's needs and about the topics, things, or situations that may trigger them. Remember that it may take time for children to open up and want to be a part of your extended family or to build trust with relatives. Keep talking—with the child and with your extended family and circle of support—about how everyone can feel comfortable, as well as what feels best for your family. Trust your natural instincts about what will be best for your family, and know that the Coalition is here to support you with resources, strategies, tools, and even connections with other families who have been on a similar path.

## **Saying Hello, Saying Goodbye: Celebrating, Recognizing, & Honoring Arrivals and Departures**

Every move a child makes can be traumatic. At the very least, every move involves a loss. And loss is tough for all of us. Foster parents and foster families play an important part in minimizing the loss a child experiences both entering and leaving care.

By the time a child arrives at your home, they have already experienced many losses. They've been separated from the parents, their home, their toys, and even possibly friends, school, and pets. They are coming to your home where they don't know the people, the rules, the food, or even where they are going to sleep. They may be sad, confused, scared, or angry. As a foster family, you can take steps to help them feel more comfortable as they adjust to their new surroundings.

Here are some ideas for how your family can welcome a child into your home and help them feel as safe and comfortable as possible:

- You can introduce yourselves and your home, and what role you will play in

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the child's life, using age appropriate tools and language.

- Give the child an opportunity to introduce themselves to your family, so that you know the "likes and dislikes" of this child. For example, what are their favorite foods, their nighttime routine, or their favorite family activities? Patience is key here as some children will not feel comfortable or safe enough to share even their most superficial thoughts initially. Using art, music, writing, or other art forms might help break the ice.
- We know you'll want to surround the child with love, warmth, and empathy. You may want to show your care in a way that doesn't feel threatening or scary for a child new to your home. While this seems obvious, it may look different for every child, depending on their history and personality. For some kids, lots of space and very little talking may be just how you demonstrate your care when the child first arrives.



to mark the occasion with one or more special family activities:

- A special meal and gift commemorating their time spent with your family.
- An addition to their life book with photos of activities that happened while the child was in

your care (being careful to protect the identities of any other children who were in your home at the same time).

- A gathering that includes the child's birth family, as way to set the stage for continued support to the family after reunification.

What about you as a foster parent? You may be experiencing anxiety or even fear about what will happen to the child after they leave. You're hopeful that he or she continues to heal and grow. Maybe the child is moving on toward something you sense is healthy and positive, and so you're relieved and happy. No matter what the thoughts or emotions, we encourage you to pause.

You've put your heart and soul into caring for this child; take this time to acknowledge and honor those feelings.

If you're struggling with some negative emotions surrounding the child in your care leaving, your behavior may impact your family and make your day to day life challenging. There are things you can do to ease the stress on you and your family:

- Reach out. Sometimes talking and feeling heard is how we process anxiety and/or grief and loss. Having someone really listen to your feelings about the departure of this child may relieve your stress and anxiety. It might be a family member, another foster parent, or even the staff at the Coalition.

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Equally important are the goodbyes. There may be many reasons why a child is leaving your home. They may be going home with their parents, to a relative, an adoptive home, or simply another foster home. Regardless, emotions can be mixed. Even in the happiest of circumstances, there still may be feelings of sadness, guilt, or anxiety, for both you *and* the child. Even if a child leaves because this is not a good fit, you want the event to be as positive as possible. No foster parent wants a child to feel like it is their fault that they are moving again.

When honoring a child's leaving, you may want



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- Connect with others. A support group of foster parents have walked in your shoes and may help you feel understood. A group like this will know instantly how to relate to your feelings, and will give meaning to your experience.
- Self-care. What do you do to refill your cup? Whether it's finding a way to relax or to do a creative activity, doing some self-care will help rejuvenate and heal you.
- Take a break. Some foster parents discover that, after saying goodbye to a child in care, their own family needs a break. They need time to heal from the stress of having a new, and sometimes traumatized, child in their midst and then from the grief and loss of saying goodbye. Families may need time to cherish the simple joys of being together "alone."

Also, consider the unique experiences of your own children. What does the goodbye mean for them? Each of your children will likely deal with this transition differently. The personality, developmental age, and the kind of relationship your child had with the child in your care will be clues as to how to help them cope at this time. Did your young son look up to a teen in care as a big brother? This may be the time to ask him about what he'll miss about this relationship. Did your daughter of the same age as the child in your care like having a buddy on the same soccer team? She may feel a big hole has opened up in her life, and may need help in understanding how to cope with that empty feeling. All the suggestions above that you consider for you are important to consider for your children.

We hope you'll consider that, even if you've been through placements and reunifications a dozen times, each arrival and departure is a unique experience for this particular child and family. Each arrival or departure affects every member of your family. Putting together some rituals or traditions to celebrate and honor arrivals and departures provides you with a wonderful opportunity to involve your children in these special events. These are also times for your family members to work through complex

feelings, take care of themselves, and find ways to process the whole experience. We hope these suggestions will be helpful as you continue those "hellos" and "goodbyes" as a foster family.

*Katherine and John, foster parents in Wisconsin with two birth children, find ways to include the whole family when welcoming a new child to their home. Their children like to do the following:*

- *Make sure the child's bedroom is neat and clean and the sheets are sparkling fresh.*
- *Put together a welcome gift box for the child.*
- *Have a welcome sign, which they make themselves and take the time to decorate so it feels special.*
- *Act as tour guides for the child to show them around the home.*
- *Serve as role models for the rules and expectations in the household.*

*John and Katherine try to make it clear to the child that they understand that it takes time to settle in and adjust to a different home. At the same time, they bend their own family's plans to accommodate the new child in their care. When an eight-year-old with an upcoming birthday arrived in their home, they combined their own child's birthday party with this new child's celebration. Along with their own extended family, John and Katherine invited the extended family of the child in care. They wanted the birth family to feel welcome. This also set the stage for the shared parenting and visitation that John and Katherine hoped to engage in with this new family.*



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# How Extended Family Members Grieve the Loss of Children in Care

by Casey W.

As foster parents, we have many hours of training under our belts. We've learned how to prepare and what to expect when a child is placed in our care. We learn the first goal of any foster placement is reunification of the child with his or her biological family. We prepare, prepare, prepare, and are as ready as we can be for the best times and most challenging times.

Many of us are blessed with very special people who are there for the celebrations, when we need to cry on their shoulders, for stories and special memories. They are our extended families, our parents, siblings, cousins, and friends. We wouldn't be able to do what we do without this specific community

of loved ones who share our love for these children and are always there with a helping hand or to lend an ear when we need it. What we all sometimes forget, though, is that these incredible people don't go through the training we do. Often, they don't have the same mindset that we do

and may not even understand why we do what we do—but they are still there to support us as best they can—even when a child leaves our care. Our community of support becomes part of the foster system through association. They didn't receive the hours of training credits, go through the home studies and mounds of paperwork, but that doesn't stop them from loving the kids that cross our doorstep.



As foster parents, we know that reunification happens and, along our journey with the child, we attend court proceedings, speak to case workers, ask innumerable questions, and usually have an idea of where the case is headed.

Typically, we have time to prepare mentally to say goodbye to the child who has shared our home and has become a member of our family. But, what about our community? They are often blindsided, lost, or confused, and when a child leaves, they suffer from grief that can go unnoticed. How, as foster families, can we help with the grief that our extended family members feel when a child in care leaves our home?

As one foster mom shared, when the first child they fostered was reunified with their birth

family, her parents cried tears not only for their own grief of losing their “grandchild,” but also tears for their own daughter’s grief. It is hard to watch someone you care about hurt, especially when you are grieving, too. In my own story, I wasn’t prepared for my family to become as attached to the children we

were fostering as I was. They had become their grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. To see my family grieve took me by surprise. None of the training I received to become a foster parent prepared me to see my parents break down in tears and yet be steadfast in their support for me.

Understandably, there may be times when our own emotions are too great and we simply cannot help others grieve while we are going through our own

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## ***How Extended Family Members Grieve, continued from page 7***

feelings of loss. However, there still may be some ideas that would help our community work through the grief they are feeling, as well. In one family, the grandmother asked the child in care to pick out a special charm for her charm bracelet. Even this simple thing leaves the child with a sense that they won't be forgotten and the grandmother has a physical remembrance of her time with the child. Here are some other ways we can help our extended families honor the memory of the time children in care were in our home and, in turn, help the grieving process when they leave:

- Have a journal of memories that was shared with each child



The grief that we all experience along the fostering journey is shared by those who love and support and care for us. We hope some of these small ideas will help you and your extended circles of family and friends through the times of loss or sadness along your paths. The Coalition for Children, Youth, and Families also offers support through shared personal experience (ask about our Journey Partner program), available books and videos in our

Lending Library, trainings, and tip sheets.

- Create picture collages of the child with our extended family members
- Make hand prints on canvas
- Purchase or make a special holiday ornament
- Plant flowers to remember them by

### **Resources**

- [Touchpoints: Preparing Children for Transitions](#)
- [Family Preparation for Reunification](#)
- [When a Foster Child Leaves Your Home](#)

We are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at [\*\*info@wifostercareandadoption.org\*\*](mailto:info@wifostercareandadoption.org).



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