

The Challenges of Foster Care: Grief and Loss

You can't help but get attached to a child in your care—whether he or she is with you for a few days or a few years. Just like most parents experience some sadness when their kids leave home for college or jobs, foster parents may also grieve when the kids in care leave... only the circumstances are often bittersweet and complex.

Foster parent grief isn't talked about much, but yet it's cited as one of the most common reasons for not continuing to foster. Months or years of caring for a child who moves can leave a hole in the hearts and lives of foster families.

Sometimes parents also grieve when they cannot bond with a child or cannot meet the needs of a child. Many grieve when they give a 30-day notice (of terminating the placement). The situation is fraught with emotion for all.

Stages of Grief and Loss

There are as many ways to experience loss and express grief as there are people. One cries. Another is stoic. A child becomes defiant. A teen cannot sleep. Others *only* want to sleep. Some throw themselves into work.

Here are some examples of the stages of grief with some common examples of reactions foster parents may experience.

Denial

Parents may deny an attachment to a child. Some who give a 30-day notice, may deny any feelings of sadness but grieve

even though they know that were unable to help. *"I won't miss him. He was so naughty."*

Anger

Parents may blame social services, the system, or some other person for a removal of a child. They focus on issues that are not at the heart of the matter. *"It's the social worker's fault that Amy went back to her mom."*

Bargaining

It is not uncommon to try to substitute other people or activities to avoid experiencing grief. *"I will just take another nine-year old. He'll help me forget about Billy."*

Depression

Grieving has components of depression. A person



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feels constant tiredness, irritability, or inability to deal with life. It becomes hard to handle family, work, and marriage. *“I can’t deal with these kids anymore. It all makes me feel like I can’t do anything right. I am tired, cranky and worn out.”*

Acceptance

In the end, grief over a loss diminishes and a sense of balance and well being returns. A foster parent acknowledges the losses and moves on.

“It’s hard to see him go, but I know that each day of love and care I gave to that child was a blessing for him and me. I can deal with his move and do what I can to make it the best situation for all involved.”

Foster parents who grieve are likely to experience all of the above stages. A foster dad may become quiet and withdrawn one day, while he feels angry and denies feelings of loss in another.

Experiencing grief in foster care also happens to children in the home.

As one child says about his foster sister, “She learned to walk and talk at our house. She stayed with us for over a year. After a while, her dad did the stuff he needed to do to have her. He took classes and he promised he would be a good parent. After she visited him for a few days, she was given to him. When she left I was

so sad. She had been part of the family, and I loved her so much!”

(From *The Wisconsin Foster Care Handbook*
<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/Resources.aspx>)

Guilt

Guilt can be another stage in the grieving process for foster parents. Parents often wonder what they did “wrong” and cannot share in the

happiness even when the child’s transition to a new home is a happy occasion.

Others may feel guilty if they cannot continue to care for a child. Another subtle but difficult situation occurs when foster parents love and provide for a child who cannot return that affection. These parents have to find hope in their sense of providing love and safety when there is little emotional connection in return.

She learned to walk and talk at our house. She stayed with us for over a year. When she left I was so sad. She had been part of the family, and I loved her so much!”
—big brother of a child in care

Preparing to Let Go

Parents can do some things to prepare for the transitory nature of foster care.

Remember that fostering is not a guarantee of a forever placement from the start. This, of course, is especially difficult if you’re a concurrent” home—it takes a lot of courage to simultaneously prepare to adopt children, while you’re also preparing to reunify them with their parents.

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Keep a record of the child from day one. Take pictures of yourselves and your families, the pets, the house, the inside of the house.

Babies or toddlers may not remember you, but those children can see the love you gave them in photos of their life when you loved and cared for them. Even if the ending is not what you would have chosen, photos, letters, and memorabilia can give them a glimpse of what was good and safe with you.

Life books are great tools, not only for children, but also for families. Create a life book reflecting your journey as a foster parent.

For more information, go to our website for our *Lifebook* tipsheet.

Preparing for Separation

If possible, prepare for the separation before it occurs. Communicate your concerns and recommendation throughout the time a child is in your home. Ask to be included in decisions.

Work with the birth family while the child is in

Warning Signs of Grief

Grief that lasts too long or becomes too difficult, grief which interferes with work and disrupts family relationships are red flags for seeking support. When the grief is unremitting or becomes destructive, it's helpful to get help from a therapist.

your care. This frequently establishes a pattern for future communication after the child returns home. The children also fare much better if they see some continuity in their journey through foster care through contact with birth parents and the folks from former placements... even if the placement ends in a less-than-ideal way. In fact, that's probably when some extra contact is especially needed—for both of you.

When the Move is Happening

When it is determined where the child will go, prepare for separation with visits, conversations with the new family or birth family, and especially with the child who will be moving.

Talk to all of the members of your household about the upcoming move so that you are all on the same page during the stages of transition.

Reach out when you or your spouse or children need extra support. Talk to your social workers, therapists, community or religious staff who understand the losses in foster care and can provide grief counseling.

In an ideal transition and when appropriate, there is continuity of contact with visits, letters,

The Importance of Rituals

Establish rituals around the separation.

- Have a going away party, even if things didn't end in an ideal way.
- Pack the child's clothes together, or if that's not possible, pack your child's things respectfully.
- Talk about memories, even with young children.

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emails and phone calls after the move too.

Recognize that family members may grieve, and that they will do so in their own individual way. The children in your house may also experience grief and loss, whether they are children in care, birth, or adopted children. They may experience a loss even when living with the other child was a difficult experience. They may feel both relieved and sad that the child is gone. Then, like you, they may also feel guilty that they feel relieved.

Sharing Your Grief

Share your grief with your partner, the birth, foster and adopted children in your household as appropriate, and with workers and people in your support network who understand. Talk to foster parents involved with WAFPA (<http://wfapa.org>) and other foster parents.

Assess what you will continue to do and examine what you can change. Good relationships are good only when they evolve and grow with changing situations. Try not to give up on yourself for what you have done.

Know that just as you will find grief and loss are interwoven in the extraordinary work you are doing,, so you will find what you give to the children in your care, day by day, week by week, is immeasurable. Reflect on your mission as a foster parent. Let your heart soar, so that in times when the losses come, you will have the reserve to continue your commitment to the children who need you so much.



Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center life Library Resources

You can find the following by going to our website or by calling 800.762.8063

Wisconsin Foster Care Handbook, Chapter 5, I Miss My Foster Parents, Herbert, Stefon.
Published by the Child Welfare League of America (Book)

Separation and Loss Issues For Foster and Birth Families, Vera Fahlberg. (DVD)
Every foster child experiences the pain of separation and loss. Offers valuable insights and sound advice on helping kids adjust to foster care.

Helping Children When They Must Move, by Vera Fahlberg (Book)

Attachment and Separation (Book). Vera Fahlberg

Other Sources

When Foster Children Leave: Helping Foster Parents to Grieve, Adoption Resource Center Newsletter, Spring, 2008, page 8
<http://wiadopt.org/>

Stages of Grief and Ways to Work Through the Stages, article by Betty Evan, foster parent, Houston, Texas from North Carolina's *Fostering Perspectives*. <http://fosteringperspectives.org/>

Foster Parent College Connections Newsletter. Grief and Loss in the Foster Care System Two hour course available online at the website for the cost of \$8.00.
<http://fosterparentcollege.com/info/connections.jsp?date=050109&source=pdfnewsletter>