



## Helping Children Cope with Loss

As parents and caregivers, you do your best to nurture the children in your care, knowing they have experienced loss that affects them deeply. Understanding loss and how it affects children helps you parent them more effectively and promote their healing.

Whether it was as an infant or as a 10-year-old, the child you're caring for has been separated from their parent or primary caregiver and has experienced loss from that separation. They may have also experienced loss during the events that led to their removal from home. The loss may have been traumatic. What is trauma exactly? Trauma is an emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person. When loss is traumatic, it has a lasting effect on a child's development and on their entire framework for interacting with the world.

You may have noticed that the children in your care respond to life's challenges differently than children who have not experienced significant loss. For example, the child may explode at the slightest frustration or be extremely defiant. Maybe they tell untruths even when there is nothing to gain by doing so. We know these actions aren't good coping behaviors, and they often cause more pain for both the child and those caring for them. In cases such as these, and others you may have already noted, the child is reacting to the world around them out of fear. The child feels an overwhelming need to fight (explode), freeze (be defiant), or flee (tell untruths). These are strong emotions that come from a powerful, primitive part of the brain and, as a result, are difficult for a child to manage.

You can help the child in your care manage their emotions and heal from their loss. A child's brain can change as they learn to manage their emotions and develop healthier coping behaviors. Through our parenting, we know that rather than reacting to the behaviors that kids who have experienced loss often exhibit, it's important to create an environment that is:

- Calm
- Safe
- Consistent
- Positive
- Present

By consciously working to be present with the child in your care and actively promoting a nonthreatening home environment, you help create a safe space. Kids experiencing intense fear are kids who cannot problem-solve or cope. Creating this safe space will help the child bring their feelings under control (emotional regulation) and reach a place of calm.

Helping a child feel safe and regulated is a good first step in helping the child heal from loss. Because all children are unique, guiding the child in your care toward emotional regulation will vary from child to child. There will be differences in personality and temperament. Also, keep in mind the developmental stage of the child you are caring for as you prepare them for future challenges.

### *Infants*

Learning to depend on a trustworthy and caring parent is an infant's main developmental task. Because caregiving is crucial to a baby's very survival, any disruption in this relationship can cause developmental problems. Being consistently and warmly responsive to the baby's needs is the most effective way to help the infant in your care heal.

If a baby has experienced loss, such as moving to a different home, you can help them heal by keeping their routines consistent and by responding quickly and calmly to their stress.

### *Preschoolers*

The preschooler in your home may be a "magical thinker"; they may believe their thoughts, feelings, or actions caused their loss. A child may not share thoughts or ideas like this with you. Play therapy might help them connect with and work through such feelings.

For example, if the preschooler in your care has "lost" a sibling in care to a move or reunification, you may need to assure the child, more than once, that the loss was not due to any thinking or actions on the part of the child. Emotional regulation is tough for all kids this age, so be prepared to do lots of calming and comforting after the loss occurs.

### *School-aged children*

Kids aged six to 11 do understand cause and effect. The school-aged child in your care can understand the circumstances surrounding a loss. In this situation, you may want to be straightforward about what happened, as well as why the change happened. The child will likely experience feelings of loss related to their relationships with family, neighborhood, school, pets, and countless others. Check in with the child; give them opportunities to think about and verbalize their feelings about the loss. Remember that traumatized kids may still need help in identifying their emotions. It may help to recognize that their fear and feelings of loss may create some difficult or acting-out behaviors.

### *Adolescents*

If you have a teen in your care, you are watching them begin to form their identity and move toward independence. As a parent, you can expect some resistance and separation. Despite this, teens need your support, encouragement, and guidance as much as ever.

To help a teen cope with loss, give them a choice, when possible, about how to respond. They may need your advice on what choices are available. Many adolescents in care have not been given much autonomy in decision-making; as a parent, you may want to provide extra support in this area.

Imagine the teen in your care having applied to, and been rejected for, numerous jobs. The rejection this young person feels may mirror the loss they experienced when placed in care. As a parent, you can affirm and validate the youth's feelings of loss. You can also assist them with problem-solving and decision-making about how to proceed without giving up.

### **Loss & Child Development**

Remember that loss may cause the child in your care to stall or regress in their areas of development. It may be helpful for you to know whether the child in your care is developmentally on track for their chronological age. The professionals working with the child may have conducted assessments to determine whether the child has developmental challenges. Your observations will also be crucial in determining where kids are on the continuum and helpful to you as you parent.

If the child in your home is seeing a therapist or other professional, ensure they know the child has experienced loss and the nature of the loss. They can incorporate the information into their sessions as appropriate. They may also be able to offer you some tips on parenting the child through this time.

As a parent, you provide the healing thread that runs through all these means of helping the child in your care heal from loss. The piece that you provide is that necessary connection to a loving adult. By being sensitive and aware of the challenges traumatized kids face, you increase the odds that a child who faces loss will not only survive but thrive.

# Resources

## From the [Resource Library](#)

- *The Elephant In The Room—A Children’s Book For Grief And Loss*, by Amanda Edwards and Leslie Ponciano
- Fostering Across Wisconsin—[Grief & Loss](#)
- [What Do These Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [What Grief Looks Like for Children and Youth in Foster Care](#)
- [Grief, Loss & Foster Care](#)
- [Grief and Loss: Making Space for Healing](#)

## From the [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#)
- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)
- [Weathering the Storm of Grief in Foster Care](#)

## Additional Resources

- Beyond Consequences, Volumes I & II, by Heather Forbes
- [Helping Traumatized Children: A Brief Overview for Caregivers](#)
- [Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma](#)