

Learning to Let Go: Coping With Reunification Anxiety

From the moment a child enters your home, the fear of reunification can also move in. How will you say goodbye? Will the child be returning to a safe and stable environment? How will the other kids in your care react when this child leaves?

The first goal of foster care is always reunification. And, while you may have known that this was the goal from the start, that doesn't mean that, when the time comes to say goodbye, anxiety can't happen. Reunification anxiety can happen to anyone, but understanding what to do in certain situations may help you cope with some of those feelings.



During the time that the child has been in your care, his birth parents have been making several complicated and possibly difficult changes. They have been concentrating on all of the things that will make them stronger parents, that will allow them to learn and use new skills, and that will, ultimately, lead to the return of their child to their home. And now that their child will be returning home, they may be feeling anxious and fearful. They may be thinking about what is going to happen when the child returns. How will they manage and cope with the stress of day-to-day parenting? What if things don't go perfectly or according to plan? The stakes are high and the fear of failure can be very daunting.

What is Reunification Anxiety?

Reunification anxiety is something that can be common for foster parents. Feelings of worry, nervousness, or unease about the child in your care returning to his birth parent(s)/home may enter your mind when you learn that the reunification is drawing near. You might also feel excited or apprehensive; happy or sad; heart-full or heartbroken. The feelings can be mixed and complicated. And, just as you may be feeling a complicated and heady mix of emotions, the child in your care and his birth parent(s) may also be feeling those same or very similar emotions.

The child in care may be experiencing worries and anxieties in the wake of returning to their birth home, as well. Depending on their age, they may have memories of living with his birth parents before entering foster care and may worry that some of those same unhealthy or negative circumstances will be there again. And, even if going back to their birth family is what they say they want, moving back home means being uprooted again. For a child who had to change schools when they entered care, for example, they may now have to once again leave their school and their friends and teachers, as well as foster

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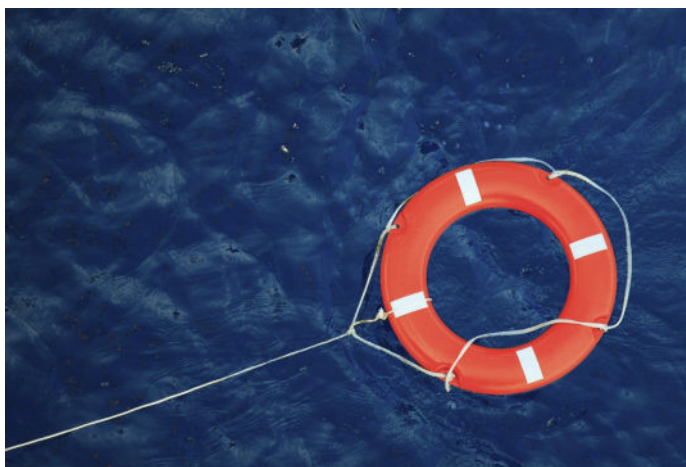
siblings and neighborhood friends.

Lastly, the foster parent's biological children may wonder what life will be like in their home if they have become attached to the child or children who are leaving. They may be sad, relieved, and anxious all at the same time. They may wonder what it will be like to no longer be sharing their spaces and belongings with this child; as well as being concerned about who might be arriving next.

In this tip sheet, we'll be focusing on foster and parents and their experience with and ideas for managing their reunification anxiety. We'll also look at the perspectives of the child in care, as well as the foster parent's biological children.

Ways to Cope

Everyone reacts differently to feelings of fear, worry, and anxiety. Some harbor them inside, silently fretting about an anticipated event. Others express their feelings openly, confiding in a friend, spouse, partner, or another support person. How you, as a foster parent, deal with feelings of anxiety can positively or negatively affect your family as a whole. Unresolved or unaddressed feelings of anxiety can take on a physical form, such as lack of sleep, a change in appetite, irritability, or pulling away from family members or friends. Healthy processing of anxiety can serve to strengthen your family and provide them with tools and opportunities for growth. Children pay attention to your words and actions and will learn from you how to cope. Your relationship with your spouse, partner, or other loved ones may shift, depending on your ability to process and verbalize your feelings of anxiousness.



Some foster parents have their own experience of trauma, and the reunification process could be a trigger for them. They may need the observations of others to help them identify that this is happening. Professional help, support, or proven techniques to heal from trauma need to be practiced by the foster parent who is being triggered by reunification.

Regardless of the method of expression, it is essential to find a way to release the anxiety that you may be feeling. Look for the silver linings and remember what the song says: accentuate the positive. It can be easy to find the negatives in any situation, but searching for the positives provides for a richer understanding and experience.

Reach Out

Everyone has days when they simply don't know how to cope. When you are feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or just need someone to talk to who will listen, please know that you can call

us here at the Coalition. We have a team of Resource Specialists who can help by simply being your sounding board, by offering possible solutions, by helping to locate resources that you might need, or by connecting you with another foster parent. Sometimes talking with another person who has first-hand knowledge of how you may be feeling and what you may be thinking is part of the best medicine. You aren't alone on your journey; support is just a phone call away.

Support Groups

Support groups allow foster parents to share ideas, experiences, and ways to cope, in addition to providing support to one another. You might find that being with or talking to

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others who have been where you are and who know how it feels to help support a child's reunification process can give you a feeling of belonging and understanding.

Self-Care

In any stressful situation, you can benefit from finding a positive and helpful coping mechanism. This could be something as simple as taking a walk around the block after dinner every night. Doing so may give you time to relax and unwind, can be a source of exercise, and may even provide you with alone or one-on-one time with one of the children in your home.

Another idea is to unleash your creativity in expressing yourself and your feelings. You might write in a journal, keep a scrapbook, or start a blog about your adventures and experiences. Sometimes it's easier to write about the things that are on your mind instead of having a conversation.

For some people, creative expression works better when words are not involved. Many find their niche in doing art, such as drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, or crafting. Music, including singing, dancing, or playing an instrument, is exhilarating for others. If you don't have a creative outlet, this may be the time to explore one!

There is much to be said about the importance of self-care. Whether by yourself or together as a family, finding and making time to take care of you can help restore a healthy balance. Take some time to think about ways to help you deal with feelings of anxiety. What activities or actions make you feel calmer? Which things refill your emotional bucket and give you renewed inner

strength and energy?

Shared Parenting

When you foster, you're embracing not only a child but the child's entire family. A child in care is but one young human being in the context of a whole family system; and so, mentoring and being a support to the birth parents is usually another of your important roles as a foster family.

The wonderful thing about this admittedly challenging aspect of fostering is that you have a part to play in helping an entire family heal. By serving as supports, teachers, and, in a sense, parents, for the parents of the child in your care, you are guiding this family system toward a healthier future. We know

the parents of many children in care have suffered their own trauma. By mentoring and respecting the child's birth parents, you contribute to stabilizing that very home the child in your care will be returning to.

Taking a Break

There may come a time when you feel that you need to take a break from fostering. Taking time between foster placements may be beneficial for you and your family, and is considered best practice. Building up anxiety upon anxiety can have mental, emotional, and physical affects—not only on you but on everyone around you. Taking a little time in between placements to rejuvenate yourself and the other members of your family will likely have a positive result; and it might also make your home and your family an even better place for the next child who enters your care.

Helping Children Feel Safe as Reunification Nears

As mentioned earlier, both the child in care



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and the foster parent's biological children will be experiencing their own version of reunification anxiety. And just like with you, as the foster parent, children will likely be quite unaware of just how much anxiety they are feeling. They will most certainly not understand how that plays out in their day-to-day behavior.

Most foster parents can recount the build-up of negative behaviors in the children they care for as reunification approaches. Even if the child is unaware that reunification is coming, the changes in the behaviors of the adults around them will often be reflected in the child's actions. Little to none of this will likely be able to be verbalized by the child. Instead, parents will often notice the child acting out. The child may be irritable, excitable, and may have trouble sleeping, eating, or doing schoolwork. There may be a regression in the child's developmental abilities, like toileting, bedtime routines, or skills in interacting with other children.

How do you, as foster parents, help children cope during these challenging periods? First of all, being aware that reunification fears may be driving the behaviors is key. The child will very likely not be able to verbalize their anxiety, even if asked. The trauma they have experienced in the past is being triggered by the uncertainties of the future, and, when you understand that this is what's happening, you can know better how you could respond.

Secondly, do all the things you normally do to



help children heal from trauma during this time. Think about attachment and how this child is about to experience another wound to their ability to attach by having to move again, even though it's back to their birth parents. Let trauma awareness guide your actions. Be a safe, calm, consistent presence; bring down the level of stimuli and avoid high-anxiety situations; and access professional help for the child. This is the time to focus on utilizing your foster parenting toolbox.

For kids who can verbalize their feelings about reunification, be available, patient, and affirming. Instead of trying to reassure kids

that everything will be OK, simply listen, and help them identify their feelings. Acknowledge that this is scary and uncertain, and be comforting by simply being present.

As the time for reunification approaches, you might consider having

conversations with the worker involved, so that everyone understands what the post-reunification world looks like. Will the child have the opportunity to communicate with you, and you with them? Or will there be a boundary that makes maintaining contact difficult? If so, have a transition plan in place to make the whole process easier for the child, for you, and other children in your home.

Speaking of other children in your home, remember to include them in the equation. While you're struggling with your feelings about reunification, be assured your kids are

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being affected, as well. They will sense your concerns and will have their own thoughts and feelings about the upcoming change. They may feel sad thinking about the upcoming loss of their day-to-day interactions with someone they came to view as a brother or sister. They may be relieved that the trauma of this child will no longer be part of their household. They may wonder what reality will be like when the next child comes to live in their home. Utilize the same skills with them that you use with the child in foster care. Listening, being available, affirming feelings, and practicing patience will all be important.

Another tool to ease this period is having a transition process. For example, you may want to prepare a life book or scrapbook that contains pictures and/or mementos of the time the child spent in your home. Plan low-key celebrations and/or rituals that will make meaning of the time you all spent together. Include the birth family in these celebrations if appropriate. Affirm the birth family by respectfully engaging in conversations that show your confidence in the process, and your excitement for the upcoming reunion. Even if you have anxieties about the future, your outward support of the process is important in modeling that for the child in your care, as well as for their parents.

Reunification is the goal for children when they are placed with a foster family. Part of being a foster parent means helping to support that reunification and caring for the child for the short-term, but it doesn't mean burying your feelings. And, while reunification anxiety may be common, there are ways to plan, take care of yourself, and replenish your individual and family strengths.

By opening your heart and your home to a child needing a safe place to stay while their parents learn, grow, and enhance their skills, you have played an important and essential

role in the life of that child—and that family. The child will remember the care that you gave during his stay, and he and his family will be stronger for it. It's not goodbye when the child leaves, but the beginning of a new chapter.



Resources

From the Lending Library

- [The Balance Beam of Life: Caring for Yourself, While Caring for Your Kids](#)
- [The Challenges of Foster Care: Grief and Loss](#)
- *The Foster Parenting Toolbox*, Edited by Kim Phagan-Hansel
- *The Foster Parenting Manual*, by John Degarmo
- *Success as a Foster Parent: Everything You Need to Know about Foster Care*, by NFPA with Rachel Greene Baldino
- *Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: Breaking Through the Clouds—Dealing with Reunification Anxiety*

Inspiration & Hope from [No Matter What Families](#)

- [A Reunification Journey](#)
- [Compassion for Birth Families Matters](#)
- [Fostering the Family](#)

Training & Resources From Champion Classrooms

- [Let's Talk: Reunification](#)

Additional Resources

- [Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association](#)
- [National Foster Parent Association](#)
- *Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook, Chapter 5: Foster Family Self Care*
- [When a Child Leaves Your Family](#)
- [It's Okay to Cry as a Foster Parent](#)