

What Grief Looks Like for Children & Youth in Foster Care

Whether caring for a six-month-old or a tween, you are invested in kids and helping keep them safe. That passion for kids leaves you feeling upbeat, excited, and hopeful when you welcome a child to your home. Amid all those emotions, it can be easy to forget that all children who have been removed from their homes have experienced loss through separation. Even in cases where a child has been in an abusive or neglectful situation, there is still hurt and loss.

Understanding the complexities of a child's loss experience is important for you as a parent. While professional help for the child in your care is almost essential, it's also critical for you to develop skills around appropriately parenting a grieving child. Begin by thinking about the child's many attachments that have now been significantly altered or severed as a result of entering out-of-home care:

- Relationships: Moms and Dads, brothers and sisters, extended family relatives, teachers, friends, a significant neighbor, or even pets
- Places: schools, neighborhoods, a secret hiding place
- Times: bedtime rituals, unique holiday traditions, family member birthdays
- Personal belongings: special toys, a favorite chair, a much-loved bedtime



storybook

- Family culture: daily routines, food, humor, music, roles in the family (e.g., a child who has played the role of parent to a younger sibling may feel a sense of loss over having failed that younger child by now being unavailable to them)

The nature of the separation itself may affect how children process being placed in care. For example:

- Was it sudden?
- Did the child have time to prepare and process thoughts, feelings, and questions about the move?
 - Was it a move to a completely unfamiliar environment or the home of a relative with whom the child had a relationship?
 - What was the message the child received upon leaving their home?
- What kind of welcoming message did the child hear in their new home?

Grief is the Normal Reaction to Loss

A child's expression of grief will, of course, vary from child to child. Some kids may express their sadness and anger by acting out. Others might internalize their feelings and become withdrawn and overly well-behaved. Understanding different developmental stages may be one way to understand grief.

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For infants, the most important developmental tasks are around attachment. Babies depend on a trustworthy and caring parent to ensure their most basic survival. They also begin relational interactions that create brain development around crucial social skills. In a sense, a baby who experiences multiple placements will be grieving the lack of a consistent caregiver. Grief comes in the form of an attachment deficit that can significantly impact their future relationships.

Preschoolers may not yet master the concept of cause and effect or the idea of time. Preschoolers are “magical thinkers,” and they may believe their thoughts, feelings, or actions caused their loss. They do not readily share their magical thinking, so adults must assess their experience of grief through behavior, play therapy, or other means. Children this age may feel anxious, hopeless, clingy, withdrawn, and emotionally numb.

School-aged children (those aged six to eleven) understand cause and effect and time. They have a realistic sense of the nature of their loss. Their grief may play out as worry over losing their caregivers. Other anxieties about perfectly rational concerns may eat up their emotional resources. These preoccupations may affect school behavior and learning. As a result, they may regress in some of the skills they have acquired. For example, a child who previously ate various foods may become a picky eater or ask to drink from a bottle.

Adolescents between the ages of 12 and 19 may grieve more like adults. They may exhibit one of the stages of grief as described by Elizabeth Kübler Ross:

- Shock/Denial
- Anger/Protest
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Resolution

For example, the first few days, weeks, and months of a child’s placement with a family may be one of shock or denial. A teen in shock may appear to be quiet, calm, or compliant. As time passes, if this same child begins to act out, we often say, “The honeymoon is over,” when, actually, the child may be entering the anger/protest stage of grief. Children and young adults are unique individuals and, as such, will have individual timelines and ways of exhibiting grief. They may not experience the stages in order or go through them all. On the other hand, some kids may get stuck in one stage, so be observant.

Complicating the grief process for adolescents is the primary developmental task of this age: forming their own identity. This means issues of independence, resistance, and separation are already occurring. Removal from home confuses this already challenging stage of life. Teens may respond by self-medicating with substances, developing eating disorders, or becoming depressed.

How to Help the Grieving Child in Care

Acknowledging the child’s grief and helping them process it is what you, as a caregiver and parent, can do to promote healing for the child in your home. Training in this specific area is recommended. Other ideas and suggestions:

- **Use a trauma focus.** Separation from one’s birth parent or parents is traumatic. The child may have suffered other traumas before arriving in your home. These are not insignificant losses that will “heal with time.” Untreated trauma can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, suicidal thoughts, or defiance. Request and review comprehensive information about the child’s background, then use sensitivity and non-punishment-based approaches when managing behavior. Identify potential triggers for strong emotional reactions, and share your observations with the child’s

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treatment professionals. A child who is throwing crayons at other children three days after being removed from home should be shown the same patience one would show an adult who has just snapped at a loved one following a significant loss.

- **Allow time for children to adjust.**
- **Provide stability.** Moving from placement to placement will disrupt the process of healing from grief and will create additional loss.
- **Listen.** Reflect on what the child is saying and affirm their experience. “It sounds like you miss your dad,” for example, validates their grief experience and opens communication.
- **Help the child identify their emotions.** Many children who have experienced trauma have trouble acknowledging they even have feelings, much less naming those emotions. Whether the experience of grief is new or familiar to the child in your care, identifying it as such will help the child process it.
- **Understand** that birth parents are also most likely grieving the loss and acknowledge that to the child.
- **A good relationship with birth parents may help provide reassurance.** By teaming with the birth parents, you’re lifting and honoring the most important connection a child began life with. The loss created by the separation will hopefully be reduced when the child experiences a continuing connection between the two families.
- **Encourage involvement in healthy physical activities.** Strong emotions like grief can create physical symptoms. Exercise and other activities engage parts of the brain that provide positive feelings and reduce stress. For example, drumming activates the non-verbal part of the brain and promotes feelings of well-being.
- **Start or continue the child’s life**

book. Working on the child’s life book will allow the child to process the losses, affirm important memories, and begin to understand what has happened.

- **Enable artistic expression,** such as drawing, dancing, or making music. Creative activity energizes parts of our brains that promote healing. A writing journal, for example, gives the child an outlet for strong feelings and can also aid in the therapy process.
- **Create a Special Memories box** or other vessel to house or honor meaningful memories.
- **Find a grief support group for the child or teen.** Some areas have support groups for children who have gone through termination of parental rights.
- **Be aware of tricky transitions** and be ready to be supportive. Times such as right after a child returns from visitation are when to be sensitive to the heightened emotions and sense of loss. The child may be grieving the end of family interactions they had before removal, especially if visits are supervised. Even if they are not, the child may feel sadness and loss at having to return to the foster home.
- **Be an advocate where appropriate.** For example, the child’s experience of grief through school assignments that lack awareness (e.g., bringing a baby picture to school) may be avoided with some communication behind the scenes with teachers and other school staff.
- **Be aware of individual differences as well as situations.** A child who has been in multiple placements will have a different set of grieving tasks than a child entering their first foster home.

The role of a caregiver is significant and has many responsibilities. We hope this tip sheet has provided some information and helpful suggestions to guide you on your journey as a foster parent and taught you new ways to understand, support, and guide the children in your care through their grief, loss, and

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sadness. If you need further support, information, or resources, please get in touch with the staff at the Wisconsin Family Connections Center – we are here to help.



Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Grief and Loss: Making Space for Healing](#)
- [Why Challenging Behaviors Post-Adoption May Be Signs of Grieving](#)
- [Helping Children Cope With Loss](#)

From the [Resource Library](#)

- [Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: Foster Care, Grief, & Loss](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Weathering the Storm of Grief in Foster Care](#)
- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)
- [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#)
- [Taking Time to Help and Heal: Child Development Through a New Lens](#)

Additional Resource

- [How Grief Goes Unnoticed in Foster Children; and the underlying trauma it can cause](#)