

Facing Grief & Loss as a Foster Family

In welcoming a child into your home, you become an essential part of their life. You provide love, comfort, care, safety, and stability. And you are keenly aware that the child entrusted into your care could be with you for hours, days, weeks, months, or even years. After all, case plans can and do change over time. Regardless, you know from the first call that the goal for the majority of children in out-of-home care is to reunite with their birth parents.

Nurturing, guiding, empowering, and parenting a child for an indeterminate amount of time requires an incredible amount of strength, patience, empathy, compassion, commitment, determination, and resilience. Fostering a child requires an emotional investment and commitment by everyone in your family. You will all experience complex emotions, from love and joy to grief and loss and the myriad emotions in between. Some foster parents equate these feelings to being on an emotional roller coaster, consisting of unexpected ups and downs, twists and turns, and even the occasional loop-de-loop!

Knowing this, how can you prepare for such an emotional journey of grief and loss?

As a foster parent, identifying, understanding, and helping children cope with the complicated

feelings of grief and loss happens daily. You are often helping the children in your care name the emotions they are experiencing, teaching them that those feelings are normal and okay before you can model healthy coping skills. For children and youth in care with past trauma histories, this process becomes essential to their well-being.

Over the length of time that a child is in your care, be it short or long, you undoubtedly form emotional attachments and connections. Learning that the child will return home to the care of their birth family can set off a chain reaction of emotions in you. True happiness knowing that the child will soon be reunited with their family of origin, and the pain of loss, knowing that you will soon be saying goodbye to a child you have grown to love.

As John DeGarmo writes in [this article in Youth Today](#): "When the child leaves our home and our family, our hearts should break. We should experience feelings of grief and loss. After all, we have given all of our hearts and love to a child in need. The unconditional love of a parent, what better gift is there than this for the child?"

Part of the nature of foster care is the inevitable reality that you will have to say goodbye to children and youth you have

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Facing Grief & Loss as a Foster Family, continued

cared for. It is never easy. The amount of time that the child spent with you varies, as do the reasons for their goodbyes. Still, those goodbyes are bittersweet and challenging for everyone involved.

Even the most experienced foster families will find that the cycle of welcome, connection, separation, and sadness takes an emotional toll. Mary Ann Siler, a foster parent with Vernon County Social Services, recently shared with us about a part of her journey. "I love our foster daughter, and I will be very sad if she leaves. She has special needs, so she takes a lot of care. This also means that we have grown very close. I think there will be a big void in my life when she goes."

That void is something that other members of her family need to prepare for, as well. "Most often, our own children are in the dark about the situation changing until it is happening," Mary Ann said. "It is really important to take time for them."

Following are some ways that you might consider as you prepare yourself and your family for eventual grief and loss—as well as ways to help heal your hearts and keep caring.

1. Seek out Support

You may feel like you and your family are all alone; however, please know that you are not! While it may be difficult for most people to understand your situation, other foster parents will have an insightful understanding and awareness of what you are going through and how you feel. Consider reaching out to your local foster parent support group. If you are not aware of any support groups, be sure to reach out to your Foster Care Coordinator or caseworker for recommendations and support.

2. Make Memories Together

When you know that the child in your care will be making a move—whether to their birth family or another caregiver—you might plan a going-away party. A celebratory gathering would give you and everyone in your family the chance to remember and honor the special times you all shared together as a foster family. You could also consider gifting the child a life book. The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association website also has a downloadable life book template, or you could create a photo album that includes mementos and photographs.

3. Maintain Connections if Possible

Depending on the child in your care, family situation, and family dynamics, you may be able to connect with one another after the child transitions to their birth home. Reach out to your Foster Care Coordinator or caseworker to see if ongoing contact and communication would be possible.

4. Practice Self-Care

While it is important to allow yourself time to feel the grief and loss, it is equally beneficial for you and all of your family members to practice positive self-care. You could take a walk, watch a favorite movie together, read a book, listen to music, or reach out to your foster parent colleagues for support. Self-care is essential for everyone in your family during this time.

Foster care will transform you, your family, and your kids in ways both big and small. We encourage you to remember the tremendous positive impact you have on children, youth, and families. Please know that the team at the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families appreciates all you do, and we are here to provide you and your family with support and resources throughout your entire fostering journey. Our Resource Specialists are just a phone call away: (414) 475-1246, or send us an email at info@coalitionforcyf.org.



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Through the Lens of Loss: How You Can Help Children Heal

Mia, aged fifteen, had a habit of climbing out the second-story window of her home late at night, shimmying down a porch post, and being with friends until the early hours of the morning. Eventually, youth justice became involved, and Mia ended up in care. Mia disclosed that her stepfather had been abusing her for years. Mia's mother rejected her daughter's accounts of the abuse and began a pattern of fewer and fewer visits with Mia.

When we think of children or youth like Mia, we wonder how they cope with this much loss. As foster parents, you want to wipe away the tears, give hugs, and make things whole for the child you are caring for. Yet, we know it's not always that simple.

The losses children in care experience are many. The abuse or neglect that led them to out-of-home care and the removal itself meant the loss of daily interaction with parents, siblings, neighbors, classmates, and pets, not to mention the loss of familiar surroundings, sights, smells, and so many others.

The loss and trauma kids in care have experienced are written in their bodies and displayed in how they respond to stress. Hormones like adrenaline and cortisol flood the child's body to prepare it to do something *right now* to survive. We know those responses as "fight, flight, or freeze." As a foster parent, you may have experienced scenes like this:

"I'm sorry, honey, but we are out of cereal for breakfast this morning. You'll have to eat something else."

"But I hate everything else! I want cereal!"

"I know this is disappointing. I care about you. There are other things to choose from."

"I *can't* eat anything else! Now I can't go to school!"

When children experience these types of losses, their responses can be unpredictable, even for experienced foster parents. It's important not to take it personally. At that moment, the child can't

think clearly, problem-solve, or worry about what others might think. His brain tells him this is a life or death situation, and I need to figure out how to survive it.

Trauma responses happen in a primitive, lower part of the brain that is non-verbal. That's why trying to process challenging behaviors with children who have experienced loss or trauma will only create more stress. They simply cannot verbally connect their actions with their fear.

One of your roles as a foster parent is to interrupt that cycle of fear, extreme behavior, and more fear. When you can help the child out of that cycle, you create space for healing to occur. And healing is critical for the children you care for.

When children are in this cycle of fear, their bodies and brains are filled with stress hormones. These high-stress hormones frequently flooding a child's body make for wear and tear over time, creating a long-term impact on a child's well-being. Children who haven't learned to identify their emotions or who haven't learned to cope with their loss will, later in life, experience high rates of depression, heart disease, diabetes, or other physical or mental health problems.

Healing can only happen in trusting relationships. As you work with the child to build trust, you create a strong foundation from which healing can begin. Following are some ideas for activities to help children cope with their loss.

Lowering stress in the child's life

Creating a more predictable environment will mean a sense of safety for the child in your care. When you become a foster parent, you likely imagined the joyful, celebratory childhood moments: the birthday parties, family fun activities, and accomplishments at school. There will be times when you may need to reel in those expectations a bit and focus instead on the calm, the routine, and the predictable. Instead of the birthday party at a pizza restaurant with a piñata and fourteen classmates, you may need to host a small family gathering with cake and gifts at home.

Be an advocate for the child in

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Through the Lens of Loss, continued

your care at school. The behaviors of the children we care for can create mayhem at school—advocate for bypassing traditional consequences. You may also want to revisit and revise your expectations for academic performance. Talk to teachers and staff and remind them, if necessary, about trauma-informed practices.

Practicing self-regulation

Instead of a child going into orbit with their emotions and melting into a puddle of tears or lashing out in anger, self-regulation means learning how to come back down to earth. It means a child is having a sense of control by experiencing feelings without going into survival mode.

“One of our sons hated going to preschool. I wanted to pull him out and just keep him home. Still, our counselor at the time helped me see that he was having fun at preschool. He just had anxiety about separating. We created a ten-step process: Stay in the classroom, then move to sit by the door, then move outside the door, then stay in the building, and so on until I was able to leave him all morning and he could trust I was going to come back.

“Others thought we were babying him, but they just didn’t understand the amount of trauma our child had from feeling abandoned...By working together, we were all able to help him create a new sense of confidence.” – Kristin Berry, HonestlyAdoption.com

This takes a lot of practice as well as support from you. Kids can learn to mirror your emotional thermometer. You might say, “I care about you, it’s all going to be OK, I’m here with you,” in a soothing voice right after a negative behavior. Being empathetic and caring, rather than jumping straight to the “appropriate” behavior, will help a dysregulated child move toward calm instead of toward hyper-alertness.

Learning core capacities

Once kids are more regulated, they can begin to replace dysfunctional behaviors with healthy

ones. Of course, it’s challenging! As foster parents, you have the privilege and responsibility to coach the child in your care on the social skills that kids need to learn. These are the things the child from difficult places needs to learn and practice while they’re healing.

Jump in and do some role-playing. Ask foster parents in your connection group how they teach healthy behaviors. Consult with your worker.

Talk with your extended family (protecting confidentiality, of course). Mentoring or connecting with the child’s birth family is another piece of this puzzle.

Kids also need to be able to take risks and make mistakes when trying out new skills.

For foster parents, it’s a delicate balancing act to

support growth while also providing safety.

Delight in the child

Encourage the child in your care to explore their world and delight in that child as they experience joy. Be the anchor the child can return to, helping them feel safe and loved. Point out all that is positive and healthy, and make it clear you are in awe of who they are becoming. We know it isn’t always easy, especially when things are in crisis and children act out.

“We define love as an emotion, as a force that overcomes us. But love isn’t an emotion; it’s not a feeling. Love is something you do; it’s a verb. Like pulling your arms through a sweater each morning, the call is to ‘clothe yourself’ with all the characteristics of loving and to ‘put on love.’”

--Foster the Family Blog

Being enthusiastic about a child’s strengths will help undo the fear, loss, and rejection the child experienced during whatever trauma happened before they came to your home. The relationship you build with the child in your care is what creates healing. A child who learns to cope with loss through how you love and respond to him is a child who will not only survive but thrive.



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The Ones Who Stay: How Birth Children in Foster Families Handle Loss

Have you ever wondered how birth children of parents who foster define family? Studies have found that there is often a discrepancy in how parents perceive how their birth children view the foster care experience and how the birth children actually felt about the process. No matter how perfect a foster care placement may seem, feelings of loss can exist throughout the entire experience for the birth children in the family.

The type of loss that might be most apparent is the loss that occurs when a child you have been fostering leaves your care. Foster parents often struggle with the transition of a child leaving their home and may be unsure how to talk about this with their birth children. One birth child shared, “There’s been a lot of heartache around saying goodbye, around not having that much faith in where kids were going after they left our home. For myself personally, it caused a lot of questioning about how to love people and watch them leave.”

As a foster family, you might have a family meeting to talk together about how important your family’s role is—or has been—in a child’s life. “I didn’t really see it as a bad thing when kids left,” [Vanessa, a birth child, shared](#), “because I was happy for them to be reunited with their families.” Her parents had emphasized that being reunited with family was greater than the sadness they might feel, and their positivity extended to their daughter.

Researchers have found that birth children in a foster family share some common loss

experiences during a foster care placement. Some feel grief at having to share their parents. One birth child talked about missing the family traditions and time spent together on the weekends. “Before we used to foster, we used to go out a lot. Every weekend we used to go somewhere for a day out, but we don’t get to do that anymore.”



Birth children often shared that they felt like they needed to “shout” to be heard. They sometimes believed that they were forgotten. “It would have helped if I could have sat down and talked to Mom and Dad more, instead of having to get in trouble to get their attention.” This frustration of not being heard sometimes led them to decide not to

bother their parents with issues where they could have used their guidance and assistance. This emotional unrest also resulted in birth children removing themselves physically or emotionally from the family, such as isolating themselves in their bedroom or spending less time at home.

Fostering can also impact the relationship between birth siblings in the family. Birth children shared that they sometimes felt a decrease in closeness with siblings. They shared examples such as, “we don’t play games or talk as much because the foster kids are around,” or “my sister likes them, and they are her friends, so we don’t talk as much.”

Growing up as a birth child in a foster home is a unique

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The Ones Who Stay, continued

experience, and there is still a lot to be learned. Just as supports are provided for children in foster care, it may also be helpful to seek out or create spaces, such as groups and community events, for birth children of foster parents where they can share their stories and experiences with one another.

Whole families are involved in foster care. And birth children in foster families play a significant role in the success of caring for a child in foster care. We encourage you to talk openly and often with your children. Include them in conversations about accepting a foster care placement, when changes or transitions need to happen, and keeping in contact with children after they have left your family's care. Recognize and reward your children for their supporting role in your foster family.

It's true that fostering is challenging and can be stressful, but it also yields many rewards. While the choice to become a foster family ultimately belongs to parents, it is beneficial to include birth children in those discussions. Let your kids know that there will be good days and bad days, and remind them often that the love you have for them will always be there. Despite the challenges, many birth children who shared their feelings about their experiences spoke of a sense of pride in sharing their beloved families with others. Some planned to become foster parents themselves. One birth child who had reached adulthood shared, "It opened my eyes to the real world and taught me so much about life and how fortunate I was growing up."

The Cycle of Grief: Birth Parents, Loss & Healing

We all make mistakes. We focus on the wrong things. We deceive others. We deceive ourselves. Sometimes these mistakes are beyond our control. What really counts are the choices that follow those mistakes. Birth mother Jeanette Vega reflected on her past trauma and how it shaped her decision making in [Rise Magazine](#). "Our mistakes, even huge ones, can teach us more than all of our successes. Our children need to see that our mistakes don't make us failures."

When someone stumbles, we all have the opportunity to help them get back on their feet. One of the many ways foster parents do that is by showing birth parents understanding and compassion. Being open to learning, exploring, and understanding how a child's birth parent or

birth family member is feeling is essential to building a supportive relationship with that birth parent. Social worker, educator, and researcher [Charles Horejsi](#) has identified stages of grief that birth parents may go through while their children are in foster care. Many birth parents may be paralyzed by feelings of grief as they work through the stages. They may also feel completely overwhelmed by the tremendous life changes that are being required of them in order to have their children return. Keep in mind, these stages may not look the

same for every parent but knowing more about them can help you become a stronger partner in the journey towards reunification.

Stage 1: Shock

In this stage, parents are in



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The Cycle of Grief, continued

disbelief. The words people are saying don't seem to make sense. They are overwhelmed with worries about their child. Parents may be in denial and are certain their child will be returned to them by the next day. At this stage of the grief cycle, birth parents need to know that the people who are taking care of their children are not trying to replace them. No matter what caused their children to be placed outside their home, birth parents still care about them, deeply.

You may notice feelings of anger close to the surface. In such a difficult and life-changing situation, we will all struggle to understand exactly what a birth parent is feeling. We encourage you to be extra mindful; don't let angry words cloud your compassion. After having their child removed from their home and their care, a birth parent may now be struggling to figure out how they can advocate for themselves and their children.

Stage 2: Protest

During the protest stage, the birth parent's grief may show itself through feelings of sadness and anger or even physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, headaches, insomnia, or exhaustion. The birth parents may continue to be angry at everyone and make demands or threats. It may feel easier to blame others for the situation than to accept responsibility. This is a way of coping with despair. The birth parents may let the foster parents know, in no uncertain terms, that they are their children's only parents.

Jeannette Vega shared the story of what she was experiencing when her visits began with her child.

"When I visited my son at the foster care agency, he did not act like he did at home. At home, he

usually never got off me. Whether he was sitting, jumping, or playing, he was always interacting with me. During visits, though, he kept his distance and barely looked my way. The confusion I felt trying to understand his behavior toward me was overwhelming.

"I tried to imagine what was going through his little mind, asking myself, 'Is my son rejecting me because he hates me? Does he not feel my love for him? Does he think I'm a stranger, like an aunt who visits him weekly?' I also blamed the agency and the foster mother for the change in my son. For so long at visits, I was so upset and angry that I found it hard to even try to engage my son."



How can you help parents through the protest stage? Assure birth parents that you will not harm their child. Some may have heard scary stories about foster care. Be humble; let the birth parent be the knowledgeable one when talking about their child. They know their child better than anyone. Understand

that the birth parent's anger is an expression of grief. Continue to show compassion and empathy. Birth parents need to be heard, not judged. Motivate and support the birth parents as they learn how to parent their children in healthy ways. Let them hear again and again that their children need them.

Stage 3: Adjustment

In the adjustment stage, things start to settle down. If the birth parents feel that they have allies in their social worker and in the foster parents caring for their children, this stage may happen sooner. If trust in the foster parents has developed, the birth parents won't worry as much about the child's safety or

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The Cycle of Grief, continued

loyalty. Jeannette Vega shared,

“What helped me build back the attachment I had with my son was remembering our unbreakable bond before the system. I was also consistent with going to visits. No matter how mad, confused, or crazy I may have been, I loved my son more than life itself and I never missed a visit. That helped my son see that I wasn’t going anywhere and would always keep fighting for him.”

Although every family situation is different and unique, the hopeful result of working to understand a birth parent’s grief and the feelings associated with their loss is that the healing process takes the next steps toward positive reunification. The child becomes the primary focus of everyone on the care team, and birth parents continue to focus on building their parenting skills and actively participating in co-parenting their children with the foster parents. A positive relationship between birth and foster parents can help boost a birth parent’s self-

esteem and further guide them toward the goal of fulfilling their obligations and meeting the case plan goals.

Beyond the Stages

After reunification, some birth parents may want to maintain a relationship with the family who cared for their child or children. As a foster parent, you might take on the role of an aunt, uncle, or cousin, for example. You could offer to provide respite to birth parents by occasionally caring for the children. Reunification can be stressful. The support of the foster parents can help the family succeed in staying together. Staying involved after the children return home can also help you work through your emotions, as well. A slow and steady transition is healthy for both the children and the adults who love them. As a foster parent, you have the opportunity to serve as an advocate, mentor, and role model for the birth parents of children in your care. When birth and foster families work together, everyone wins—especially the children.



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Resources

Tip Sheets

- [What Grief & Loss Look Like for Children & Youth in Care](#)
- [The Challenges of Foster Care: Grief & Loss](#)
- [Grief and Loss: Making Space for Healing](#)
- [Helping Children Cope with Loss](#)
- [Is It Grief: Why Challenging Behaviors May be Signs of Grieving](#)
- [Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First](#)
- [Preparing the Kids in Your Home for Fostering](#)
- [Learning to Let Go: Coping with Reunification Anxiety](#)

Courses & Webinars

- [Weathering the Storm of Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#)
- [Foster Parents Supporting Birth Parents: Considerations for Success](#)
- [Starting a Virtual Support Group: The Basics](#)
- [Let's Talk: Partnering with Birth Parents](#)
- [Let's Talk: Reunification](#)
- [Working in Partnership with Birth Parents](#)
- [Grief & Loss in Foster Care & Adoption](#)
- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)

No Matter What Families Videos

- [Fostering the Family](#)
- [In It Together: Fostering as a Family](#)
- [Reunification Journey](#)

Other Library Resources

- [In My Heart](#), by Holly Band
- [Maybe Days](#), by Jennifer Wilgocki and Marcia Kahn Wright
- [A Knock on the Door: Stories by Biological Parents Who Have Children in Foster Care](#)

Additional Web Resources

- [Letter to a Foster Parent](#)
- [Saying Goodbye to Foster Children with Gratitude Instead of Grief](#)
- [Preparing to Say Goodbye to Another Foster Child](#)
- [Saying Goodbye](#)
- [Supporting Foster Parents through Their Loss and Grief](#)
- [What I Learned in Grief Counseling as a Foster Parent](#)
- [Resource Parents Partnering with Birth Parents to Benefit Children](#)
- [Rise Magazine: Act Now, Pay Later](#)
- [Building a Positive Relationship with Birth Parents](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Parenting: What You Should Know](#)
- [Becoming Trauma Informed Foster Parents](#)
- [Addressing the Impact of Foster Care on Biological Children and Their Families](#)
- [Fostering Families: Supporting Sons and Daughters of Foster Carers](#)
- [Exploring the Experience of Biological Children of Foster Parents](#)

The team at the Wisconsin Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center are always here for additional information, resources, and support.

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