



Why Challenging Behaviors Post-Adoption May Be Signs of Grieving

Most adoptive parents have been through it. You've done all you know how to do to make your child feel secure and loved. You've gone to training, read all the right articles and books, made well-informed decisions, and sought help when needed. And it paid off. Your child is doing great in school, has lots of friends, and seems happy and well-adjusted. Then, out of nowhere, your child begins exhibiting behaviors you haven't seen in months, years, or maybe ever. Suddenly, after so much progress, your child's behaviors are angry and out of control. Both you and your child are at a loss to understand what's going on. What happened?

If you're like most parents, you start second-guessing your parenting and wonder where YOU went wrong that your child is suddenly struggling. This is especially true if you adopted your child at a very young age or your child has been with you the majority of their life.

Before you start blaming yourself, it may be helpful to remember:

1. Adoption inherently involves complex emotional dynamics directly associated with loss and trauma that may be impacting your child's behavior.
2. Children may grieve the losses surrounding their adoption many times throughout their lives.

While there can be many reasons for a child who was adopted to exhibit challenging behaviors, it's important to consider that your child may be grieving, especially if there is no apparent trigger. Adoption often involves what's referred to as "ambiguous loss." This term describes a loss where uncertainty or confusion does not allow for closure or resolution. For the child who has been adopted, this can manifest as the absence of their biological family, creating a sense of incompleteness or unanswered questions. This feeling of loss can resurface at various developmental stages throughout their life, potentially triggering grief responses. Much like the unresolved grief experienced when a loved one goes missing, children who were adopted may struggle with the ongoing uncertainty about their biological roots. This can lead to repeated cycles of grieving as they grow and gain new perspectives on their adoption story.

Although the stages of grieving are universal, not everyone moves through them in the same order or with the same intensity. The process may look very different for each child, depending on the current age, the age at adoption, the degree of trauma, or the level of awareness. For example, a child

adopted through foster care who has vivid memories of the removal from their birth family may experience the stages of grief differently than the child adopted in infancy who grew up celebrating their adoption story. What is important is that we understand both have experienced loss—and that we can recognize when our children are grieving that loss.

So, what are the stages of grieving?

While the 5-stage model of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) is widely known, the expanded 7-stage model better reflects the complexities of the grieving process, especially for children who were adopted and may be experiencing grief in unique ways. These stages include:

1. **Shock and denial:** In this stage, there is either a conscious or unconscious refusal to accept facts. For the child who was adopted, this could come across as disbelief about their adoption or perhaps a false belief they will eventually be returned to their birth parent(s).
2. **Pain and Guilt:** Intense pain and guilt may surface as the shock wears off. Children may feel guilty about being adopted and/or experience pain from the loss of their birth family.
3. **Anger and Bargaining:** In this stage, your child may express anger towards themselves, with you, or with their birth parent(s). They may begin pushing you away with tantrums, lash out, swear, use physical aggression, or other destructive behaviors. This is also known as the “If/then...” stage, where a child struggles to regain a feeling of control amid the helplessness and vulnerability of loss. They may try to bargain, thinking, “If I’m good, then you won’t abandon me.”
4. **Sadness, Depression, and Reflection:** This stage involves a period of sad withdrawal. Your child may be thinking, “Why bother trying if you’re just going to abandon me, too?” or “I must not be lovable if my mom picked drugs over me.”
5. **The Upward Turn:** This stage marks the beginning of adjustment. Your child might start to feel more stable or calm, even though they may still be grieving.
6. **Reconstruction and Working Through:** Here, your child begins to actively process their adoption, perhaps by seeking more information or trying to make sense of their story.
7. **Acceptance and Hope:** “Everything is going to be okay. I am loved and safe.” This stage doesn’t mean forgetting the loss, but learning to live with their adoption story and moving forward.

It’s important to understand that these stages are not linear, and children may move between them or experience multiple stages simultaneously. Feelings of grief and loss can surface at any developmental stage or when triggered by specific life events. Know that even children adopted at an early age who have no conscious recollection of their birth parents may experience symptoms of profound loss, especially as they approach their teen years and are developing an identity. Other common triggers may include:

- Puberty
- Holidays
- Birth or adoption of a new sibling

- Graduations
- Contact with birth family
- Transitions such as moving to a new school or home
- Death of a loved one or family pet
- Divorce, breakups, or changes in relationships

Many behaviors may indicate that your child is grieving, especially if their behavior is out of character. They can include:

- Defiance
- Self-harm
- Physical and verbal aggression
- Property destruction
- Substance abuse
- Sexually acting out
- Regressive behaviors
- Tantrums
- Poor hygiene
- Bedwetting/soiling
- Obvious negative attention-seeking behaviors
- Expressions of guilt for being rejected by parents
- Fear and anxiety about being taken away or abandoned
- Distrustful and deceitful behaviors

It's important to recognize that various factors could contribute to the challenging behaviors listed above. As a parent, your initial reaction might be to firmly communicate that these behaviors are unacceptable and to enforce consequences consistently. However, if your child is experiencing grief, chances are traditional disciplinary methods like taking away a favorite toy or video game may not effectively address the underlying emotional issues or create a more peaceful home environment. The good news is that there are strategies you can employ to help effectively alleviate the behaviors—regardless of the reason behind them. The most important road to healing and secure attachment for a child who is grieving loss involves being patient and understanding in helping your child process what they are feeling.

Tips for Parents

- Know it's not your fault—grieving is a natural process for all children who were adopted
- Remind your child frequently that they are wanted and valued
- Reassure your child their loss is not their fault, and absence does not mean rejection
- Share age-appropriate information regarding your child's adoption story
- Acknowledge your child's loss and validate their feelings

Give your child permission to grieve without feeling guilty

- Don't take it personally. Your child's feelings of loss are not a reflection of their relationship with you
- Celebrate your child's dual heritage, biological and adoptive
- Know that your child needs to grieve their loss. It is a process that may reoccur over their lifetime
- Find a therapist who specializes in working with children who have experienced trauma and loss
- Take care of your own emotional needs so you can be fully present to support your child

Yes, grieving may be a lifelong process for children who were adopted. Regressive and out-of-control behaviors, while challenging, are often a natural part of that process. As a parent, you can support your child by helping them identify their feelings, being open and honest with them about their adoption story, providing a safe space for their emotional expression, and allowing them to grieve without guilt or shame. Your consistent, patient, and understanding ongoing support is essential to your child's emotional well-being and journey toward healing.

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

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

Tip Sheets

- [What Grief & Loss Look Like for Children & Youth in Foster Care](#)
- [Foster Care, Grief & Loss](#)
- [Grief & Loss: Making Space for Healing](#)
- [Helping Children Cope With Loss](#)

Training From [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Weathering the Storm of Grief in Foster Care](#)
- [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#)

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

- [What Do My Child's Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [Love Them Through It](#)
- [Grief Is Part of the Fabric of Adoption](#)

Additional Resources

- [Wisconsin Family Connections Center's Virtual Support Groups](#)
- [Effects of Separation and Loss on Children's Development](#)
- [Grief Speaks](#)
- [Letter to a Foster Parent](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Parenting: What You Should Know](#)