



Foster Care, Grief & Loss

When we think about grief and loss in foster care, the first thing that may come to mind is the loss that foster parents feel when a child they have come to know and love leaves their home. Although it doesn't lessen the pain, it's important to remember that foster care is temporary by its very nature. Foster care gives families time to make the necessary changes so their children can live safely in their homes and communities. Reunification is the goal of foster care—children returning home to their families. Reunification should be celebrated, even though it can be painful. In many cases, reunification is best for the children we've come to love.

Foster parents adjusting after reunification aren't the only ones who experience grief and loss. Birth parents are grieving when their children are placed in out-of-home care. Children placed in foster homes are experiencing grief related to their removal. Other children in the home may grieve the loss of the child who leaves while at the same time grieving for what their life used to be before fostering. For the child placed out of their home, the trauma of being separated from their families is significant, and the emotions that come with the loss can take many different forms.

Grief for What Was

What are some losses you have experienced? Perhaps a beloved friend or family member moved across the country, and you no longer have the chance to see them every day. Maybe you're the person who moved and are no longer in a familiar environment. You miss your family and friends, familiar foods, and your neighborhood.

There is a loss of everything familiar to the child in care and the birth family. Both adults and children may feel they have lost control over their lives. Children in care may be missing details that led to their removal from the home. This lack of knowledge about their past may leave them feeling disconnected from their own story. Even in a kinship placement, children may need help understanding the new daily routines or becoming familiar with the stories the family shares. Unfortunately, kids in foster care or kinship care may have lost their confidence in a safe and trusting world. Acknowledging that loss is a loving way to help them, even by listening to their experiences and answering questions when possible.

Grief for the Foster or Kinship Family

Although the goal of foster care is reunification, when it happens, many foster or kinship families feel like they are losing someone they have grown close to. Some issues may complicate grief for the foster or kinship family, such as the child's age, time in the placement, and the emotional relationship with the child. Foster parents may be frustrated if the transition circumstances are unexpected, and a sense of loss can hit suddenly. Even if the transition is planned, the family may feel like the reunification was

premature.

Foster parents may experience disenfranchised grief. People feel this type of grief when they experience a loss that can't be publicly validated and openly mourned. When licensed for foster care, they know that the goal is reunification. Still, when it actually happens, the sadness can be overwhelming. Feelings of powerlessness, anger, and guilt can be intense and only get worse if you feel like no one else understands.

Grief is Different for Everyone

What does grieving look like? Let's take a look at how grief presents itself. The five stages of grief were introduced to the world by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969:

1. Denial: "This cannot be happening to me!"
2. Anger: "Why is this happening? Who is to blame?"
3. Bargaining: "Make this not happen, and in return, I will_____."
4. Depression: "I am too sad to do anything."
5. Acceptance: "I am at peace with what happened."

These stages suggest that grief is a linear process one can walk through and complete. Although these stages can be a helpful framework, grief is much more complex. No two people experience grief the same. Some people may never get to the acceptance stage. Most people are likely to revisit stages they've experienced before as they continue to process the loss. With time, the difficult periods should become less intense and shorter. However, even years after a loss, many still experience grief seemingly out of nowhere. Just remember, almost anything you experience during grief is normal and acceptable.

Shortly after a loss, many people experience these symptoms:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Numbness
- Guilt
- Irritability
- Loneliness
- Loss of appetite
- Apathy
- Anxiety
- Depression

These symptoms often present themselves in different ways. Angry outbursts or moments of crying may become common occurrences. Children and adults who have experienced loss may have difficulty concentrating, show signs of hyperactivity, or have poor impulse control. They may feel overwhelmed by even the simplest choices. Grieving may be a loss of enthusiasm for everyday life or quickly shifting emotions.

Coping with Loss

So, how can we support everyone, including ourselves, as we move through grief and loss? Extra patience and compassion are key - including patience for yourself.

For the child in care and other children in the home, talk to them about the symptoms of grief and give them time and space to express their feelings. They may have conflicted emotions or may not even be able to identify the emotions they are feeling. Let them know that you care for them deeply and will always be there to listen and help them through these difficult emotions.

For foster, kinship, and birth parents, ensure you take the time to recognize and sort through your feelings. Allow yourself time to grieve and talk to someone, such as a spouse, a close friend, or a therapist. Connect with someone who understands how you feel. If you have had a positive shared parenting experience, be honest with the birth parent or foster parent about your emotions and your fears moving forward. Most importantly, remember your accomplishments and feel good about the growth of everyone involved.

Recovery from Grief and Loss

Recovering from loss and its strong emotions can take a long time. Some signs that you may be moving on include:

- You can laugh and enjoy being with others
- Taking care of yourself feels good
- You can handle special days without falling apart
- You want to reach out to others in need or pain
- You can share humorous memories without crying

A word of caution – don't be alarmed if you're suddenly feeling the sharp pains of grief again after you feel you have moved on. Remember, the stages of grief are not linear and may rise to the surface at any time, sometimes when you least expect them.

Confronting our grief can be challenging. It's important to remember that joy and sorrow can coexist. Understanding our losses helps us to connect with the grief and loss children experience and aids us all to heal in a healthy way. Though it is painful, there is value in recognizing and working through our grief. Grief and loss are a normal part of the fostering experience – it means that we were invested and that we cared. And that, ultimately, is a good thing.

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [Foster Care, Grief & Loss](#)
- [Grief & Loss: Making Space for Healing](#)
- [Helping Children Cope With Loss](#)
- [Why Challenging Behaviors Post-Adoption May Be Signs of Grieving](#)
- *The Elephant in the Room: A Children's Book for Grief and Loss*, by Amanda Edwards & Leslie Ponciano
- *Billy Had to Move*, by Theresa Ann Fraser, CYW, B.A.
- *Lost in Child Welfare*, by Ashley S. Stokes

Learn in the [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Seasons Change: Understanding Transition & Change for Foster Parents](#)
- [Creating Space for Healing: Helping Adolescents and Teens Thrive](#)

Additional Resources

- [Discussion Guide: Understanding Parental Grief and Loss](#)
- [Understanding the Losses Foster & Kinship Kids Experience](#)
- [Get Grief-Informed for Youth in Foster Care](#)