



Helping Children in Care Build Trusting Relationships

Imagine losing your home, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your friends, your school, your pet, your toys, and even your bed. Now imagine losing these things over and over again.

For children in out-of-home care, this isn't just an exercise in imagination; it's their lived experience. Sadly, many children in foster care have had these types of experiences. These losses that children experience are traumatic events, and they often have to relive these traumas.

Factors that can impact trust

There are many reasons why children in care have difficulty developing positive connections and establishing trusting relationships with others.

Trauma significantly impacts children's ability to trust—people, relationships, situations, and themselves. Trauma is defined as "an extremely distressing experience that causes severe emotional shock and may have long-lasting psychological effects."

Traumatic experiences such as physical and sexual abuse, neglect, separation from family, and multiple moves are all examples of trauma that children in care may have experienced.

Author and therapist Arleta James explains the effects of trauma well: "First and foremost, we must come to understand that trauma interrupts 'normal' child development. The child who is chronologically age 12 may really be functioning as a three- or four-year-old."

She says, "In essence, all children have a chronological age and a social and emotional age. Usually, the two are in accord. However, institutionalization, neglect, abuse, etc., causes a discord between the two ages."

Ambiguous Loss and Unresolved Grief. Children in care have experienced a lot of loss and separation from their homes, families, school, friends, and siblings — everything familiar and comforting to them. Ambiguous loss happens when someone you care about is gone in some ways but not in others. It's the kind of loss that doesn't have clear answers—like when a person is physically away but still alive, or when they're present but not able to care for you like they used to.

A child might feel ambiguous loss when they can't live with their mom or dad anymore. They still love their parents and miss them, but they don't know when—or if—they'll see them again. That uncertainty

can make it hard to know how to feel or how to move forward.

Lack of Control. Some children in care may feel that they lack control over what happens to them in their lives. They've had several adults dictate where they live, when they move, what school they go to, and who they will live with, without ever being asked what they want—all of which contributes to not being very trusting of adults.

Lack of Consistency. Another possible reason for their mistrust is that they have not consistently established healthy relationships with adults (or anyone) and are unsure how to do that.

Fear is also a major contributing factor, namely, fear of the unknown. What if I begin to trust them? What if I don't? What will happen? Will I have to go to another place? What if they reject me?

Lack of Felt Safety. When children have experienced chronic trauma, their brains are hyper-vigilant and scanning for safety. Even when the child is in an environment that others may perceive as safe, the child may not be able to feel that safety because of their past traumatic experiences. Children may be more sensitive to triggers unseen by those caring for them. Caregivers may need to provide reassurance of safety even when they don't expect it.

Divided Loyalties and Feeling Like They Have to Choose. Children in care often experience divided loyalties between their foster families and their birth families. By establishing a relationship with you, they may feel disloyal to their mom or dad. Or that by connecting with you, they are rejecting their birth families.

They may feel that their birth families do not want them to like their foster parents or vice versa. The desire to be with their birth families is powerful—not being with them feels like a piece is missing from them.

Children in care usually want to go home so desperately—to be with their parents and siblings. By getting close to their foster parent, they may feel they are telling themselves that they will not be going home. See Heather's letter in the resource list for an excellent example of this.

Low Self-Esteem. Some children in care have low self-esteem and may not feel like they deserve love, respect, and a family who cares. They also may feel different because they are in foster care. They sometimes internalize the negative stigma associated with being involved in the child welfare system, such as being "bad" or having "bad parents." Children want to feel like they belong and don't want to feel different from their friends. These feelings they are carrying make it difficult for them to believe the adults in their life will be safe and supportive. This is often a barrier that caregivers spend years trying to overcome. It is important to note that each time a caregiver shows up, the child can start rebuilding his or her own belief that they are worth showing up for.

How can I build trusting relationships?

You can help begin building a trusting relationship in several ways. The following are some ideas to help you build a connection and relationship that children in your care can count on.

Acceptance. Accepting children for who they are, as well as accepting their birth families, goes a long way in building a meaningful relationship. They need to see that you value them and the family they came from. You can do this by establishing a respectful and caring co-parenting relationship with their birth parents and families from the start.

Stability and consistency. Providing children with a stable, consistent environment will show them they know what to expect daily. Part of being able to trust is knowing that they can be confident in you to keep them safe.

Be a positive role model. By showing what trusting relationships are, kids can begin to learn by your example. Children are always observing. Demonstrating healthy relationships can help them know how to start building them.

Make yourself available. By engaging kids in meaningful conversations about feelings and expectations, you can help them feel comfortable coming to you about their feelings without fear of judgment or rejection. You show children you are there for them by simply giving your time and attention.

Multiple Transitions: A Young Child's Point of View on Foster Care and Adoption, by Michael Trout (Excerpted from the Parent-Institute video)

After a while, I had just lost too many people that I might have cared about. I had been with too many "parents" who really weren't because they couldn't hold me tightly in their hearts at all.

None of you got how I was being changed by all these losses (in my heart and in my behavior).

After a while, I began to get some pretty bad ideas about how things work. I wasn't going to let anybody like me. Not even me.

And so, now, I won't let you imagine even for a minute that I like you and that I need you desperately. That I might ever grow to trust you.

Are you ready to have me not believe you?

Are you ready for me to fight you for control?

Are you ready to hold me, and then hold me some more (when, all the time, I act like I don't want you to at all?)

Are you ready to really stay with me through a battle that might last almost my whole growing up? Are you willing to feel as powerless as I do?

So, have I told you anything that you wanted to know? Have I helped you to understand how we feel—all of us kids who fell into the world of foster care and adoption?

Space. Giving your children space and not trying to force a relationship shows that you're willing to let your relationship grow at their comfort level. This can provide them with some control over their life and let them begin to trust themselves again.

Education and Training. Gaining a better understanding of the developmental and emotional level of the child in your care can help you better respond to situations that may leave you feeling frustrated and create a distance between the two of you.

Patience. Children will likely test your patience and may plan (intentionally or unintentionally) to sabotage the placement before risking the possibility of trusting and liking you. It's a powerful defense mechanism, but your patience may help break through that barrier.

What else can I do?

Self Care. Sometimes, we're so focused on trying to help others that we forget that it's okay to focus on ourselves, too. Make time to read, go on a date, take a bath, or whatever else you need for a break. Be patient. Things sometimes take longer than you might like. So, be patient with the child in your care and with yourself.

Seek help and feedback. Talk with your caseworker, respite providers, other foster parents, and any other helpful resources who may have insights and solutions for you.

Celebrate the small accomplishments and goals! Progress may come in a small package. Remember: you are making a difference in the life of that child.

Life experiences have taught many children in care not to trust. You are making a positive difference in the life of the child entrusted to your care.

Growing together

Helping children rebuild trust after loss isn't easy, but it's one of the most meaningful parts of caregiving. Through small moments of connection, safety, and consistency, you offer children the chance to believe in relationships again.

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

- *Lost in Child Welfare*, by Ashley S. Stokes

Tip Sheets

- [Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma](#)
- [Coming Out of the Dark: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children & Youth](#)
- [Why Challenging Behaviors Post-Adoption May Be Signs of Grieving](#)

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [An Introduction to Trauma's Influence on the Brain, Body, and Behavior](#)
- [Everyday Language and How It Impacts Trauma](#)
- [Taking Time to Help and Heal: Child Development Through a New Lens](#)
- [Building Relationships With School-Age Children and Teens](#)
- [Creating Felt Safety](#)
- [Let's Talk: Preparing Your Home to Welcome a Child](#)

Additional Resources

- [Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook: Chapter Three](#)
- *Multiple Transitions: A Young Child's Point of View About Foster Care and Adoption (Video)*
- [Eric Erickson's Eight Stages of Development](#)
- [Heather's Letter](#)