

Supporting the Emotional Healing of the Children in Your Care

One of the most important and ever-present jobs of a foster parent is to help children heal from past traumas and emotional difficulties. Wounds from past negative events can act like invisible barriers to emotional connection. This can be especially true for the kids we care for, who may have entered our families as a result of past wounds. Unlocking these past events - exploring and acknowledging them - can help the child in your care break cycles of negative self-esteem, negative projections on others, and behaving toward the ones they love in ways they are not proud of.

Children and youth process their emotions in very unique ways. They tend to explore themselves and the world around them through their senses, through creative expression, and through their social connections. Emotional healing varies from child to child, depending on their cognitive development, the adverse experiences they have had, and what coping skills they may or may not have developed.

The best way to be a support person in a child's journey of emotional healing is to be creative and open, while recognizing that the child is an individual and that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Working as part of a team with school staff, medical personnel, and social workers, will ensure consistency for the child and help to maintain a clearer sense of what is in the child's best interest. You are an important advocate for

the child in your care, so please be sure to share your insight and perspective.

Emotional healing can be looked at as a holistic process with many moving parts. Following are some steps you may want to consider in helping the children in your care heal from emotional wounds.



- When you talk with the child in your care about the hurts in his or her past, let him or her know that *it is okay to feel the grief and pain* associated with those past memories. Share with the child that those feelings are important parts of healing and that they will pass.
- During times of healing, it is important for the child in your care *to do things that make him or her feel good and are meaningful*. Help the child identify the activities he or she enjoys and that make him or her feel alive and happy. Finding ways to be thoughtfully kind and gentle to oneself, while rooting down into routine and meaning, is a key component of the healing process.
- *Let the child know he or she is not alone*. You can help the child in your care identify people that he or she can talk to who he or she trusts. It could be a therapist, a close relative, a teacher, or, of course, you! A therapist can help guide the child along a safe and productive path to healing. A therapist can

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Learning to Forgive

“In forgiveness, the heart of stone becomes the softened heart.”

- Jeanette Knutson Enright, Ph.D. and Robert Enright, Ph.D.



As a foster parent, it can be really easy to have feelings of blame and resentment toward a birth parent or the adult who harmed the child you are now caring for; you see the hurt, anger, and confusion in that child every day. Furthermore, you have likely witnessed how those feelings of anger have been damaging to the child and are deep in the process of helping that child to feel safe. That desire to help give a child a safe place to be and heal and grow might even be one of the things that motivated you to become a foster parent in the first place.

Justifiably so, with these behaviors turning your life upside down, you may find yourself angry or resentful. *Learning to forgive*, then, may seem uncomfortable, even impossible. Practicing forgiveness, however, is a cornerstone of successful fostering. It is a process, a journey, and something you may need to direct toward the birth parents, the children in your care, others involved in the child's journey, or all of the above.

When you forgive someone, you are not condoning the behavior, nor are you excusing it. Forgiveness is not an exercise in denying the pain and hurt caused to the children, or to you as their caregiver. It is not about trying to forget that bad things happened, or about suggesting anyone “turn the other cheek.”

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Resources

Tip Sheets

- [The Journey of Forgiveness: How to Teach Your Children](#)
- [The Journey of Forgiveness: Learning to Live a Life of Forgiveness](#)
- [The Wider Scope of Therapy](#)
- [What Do These Behaviors Mean?](#)

Books

- *Red, Blue and Yellow Yarn, A Tale of Forgiveness*, by Miriam R. Kosman
- *From Anger to Intimacy: How Forgiveness Can Transform Your Marriage*, by Dr. Garry Smalley & Ted Cunningham
- *Forgiveness is a Choice*, by Robert D. Enright, PhD
- *The Waiting – The True Story of a Lost Child, A Lifetime of Longing, and a Miracle for a Mother Who Never Gave Up*, by Cathy LaGrow
- *The Privilege of Youth: A Teenager's Story of Longing for Acceptance*, by Dave Pelzer

- [The Gift of Forgiveness: A Guided Curriculum for Parents in the Great Families Project](#), Jeanette Knutson Enright, Ph.D. and Robert Enright, Ph.D., 2006.

Additional Information

- [If For Only a Moment](#) (foster parent blog)
- [How I Went From Bitterness to Forgiveness](#), Derek Clark (former foster youth)
- [5 Ways Parents Can Teach Their Kids to Forgive](#), Huffington Post
- [Are You Really Teaching Your Kids How to Forgive?](#), Psychology Today
- [How to Teach a Child Forgiveness](#), Psych Central
- A Year of Awesomeness: [Forgiveness](#), Josh Shipp
- Truth for Kids: [Children Forgiving Others—Forgiveness Craft](#)

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Forgiveness, instead, is acknowledging that a wrong was committed, but choosing to show compassion anyway. We dislike the offense, but do not despise the offender. Instead, we strive to honor the inherent worth of the one who did the hurting, whether that's a birth parent or the child in your care or someone else. Forgiveness is about freeing ourselves from any bitterness surrounding the damage that was done.

Practicing forgiveness is something that can be beneficial to both you, as a foster parent, and the child or children for whom you care. The first, and, sometimes, the only person to be healed by forgiveness, is the person who does the forgiving. Letting go is what is really at the center of forgiveness. In choosing to forgive, you are freed from burdensome emotions that can eat away at your peace of mind. You'll have the mental energy and lightness of heart to be the best parent you can be.



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also help support you as you support the child. It's also important that the child in your care knows you are there for him or her. Be sure to ask the child what he or she needs from you and be prepared if he or she cannot exactly articulate his or her needs. As he or she heals, it is important that the child has people in his or her corner that help him or her feel understood. You may need to help the child identify who that is for him or her, and help him or her connect to those individuals. He or she may feel awkward at times, and you may need to help him or her develop his or her comfort. Over time, you can help the child develop an inner voice of kindness that helps him or her believe he or she is worthy of care and concern from people he or she is close to.

- *Practice patience with the process.* Emotional healing takes time and the child in your care may lose patience and become frustrated. You can help by reminding him or her to take it easy, be patient, and remember how far he or she has come. Help the child think about what the future may bring when he or she is in a better place of wellness, after taking on the hard work of healing.

In order to help the children you care for through their emotional hurts and the healing process, you may find the following “tools” helpful to keep in your foster parenting toolkit:

- consistency and structure in daily life
- firm but fair rules and boundaries
- open lines of communication between all caregivers/trusted adults
- physical activity to expend excess energy and release “feel good” brain chemicals
- developing daily living skills
- individual and/or group therapy
- a nutritious diet
- creative activities

- spiritual activities
- reading books with healing themes
- interactions with animals
- time exploring and experiencing the peace and wonder of nature
- modeling healthy emotional expression

Emotional healing is a lifelong journey. The children you care for will make sense of their pasts in new ways for many years to come. As a foster parent, you can make all the difference in helping them to expand their coping skills toolbox to offer a less bumpy road along the way.

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**.

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.



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Forgiving Family

The journey and practice of forgiveness is a unique one for every individual. Some foster parents and caregivers may find the journey relatively smooth, while others might experience a more difficult time. This can be particularly true if you are a relative or kinship foster parent caring for a relative's child. Unlike general foster parents, who often have limited information about the children and family of the children being placed with them, relative caregivers likely have deep-seated connections with the children they are fostering, and those children's birth parents. You likely have intimate knowledge of the realities and the pain these children have endured and your proximity to that pain might make it more challenging to practice forgiveness.

At the core of forgiveness is pain. Pain that requires healing. As a kinship/relative foster parent, this pain can feel especially personal and overwhelming. In many cases, you did not ask to be a foster parent. The role of being a foster parent was thrust upon you due to the actions, or inactions, of a family member(s), who failed to provide a safe environment for the children you are now being asked to care for. Children with whom you have likely already formed a lifelong connection. Along with that pain, there is often resentment and anger towards the relative(s),

who allowed their children to be introduced to the realities of foster care. However, as with general foster parents, practicing forgiveness and taking those first steps on the journey of acceptance is an essential component of the healing process for both you and the children.



Sorting through emotional baggage

As a kinship/relative foster parent, you may feel that there is some heavy emotional baggage weighing you down. That baggage may look like many things, including some of the

following:

- I did not ask to be a foster parent. My life has been disrupted because of the actions of my family.
- I resent that my relative has caused so much pain and disruption in the lives of these children that I love and care for.
- I feel embarrassed or ashamed that my family is going through this situation.
- I am resentful that I have to be the one to take care of this problem.
- I don't know how to handle these new conflicting roles. I am no longer the

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aunt, uncle, grandmother, or grandfather. I am now the foster parent being asked to fulfill the day to day parenting needs of these children.

The first thing to understand is that it is certainly okay, and even normal, to have these types of feelings. One of the first steps to healing is to make a choice about how much weight you want to give each feeling. You don't have to forget or ignore these feelings, but you can make the choice to decide how much of a daily impact they will have as you move forward in caring for the children in your home.

Putting the needs of children first

While you are managing the multitude of feelings associated with the role of kinship/relative foster parent, the children in your care are also managing complex feelings of their own. Children who are being cared for by relatives are making their own adjustments, while grappling with similar feelings of pain, resentment, guilt, disappointment, embarrassment, and mixed loyalties. However, as children, they may lack the experience to effectively handle all of these emotions. As a result, children are dependent on the adults and caregivers in their lives to model effective strategies for dealing with their emotions. The hurt they feel about coming into foster care and being separated from their parents will always be with them. But, at the end of the day, children are looking for ways to move beyond that pain so that they can focus on just being kids again.

As best as you are able, consider those children when you have interactions with the birth parent and do your best to model compassion and forgiveness. When children see the adult caregivers in their lives working together, acting

gracefully towards one another, and striving to meet their needs, it greatly enhances their wellbeing and gives them permission to just be a kid.

Fostering healing

The word forgiveness is a seemingly simple noun but, in reality, it is much more than that. Forgiveness is realization; a realization that one cannot change the past, and forgiveness is a choice; a choice to move forward from the past. Forgiveness does not require that you condone hurtful actions or forget what has happened in the past, but instead offers you an opportunity to heal. Forgiveness is a journey and, for kinship/relative caregivers in the foster care system, it may feel like one of the most complex and challenging paths to navigate. Perhaps most importantly though, is that forgiveness is an opportunity to foster healing in your family. When you take on the journey of forgiveness and acceptance, you model the strength, courage, compassion, and empathy that makes the process of healing less daunting for the children you care for. You give children the opportunity to experience some of the joys of childhood, and the space to explore their futures and dreams.

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