

Learning to Let Go: Coping With Reunification Anxiety

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.

When 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?

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, apprehensive, happy, sad, heart-full, or heartbroken. The feelings can be mixed and complicated. And, just as you may be feeling a complex and heady mix of emotions, the child in your care and their birth parent(s) may also be feeling those same or very similar feelings.



During the time that the child has been in your care, their birth parents have been making several 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. Now that their child is returning home, they may feel anxious and fearful. They may be thinking about what will 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 daunting.

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 their 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 siblings and neighborhood friends.

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Lastly, if there are biological children in the home, they may wonder what life will be like now. They may feel sad, relieved, and anxious all at once. They may wonder what it will be like to no longer share their spaces and belongings with this child and be concerned about who might be arriving next.

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.

It is essential to find a way to release the anxiety that you may be feeling. Finding the negatives in any situation can be easy, but searching for the positives provides a richer understanding and experience.

Reach Out

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

the Wisconsin Family Connections Center. We have a team of Resource Specialists who can help by simply being your sounding board, offering possible solutions, helping to locate resources that you might need, or connecting you with another foster parent. Sometimes, talking with another person who has first-hand knowledge of how you may be feeling 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 coping methods. You might find that talking to others who have been where you are and know how it feels to help support a child's reunification process can give you a feeling of belonging and understanding.

Self-Care

You can benefit from finding a positive and helpful coping mechanism in any stressful situation. This could be as simple as walking around the block after dinner every night. Doing so may give you time to relax and unwind, can be a source of exercise, and 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 experiences. Sometimes, it's easier to write about the things 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 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!

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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 a child and 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 supporting the birth parents is usually another important role for 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 supporting parents, 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 need to take a break from fostering. Taking time between foster placements may benefit you and your family and is considered best practice. Taking a little time between placements to rejuvenate yourself and the other family members will likely have a positive result; 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 and the foster parent's biological children will be experiencing their own version of reunification anxiety. Children will likely be unaware of just how much anxiety they are feeling.

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 usually notice the child acting out. The child may be irritable and excitable and could 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.

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

Secondly, do all the things you usually do to help children heal from trauma during this time. 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.

Be available, patient, and affirming for kids who can verbalize their feelings about reunification. Instead of reassuring kids that everything will be OK, listen and help them identify their feelings. Acknowledge this is scary and uncertain, and offer comfort by simply being present.

As the time for reunification approaches, you might consider having conversations with the workers involved so that everyone understands what the post-reunification world looks like. Will the child be able to communicate with you? Or will there be a

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boundary that makes maintaining contact difficult? If so, have a transition plan to make the whole process easier for the child, 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 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 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. Listening, being available, affirming feelings, and practicing patience will all be necessary.

You may want to prepare a life book or scrapbook containing pictures and mementos of the child's time in your home. Plan low-key celebrations or rituals that will make meaning of your time 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 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 and their parents.

When children are placed with a foster family, the goal is reunification. 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.

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 your care during their stay, and they and their family will be stronger for it. It's not goodbye when the child leaves, but the beginning of a new chapter.



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Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *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](#)*

Tip Sheets

- [The Balance Beam of Life: Caring for Yourself, While Caring for Your Kids](#)
- [Foster Care, Grief & Loss](#)

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

- [From Birth Mom to Foster Parent: A Journey of Compassion](#)
- [Fostering the Family](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Let's Talk: Reunification](#)
- [Relational Permanency: The Role of Foster Parents in Supporting Child Relationships](#)
- [Seasons Change: Understanding Transition & Change for Foster Parents](#)

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](#)