

Breaking Through the Clouds: Dealing with Reunification Anxiety

One of the primary goals of being a foster parent is to provide a safe and nurturing home and help a child prepare to go back home. Reunification is an exciting time and is often the culmination of many people working very hard for the sake of a child. It can be heart-filling and joyous to watch a child that you have cared for and nurtured be able to reunify with his family. At the same time, as a foster parent, it's common to feel anxious about reunification, even if you know in your heart it is what is best for the child.

Feeling anxious about the plan for the child in your care to reunify with her birth family can be the result of several things. Maybe you are concerned that it is not the right time for reunification to occur. After all, the changes that people have to make are often big ones and it can seem that the process is moving too fast. Sometimes, due to confidentiality, foster parents may not get all the information about a birth parent's progress and that can be scary. When people don't know all of the facts, they tend to make up the worst possible scenario.



Or perhaps you are anxious because you know you will grieve the loss of that child and you aren't quite sure how to care for yourself. Grieving is ok and, in fact, is common when a child leaves your home. Grief and loss can be tough to go through for anyone. And, it is important to note everyone's grieving process is different and there are no timelines assigned to grief.

You may also be worried about how the other children in your care – whether they are birth children, children who you have adopted, or other children you provide foster care for – will react when this child returns to her birth home. This could vary for children, as it does for adults. Not only do children lack certain brain development to assist in grief and loss, depending on their past, the process may bring up old wounds for them, too.

No matter where the anxiety you are feeling comes from, it can make day-to-day parenting more challenging when you are trying to navigate through these complex emotions. Kelly, a foster parent of six years, shared how she copes with feelings of anxiety:

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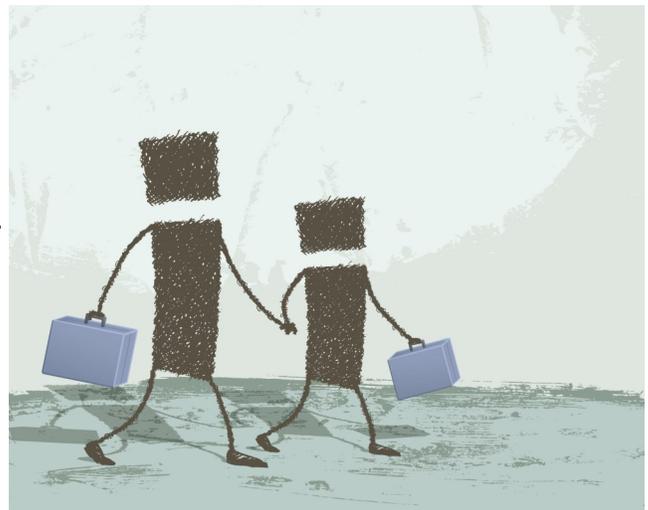
Why is Reunification the Primary Permanency Goal?

Being a foster parent can be a uniquely challenging job, and one of the more conflicting aspects of your role as foster parent may be supporting the reunification of the child in your care with his family of origin. As human adults, we have a huge instinct to protect a vulnerable child from harm, and when we hear about the circumstances that may have led to a child's entry into out-of-home care, we may have an immediate aversion to the idea of the child being entrusted to the parent(s) or caregiver(s) who previously couldn't meet their needs or keep them safe. However, roughly 60% of children who leave out-of-home care in Wisconsin are reunified with their primary caregiver. This means that, while children are in out-of-home care, families are hopefully working to learn skills, gain resources, receive effective mental health treatment, and use new ways to parent their children. If all goes according to plan, the primary goal of reunification will be achieved. But why is reunification so important?

At the foundation of child welfare law here in the US is our societal value that parents have undeniable rights to their children. That means parents may choose to raise their children in a wide variety of ways for a wide variety of reasons. Think of yourself or other parents you know; you may use different strategies and have different family traditions. But everyone has the right to raise their children in line with their personal values. Most people wouldn't take kindly to being told how to raise their child, having their parenting methods interfered with, or losing the right to make decisions for their child. A focus on reunification is the effort to make sure parents maintain that basic right whenever possible, safe, and appropriate.

Not only do parents have the basic right to raise their children, children deserve to be with their families. Being surrounded by and connected to people who share your biology is critical to identity. Family helps children know who they are and where they came from, and also helps lay the foundation of who they will be as adults. When children are separated from their families, it means experiencing a loss and may be an added trauma in their lives. Reunification can help reduce the impact of both trauma and loss.

Even though we know that parenting is a basic right and children deserve to be with their family, it still may be hard, at times, to fully understand the focus on reunification. As a foster parent, you come to love the children in your care and want only the best for them. But, when a family can turn their home life around, change habits, and parent more effectively, we see positive long-term outcomes for children. And *that* is what the goal of reunification is all about. Sometimes a safety plan can help to achieve this turn-around quickly. At other times, a child may be in out-of-home care for months or years as his family works to get to that point. For the families that do get to the point of reunification, the long road may be marked by both failures and successes. And you, as a foster parent, are a safe haven for the child along that journey.



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10 Ways Foster Parents Can Support Reunification

1. Build a relationship with the child's biological parents while the child is in your care. Having a strong relationship during care encourages the family to reach out to you for support post-reunification. Because you are someone who is already familiar with and to the child and the family, you can be a source of comfort, support, and encouragement. Talk with your worker about this to see if it may be appropriate after reunification.
2. Help the child prepare for reunification and understand the situation. Talk with the child about the process and help ease any fears and anxieties she might have.
3. Talk with other foster parents who have supported reunification for children in their care. They'll have a personal perspective to share and can help you to

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“Personally, I manage my anxiety by reminding myself that there is nothing I can do about it right now and try to refocus on something that I *can* do. Some days I have to repeat this every minute.” Some other techniques that may be helpful are focused breathing, meditation, exercise, or talking to a close friend or a therapist.

It can be helpful to remind yourself that you aren't the only one feeling anxious about reunification; it may be that the child in your care may be feeling nervous about returning to her birth parent(s) full time. Even if she truly wishes to return to her birth home, she may also be feeling uneasy and uncertain about the move. And the child's birth parent(s) may also be feeling anxious about the reunification, as well. They may wonder if they truly are ready to return to the role of full-time parent and they may have lingering fears that, should everything not turn out perfectly, their child will be removed once again.

Abby, a foster parent in Wisconsin, shared how she helps ease the anxiety of the children she cares for: “I try to validate their feelings. I also refocus them on the moment and what we know will happen,” she explained. She also said, “I advocate for them by sharing their concerns and behaviors with the other adults involved in their case.” Even if the child doesn't know that you are advocating on her behalf, you will be helping *all* of the children in your care get the services they need which could, in turn, help with any anxiety they may be feeling.

Though it can feel like a cloud following you around, reunification anxiety is a normal and common feeling – and you can work through it. You might find comfort in talking with other foster parents or your worker. You can also call us and speak with a Resource Specialist when you need someone to listen to your worries and concerns. You may also find comfort in reminding yourself that everyone is working for the common goal of what's best for the child. Saying goodbye to a child who you have come to care about and love will never be an easy task; however, knowing that, together with the case workers and the birth parent(s), you have helped achieve was is the best outcome for that child can maybe lessen those feelings of loss and sadness. Finding ways to work through your feelings of anxiety will help you refocus on enjoying the time you spend with the child in your care; and those everyday moments are powerful, important, and meaningful for you both.



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10 Ways Foster Parents Can Support Reunification, continued

- cope with the loss you may experience if/when a child is reunified and no longer in your care.
4. Create a life book with the child as a way for him to explore his out-of-home care experiences, identity, cherished memories, important people who have influenced his life, achievements, losses, and important highlights he may want to communicate with his biological family, and others who have made an impact on his life.
 5. Talk with your worker about any extended family members who you might contact. Keeping those relationships open can encourage those family members to keep in touch and can also help you get to know more about the child in your care, too.
 6. When possible, provide transportation to and from family visits as a means to connect with the child's family. This may not be required of you, but if you are able to manage it, you might find that it's a good way to build a mutually trusting relationship.
 7. Empathize. Try to gain an empathetic understanding of how the family's situation came to be. There may be complex intergenerational layers of personal and social issues that, if given the parenting tools and techniques, a parent can work towards creating a safe and nurturing home and family for the child in your care to return to.
 8. Document everything! As rigid as it may seem sometimes, the record you can provide of the time a child is in your care can be helpful to his or her family of origin, caseworkers, and the child in the near or far future.
 9. Take a step back. If you feel in conflict with the child's family or treatment team's decisions about reunification, pause and try to focus on the progress his family has made. Ask the child's worker to help you understand the case plan and permanency goals if you have questions.
 10. Call us! We're here to provide resources and support so that you can provide what may be helpful for the child you care for. We're here for you every step of the way.

Resources

Tip Sheets

The Journey of Forgiveness: Learning to Live a Life of Forgiveness

wifostercareandadoption.org/
resources/tipsheets

The Challenges of Foster Care: Grief and Loss

wifostercareandadoption.org/
resources/tipsheets

Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First

wifostercareandadoption.org/
resources/tipsheets

Fostering a Child whose Sibling(s) Live Elsewhere

wifostercareandadoption.org/
resources/tipsheets

Additional Resources

- Support organizations for foster families
wifostercareandadoption.org/
TrainingandSupport/
FamilySupportAssociations
- Family Reunification, by Fred Wulczyn
futureofchildren.org/publications/
journals/article/index.xml?
journalid=40&articleid=136§io
nid=894

Books

- ⇒ *The Foster Parenting Toolbox*, Edited by Kim Phagan-Hansel
- ⇒ "Family Forever: Reunification through Family Focused Foster Care" (VHS)



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our wish:
a family to keep us **together.**

FosterParentsRock.org



our wish:
a family to keep us **safe.**

FosterParentsRock.org



Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)

WFAPA provides great opportunities to network with other foster and adoptive parents. They also have an extensive website, wfapa.org, a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.

Contact Us!

Please know that 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

Where to Find Us on Social Media

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