

Fostering Across Wisconsin

A publication of the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

We Need to Talk: What to Expect When You Need to Have Difficult Conversations With the Children in Your Care



"We need to talk." Do those four words strike fear in your heart? They are usually the signal that a difficult conversation is on its way. Most of us are just not good at discussing potentially painful topics. Unfortunately, we can't avoid it. If you're fostering children, especially older youth, you'll probably need to talk to them about many difficult topics. Often, kids don't know the details of their own stories or may have questions that they are afraid to ask. How can we make this less stressful for all involved?

What do you want to talk about?

What comes to mind when you think of uncomfortable conversations with children in your care? Here are a few examples of issues that you may need to discuss:

- Is this my fault?
- If I'm really good, can I go home?
- Why is my mom or dad going to jail?
- Are my siblings safe? Why can't I be with them?
- Why can't I stay with my grandma?
- Why does my mom want drugs or alcohol instead of me?
- I told my mom what a bad parent you are. I don't want to be here!

The book Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child (available in our Lending Library) includes examples of conversations with age-appropriate details for a child who does not live with their birth parents. An important point made in this book is that children in your care should know they are there because of "grown-up" problems and that "grown-up" problems are more

Continued on page 2



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)
info@wifostercareandadoption.org
800-762-8063
6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
©2021



complicated than they seem. You can't shield children from difficult conversations when they have already been exposed to real-life situations. Under these circumstances, children need to discuss life events to make sense out of what is happening.

Where should the conversation take place?

There will come a time when you know a difficult conversation needs to happen. Perhaps you overheard something the youth in your care shared with someone else, or a social worker has shared something that will be easier for the child to hear if it is coming from you. But, first, you need to find the "window of opportunity" for having the conversation. It might not be the greatest time when they're watching their favorite TV show or getting ready to head out the door with friends. So how do you create the right environment for what could be an emotional moment?

Think about where you want the conversation to occur and what you could be doing while you talk. Sitting across from each other at the dining room table with no distractions might not be the best environment. Could you take a walk together to a park or lakefront and sit side by side on a bench? Does the child in your care enjoy making art or crafting? It can be easier to talk about tough things when hands are busy, and eye contact isn't necessary. This can offer a distraction and ease anxiety. And, of course, there is always the car ride. You'll find it easier to talk with teens when neither of you can walk away, and your eyes are on the road. A vehicle has the bonus of being an intimate setting where no one else can hear what you're talking about.

How do I navigate this conversation?

Now we know what we want to talk about and where to discuss it. What's next? Social worker, educator, and parent Maris Blechner uses four guiding principles regarding difficult conversations:

1. Never lie.
2. Don't tell children more than you think they can handle. But if they ask for more, tell them.
3. Never say anything that you will have to change later unless you get new information.
4. Don't let self-protection dictate what you say.

You're ready. Take a deep breath and follow these tips to navigate the conversation:

- Let the child in your care know that you have confidence in their ability to hear the facts of their story. They are entitled to know their truth.
- Don't minimize or exaggerate. Convey empathy and strength, not pity or fear.
- Be ready to engage when the child starts asking questions. When a child asks questions, it's a sign that their brain is ready for the information. Don't disclose more than you think they can handle. But if they ask for more details, share them.
- Avoid strong reactions if a child says something you don't like or that you disagree with. Instead, support them as they express their thoughts and feelings. As the conversation unfolds, you may find it's necessary to provide additional information to correct misunderstandings.
- Keep answering their questions until they stop asking. It's okay to say, "I don't know." Explain that you will do your best to find out an answer if possible.

Continued on page 3



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)
info@wifostercareandadoption.org
800-762-8063
6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
©2021



- Follow physical and emotional cues to find an appropriate time to end the conversation. If a child refuses to accept what you are telling them or starts to disassociate, that is the time to stop.

Time to process

You've had the conversation--congratulations! But you're not finished yet. Both you and the child in your care need time to process and revisit the conversation later if necessary. Children and youth learn best through repetition. You may need to introduce complex topics or details about their life stories several times before a child fully understands. Integrating these conversations during moments of connection with the child can help build attachment and trust.

What Happens Next?

With the conversation over and keeping in mind that everyone may still be processing, what comes next? You may have spent so much time planning for the difficult conversation that you haven't given much thought to the aftermath.

After a difficult conversation, you may witness angry outbursts, crying, hyperactivity, poor impulse control, or anxiety symptoms. Let the child in your care know that it's okay to experience these feelings. Give them the opportunity, space, and support to process their emotions.

How can you help them do this?

- Acknowledge the conversation. You could say, "I really appreciated the way you handled that talk yesterday," or "I just wanted to see how you're feeling after our conversation."
- Thank them for engaging in the discussion.
- Reiterate your invitation to revisit the conversation whenever they are ready or have new questions.
- If you feel that you have something new to share, don't wait to broach the topic. You might find that the conversation flows more easily this time.



Continued on page 4



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)
info@wifostercareandadoption.org
800-762-8063
6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
©2021



You may feel guilty or upset for causing anxiety or anger in the child in your care. Our tip sheet, [Making Space for Healing](#), shares information about “good grief.” Grief is necessary to let the healing process begin. Let the children in your care know that they have permission to feel, respect their current emotions, and model how to handle a loss. In addition, you may need to model sharing your feelings for them to practice caring and listening.

Keep in mind that the elimination of grief is not the goal. Instead, look at the child in your care through a lens of compassion, even when challenging behaviors may be affecting you emotionally. And don't forget to take care of yourself. As a caregiver of someone who may have experienced staggering losses, you need support as well. Relationships with other foster/adoptive/relative caregiver parents may bring comfort to you. You can find a list of support groups here: [Family Support Associations](#). Being a foster/adoptive/relative care parent is challenging, but it is also life-changing. As you continue to learn and grow, so will the child in your care. ❤️



Preparing Children & Youth in Care for Difficult Questions

One of the primary goals for all parents is to keep children safe. As foster/adoptive/relative care parents, you empower and guide children in your care on ways to establish and maintain healthy boundaries. They rely on you to help, guide, and support them throughout the time that they are in your home.

When you welcome a child into your care, you become an essential part of their life. You provide that child with love, warmth, care, compassion, resources, stability, guidance, and unconditional love and support. Often, the children in your care will be asked a plethora of personal questions about their experience with and involvement in foster care. Those questions can come from friends, family

members, and others. A few examples include:

- *Why are you in foster care?*
- *How long will you have to live with your grandma?*
- *What did you do to end up in your situation?*
- *What did your parents do (or not do)?*

Sometimes these questions are well-intentioned. Sometimes they are inquisitive, and, at other times, the questions can be downright intrusive. You can help the youth in your care understand different ways they can respond when asked personal questions about their lives, their families, or their experiences.

Continued on page 5



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)

info@wifostercareandadoption.org

800-762-8063

6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353

West Allis, WI 53214

©2021





One of the most beneficial things you can do is to provide a safe environment for the children in your care to practice what and how much personal information they are comfortable and willing to share with others. Ask them some questions that others might ask and discuss their answers together. You might also consider switching roles with the child—have them play the caregiver while you put yourself into their shoes. This type of exercise can help the child learn various ways to respond to personal questions from others. Setting and establishing privacy boundaries are essential life skills for children and youth to carry over into their adult lives.

To Share or Not to Share

Children and youth in care have the absolute right to keep their personal information private. Given the prevalence of social media in all of our lives, it is vitally important to educate and remind the youth in your care that what is shared on the internet is there forever.

Privacy is about respecting oneself enough to set personal and appropriate boundaries. Therefore, teach the child in your care that they have no obligation to tell someone else their personal story or information either in person or online. Reinforce that they have the right to decide how much or how little they feel comfortable sharing—even if that means sharing nothing at all. Teach them that it is okay not to answer any questions about their personal lives or the lives of their family. Encourage them to talk with you and their caseworker when they are unsure if they should or should not share their personal information. You and the child's caseworker can also discuss potential ways to respond by sharing some info without oversharing. Sometimes, it is best to change the topic, refuse to answer the question, or simply walk away.

Sharing Strategies

The National Resource Center for Youth Development recommends a green light, yellow light, red light lens to think about how and when to answer questions. Green light items are things you can tell anyone. Yellow light experiences are those you want to be cautious about and perhaps talk over with others before sharing. Red light means don't share.

Continued on page 6



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)

info@wifostercareandadoption.org

800-762-8063

6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353

West Allis, WI 53214

©2021



Potential Green Light Questions

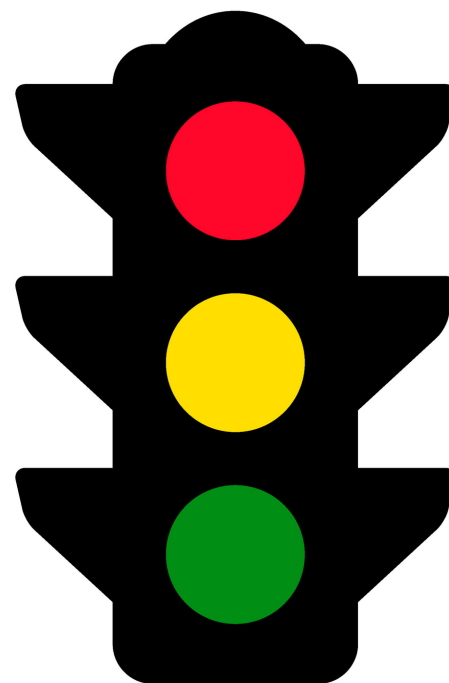
- Do you like being in foster care?
- Are your foster parents nice?
- Do you like living with your aunt and cousins?
- Do you get to spend time with your siblings/parents?
- Can you have friends over to your foster home?

Potential Yellow Light Questions

- When are you going to be able to go back home?
- What did you do to end up in your situation?
- I've heard foster parents can be mean. What about your foster parents?
- Why can't you live with other family members?
- Do your parents have to go to parenting classes?

Potential Red Light Questions

- Why don't you live with your REAL parents?
- Did your parents abuse you?
- Don't your parents love you anymore?
- How much do your caregivers get paid for taking care of you?
- I heard your grandparents are your foster parents. Are you one of those BAD Kids?



In addition to this system, you might consider learning more about the Center for Adoption Support and Education's W.I.S.E. Up! ® Tool. The W.I.S.E. Up! ® Tool teaches children that they have the power to respond to unwanted questions through the four W.I.S.E. choices:

- Walk away
- "It's private"
- Share something about their relative care, foster care, or adoption story
- Educate with general information about foster care or adoption

To learn more, please visit the website listed in the resource section of this newsletter. You can also check out the W.I.S.E. Up! ® Powerbook for Children in Foster Care in the [Coalition's Lending Library](#).

Both of these response strategies and resources can be helpful for you to share with the child in your care. You might also consider planning and scheduling regular family meetings to discuss these strategies. Talking about this topic often can help the child in your care feel more prepared and comfortable with answering potentially personal questions.

Establishing Healthy Boundaries

A child's story is their story to either share or keep confidential. When kids are forming friendships, they tend to share family information and other personal information. The key is to avoid oversharing. After all, once personal information has been shared, it is no longer private. Moreover, those who we shared with may re-share that information with others—both in-person and online.

Continued on page 7



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)
info@wifostercareandadoption.org
800-762-8063
6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
©2021



Empower the youth in your care to set healthy personal boundaries to protect themselves, as well as to protect their family's privacy. Teach them that they get to decide what they want to share and control how much or how little they want to share with others. Remember that this can be a delicate and difficult decision. How much they feel comfortable sharing may change at various times and with various people. Encourage the kids in your care to share their questions and feelings with you, their caseworker, or another trusted adult whenever they need to. ❤️



Connection is Crucial for Healing Conversations

As relative, foster, or adoptive parents, you know that trauma creates emotional wounds that make it hard for kids to cope. You know that difficult behaviors, like meltdowns, lying, stealing, or aggression, are the “language” kids use to express their trauma. “Behavior is a communication of the internal state. When we are stressed, we regress,” says Bryan Post of the Post Institute.

Kids communicate with words, too, of course. Whether it's a thoughtful question about why they can't live with their birth parents or a blunt statement about how unhappy they are, we may struggle with these difficult conversations. By definition, these talks are going to be stressful. We know that stress puts kids in the fight, flight, or freeze mode when they have had trauma. And when kids escalate, we may find ourselves becoming a bit emotionally dysregulated as well.

Here are some ideas of what not to do when having these difficult conversations with kids:

- Becoming anxious or agitated yourself

- Trying to distract them from their painful emotions
- Telling them it's not that bad, or they don't really have any reason to feel that way
- Pointing out the things they should be grateful for
- Giving advice

Instead, we want to help the child in our care know that their feelings are valid and that they are entitled to those feelings, no matter what they are. A safe, affirming connection is everything in this moment.

To create this safe connection, we need to put aside teaching, put aside guiding, and put aside any values connected to what the child is saying. These are the moments to listen, be present, and try to feel what the child is feeling. The child should be talking more than you are. The hurt they feel, or the numbness, or the anger – it's your role to affirm those feelings. At the same time, you want to help them avoid becoming overwhelmed or flooded by those emotions. There are many ways to do that. (see sidebar)

Continued on page 8



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)
info@wifostercareandadoption.org
800-762-8063
6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
©2021



In stressful conversations, we as parents can model calmness and emotional regulation. Sometimes you need more than modeling, though. Explore these emotional regulation tips for parents with kids who are emotionally distraught:

Affirm their feelings by asking them a question or two about their feelings.

Your nonverbal communication is essential - show interest and empathy with your posture, facial expressions, and openness.

Avoid jumping into advice-giving.

Also, try any one or more of the following:

- [Dragon Breathing](#)
- [Relaxation Exercises](#)
- [Partner Yoga Poses](#)



When trauma happens to children, it's not just what happened to them, but what they learned from what happened to them. In essence, children from trauma learn that the world isn't safe. Whether an infant, a toddler, or an older child, they perceive the world as dangerous and even life-threatening.

You can help a child reframe their perception of their world when you grow that safe connection with the child in your care. What does safety look like? It means your responses to the child are:

- Consistent and predictable
- Nonjudgmental
- Absent any alarm or shock in response to what a child says or does
- Emotionally regulated

You are the safety, in essence. You are the child's connection with the world, and your calm, caring empathy provides a soft landing for those big emotions.

Your attention is part of this equation, too. When children are talking, playing, and even acting out, they want to be seen. How do you see a child, you might ask? You delight in them; you engage with them; you make the child feel like the center of your world at that moment. These many little moments adding up is how you build a connection that allows healing to begin.

You might be wondering, "how can I 'delight in a child' when that child is expressing the pain around why they are in our care?" Of course, we can't erase whatever it was that brought the children into our care. But we can empathize and walk with them through their pain. We can help them to avoid feeling powerless.

With your connecting presence, kids will begin to understand there's nothing so wrong, so shameful, so painful, that they can't bring that thing out and look at it. The world may still seem scary, but the bad feelings that go with those experiences can be honored and managed. This is the path to healing.



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)

info@wifostercareandadoption.org

800-762-8063

6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353

West Allis, WI 53214

©2021



Resources

Tip Sheets

- [What Do These Behaviors Mean? How Children Process & Respond To Trauma](#)

From the *Champions Classrooms*

- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)
- [Creating Felt Safety](#)
- [Connected Parenting: Creating Secure Attachment](#)

From the *Lending Library*

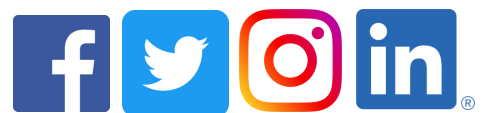
- [Trust-Based Parenting: Creating Lasting Changes in Your Child's Behavior](#) (DVD Set)
- [Creating Loving Attachments](#), by Kim S. Golding and Daniel A. Hughes
- [Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child](#), by Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler
- [W.I.S.E Up Powerbook For Children In Foster Care](#), by Marilyn Schoettle
- [Keeping Foster Children Safe Online](#), John DeGarmo
- [Foster Care and Social Networking](#), by Eileen Furland
- [Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: Social Media-The Changing Face of Connections](#)

Additional Resources

- [8 Effective Emotional Regulation Techniques for Kids](#)
- [Dragon Breath \(Yogic Breathing\)](#)
- [Relaxation for Kids - The Koeppen Technique](#)
- [Family Partner Yoga](#)
- [Difficult Conversations in Adoptive Families: Thirteen Tips](#)
- [Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption](#)
- [Talking to Kids About Tough Stuff: The Rules](#)
- [How to Talk to Children About Difficult Topics](#)
- [Helping Children in Foster Care Understand Their History](#)
- [Discussion Guide: Understanding Childhood Grief and Loss](#)
- [Ambiguous Loss Haunts Foster and Adopted Children](#)
- [W.I.S.E. Up!® - C.A.S.E.](#)
- [The Power of One Caring Adult](#), by Joshua Shipp
- [The Connected Child](#), by Karyn B. Purvis, David R. Cross, Wendy Lyons Sunshine
- [FosterClub](#)

The team at the Wisconsin Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center are always here for additional information, resources, and support.
Please contact us at 414-475-1246 or 800-762-8063

Follow us on social media @coalitionforcyf



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)
info@wifostercareandadoption.org
800-762-8063
6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
©2021

