



Grief & Loss: Making Space for Healing

While it may take six-eight weeks for a broken bone to heal, or five-10 days to be cured of the common cold, emotional healing often takes much longer. The day an adoption becomes finalized, for example, is a joyful experience; but it may have an underlying layer of sadness for the child or children involved. This grief due to loss must be acknowledged. That's where everyday healing comes in.

Children touched by foster care and adoption often lose all that was familiar to them. This loss may include family members, their home, school, friends, or even pets. This feeling of loss can go unnoticed by others because there are no rituals, such as funerals, that show children that their loss is shared. Children may wonder if they have the "right" to grieve. This unspoken grief may lead to challenging behaviors. These behaviors are normal in this circumstance and each child's experience will differ as they go through the stages of development and grief.

Stages of Development and Grief

Your relationship with the child in your care is a partnership, and you are an active member of their healing journey. Symptoms of loss may be physical, emotional, or both.

You may notice changes in eating or sleeping patterns, poor concentration, moodiness, anger, or even trouble making decisions.

In the webinar [*Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss*](#), presenter Dr. Samantha Wilson explains that "naming" adversity and loss is the path that provides hope for the future. Here is an overview of how grief may present at different ages and how you can help the child in your care at each stage.



- **Infants and Toddlers**
Infants and toddlers have the capacity to remember, even from times when they were preverbal. They are egocentric, meaning they are the center of their own universes. This is a time when kids may be hungry for details about their life stories because they play the starring role. Keep in mind that losses relating to foster care and adoption are complex. At this stage, be careful about the language that is used. Strive for positivity, while being truthful.

- **Preschoolers**
Preschoolers can differentiate between "then" and "now." Acknowledge what happened in the past, while ensuring safety and stability now. The message you want to convey is, "you are loved, you are

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safe, and you are valued.” Children in this age group may need to demonstrate what happened in their past through play. Don’t be alarmed if the child acts out previous trauma. You can be their protective shield. As a caring adult, be there to bear witness and give voice to their emotions.

- *School Age*

At the ages of six-12, you may see that the child continues to revisit their pre-adoptive or pre-foster care experiences. Through this, they are making meaning. They may ask the same questions over and over. You may find that they misremember due to their understanding of cause and effect. Here is where you can introduce the concept of life books to tell the story. See our tip sheet, [Life Books: A Lifelong Priceless Treasure](#) for tips on how to create one.

- *Adolescents*

A child’s sense of loss may increase when identity needs become more pronounced in the teenage years. You may find the child is longing to have more information, which is normal. Continue to help them regulate their emotional experience. Give them the language and space they need to process their grief. In adolescence, the “thinking” part of the brain can be isolated from the “feeling” part. It can be hard for teens to find language that describes their moods or experiences. Move at a pace that is comfortable for them. It may be best to have conversations during a stress-free time, such as during a physical activity like a walk around the block or a game of

basketball. You might find that you have the best talks when you’re in the car, or when the youth is looking at their phone, as it can be hard for teens to maintain eye contact when having difficult discussions.

Grief Triggers

Sometimes, everything seems to be going great. Then, out of the blue, the child explodes with anger, or begins lying again, or picks fights with their siblings more than usual. They may have encountered a grief trigger. You might notice that there are certain things that trigger negative behavior. Memories of the past are often to blame. For example, the child might cry or act out at birthday parties because it reminds them of past birthdays, good or bad.

In the Champion Classrooms course [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#), therapist Jaclyn Skalnik shares some possible grief triggers:

- Moving
- Anniversaries
- Pregnancy or birth of another child
- Times of financial hardship
- Changing schools
- Holidays
- Divorce
- People who ask intrusive questions or attempt to exert control

Remember, no matter how frustrating the negative behavior may be, do your best to be inquisitive, be a good listener, and let the child grieve with you.

Good Grief

According to Dan Siegel, Clinical Professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of



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Medicine, it's necessary to address grief because, "we name it to tame it." This is an ongoing task. Kids use behaviors, play, and conversations to communicate and heal. This can take place with family, friends, or therapists.

Good grief is allowed through the following:

- Permission to feel
- Respect for their current emotions
- Safe adults
- Models of how to handle loss

Keep in mind that any partnership requires give and take. Allow the children in your care, especially teens, to practice caring and listening by sharing your emotions with them as well. It may feel unnatural to let yourself cry in front of the child when you're sad or frustrated; however, this honesty allows them to see how much you care for them. It's an important way to model trust

and build genuine connections.

Finally, remember that elimination of grief is NOT the goal. Rather, feelings of grief should be expected and accepted as a part of life. As an adoptive or foster parent, you have the opportunity to help the hurting child heal. Grieving behavior can be challenging, but it is understandable when seen through the lens of compassion.



Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Helping Children Cope with Loss](#)
- [What Grief Looks Like for Children and Youth in Foster Care](#)
- [Is it Grief? Why Challenging Behavior may be Signs of Grieving](#)

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Healing Children Through Trust and Relationships*, by TCU Institute of Child Development
- *Healing Days – A Guide for Kids who have Experienced Trauma*, by Susan Farber Strauss
- *Healing Parents: Helping Wounded Children Learn to Trust & Love*, by Michael Orlans & Terri Levi
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [Supporting the Emotional Healing of Children in Your Care](#)

From the [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)
- [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#)

Additional Resources

- [Developmental Trauma Disorder](#)



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