



Celebrating the Holidays with the Children You Foster

Conflicting loyalties and family separation often make the holidays a difficult time for children in foster care. Just as studies show that holidays are stressful for most of us, these reactions may be compounded for children in your home. Here are some considerations for supporting the children in your home through the holidays.

Consider Ways to Co-parent During the Holidays

- Talk with the parents and birth family before the holidays. Consider how you can include the family in the holiday plans.
- Ask the birth parents and kids in your care about the holidays they like celebrating and how they do so. Share how your family spends time during the holidays and which holidays you celebrate.
- Ask what celebrations are like in the child's birth home. Perhaps you can include some of them. For example, if there is a particular stocking stuffer the parent gives every year, make sure it is included in the stocking and have it marked that it is from the parent.
- Help the child in your home imagine what to expect. Much of what we assume to be commonplace can be new to the children you foster.
- Ask the child's family members about their holiday traditions, beliefs, and observances. Make time to coordinate schedules with the birth families.
- This is a good time for the children in your home to make gifts and send cards to their birth families or old neighbors and friends.
- Share the spiritual and religious meanings the holidays may have for your family and ask the child and birth parents to share with you. Talk about customs and activities.
- As you learn about the spiritual and religious beliefs, customs, and activities of the children you foster, incorporate their traditions into your traditions. Perhaps the birth parents have always used an Advent calendar. Consider gifting an Advent calendar to the child from you and their parents. Perhaps there is a story the family usually reads on each night of Kwanza. Make sure the child is available for a phone call or video call each evening of Kwanza so they can read that story with their birth family.
- If you are unable to connect with and include the child's birth family, reassure the child, if you can, about the safety of their birth family. This is a time when many children in care worry about them. They may need to hear that it is okay for them to be safe and cared for during this time of struggle.

Consider Ways to Recognize and Respond to Sadness or Grief Due to Family Separation

Although the children in your care may be happy that you are co-parenting and they may enjoy most of the holiday celebrations, be prepared for sadness and grief. Talk with the child about how they are

feeling throughout the season.

- Give the children time and space to grieve.
- Grief takes many forms and may be exhibited in lots of ways, including:
 - Reverting to younger behaviors developmentally.
 - Soiling themselves or bedwetting.
 - Becoming withdrawn and isolated.
 - Having temper tantrums.
 - Being rebellious.
 - Complaining more than usual.

Consider Ways to Prepare for Large Gatherings

- Talk about upcoming events and the people who will be there. If you cannot get together before the big event, introduce the children to family and friends who will be at the celebration by going through pictures.
- Prepare them for the “characters” in your family, and also tell them about other children who might be there.
- Describe your celebrations in detail. For example, are they loud? Silly? Sacred? Quiet? How many people? What foods do you eat?
- Describe the home or place where the event will be held and how things usually proceed.
- Be realistic about it—do not make your celebrations seem perfect, but do not stress the challenges that are part of all family events.
- Give the child a camera so that they can record the celebration, and also give them one for holiday visits with their birth families.

Consider Ways to Build a Sense of Belonging for the Child in Your Care

- Do a smaller gathering with familiar faces. Although it might be important to you to attend large gatherings on the holidays, you might need to consider keeping the holiday small when caring for a child unfamiliar with your family and friends.
- Make a meal together for the family in your home and ask the child in your care to help.
- Ask the child in your care if they want to pick out the holiday dishes. This may mean sharing several options of holiday paper or plastic plates the child can choose from. You may also want to consider working together to create a centerpiece for the table.
- Decide as a family on a new holiday tradition, whether that means playing soccer in the yard, going to a holiday movie, going bowling, or bundling up for a post-dinner walk.

Building a strong co-parenting relationship from the beginning can help with conversations and scheduling during the holidays. The most important thing to remember is to keep the child at the center of your thoughts and plans. Happy holidays!

Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- [Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: Honoring the Holiday Traditions of Children in Care](#)

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Let's Talk: Navigating the Holidays](#)

Additional Resources

- [When a child can't be home for Christmas](#)
- [Foster Care & The Holidays](#)
- [The Holidays Aren't Always a Celebration. It's Much More Complicated for Foster Youth](#)
- [Helping Young People in Foster Care Through the Holidays](#)
- [Celebrating the Holidays In Foster Care: A Guest Post](#)
- [How to Navigate the Holidays as a Foster Family](#)