



Grief & Loss: Making Space for Healing

While it may take 6-8 weeks for a broken bone to heal or 5-10 days for the common cold to resolve, emotional healing often takes much longer. The day an adoption becomes finalized, for example, is a joyful experience, but it may have an underlying layer of sadness for the child or children involved. This grief due to loss must be acknowledged. That's where everyday healing comes in.

Children touched by foster care and adoption often lose all that was familiar to them. This loss may include family members, their home, school, friends, or even pets. This feeling of loss can go unnoticed by others because there are no rituals, such as funerals, that show children that their loss is shared. Children may wonder if they have the "right" to grieve. This unspoken grief may lead to challenging behaviors. These behaviors are normal in this circumstance, and each child's experience will differ as they go through the stages of development and grief.

Stages of Development and Grief

Your relationship with the child in your care is a partnership; you are an active member of their healing journey. Symptoms of loss may be physical, emotional, or both. You may notice changes in eating or sleeping patterns, poor concentration, moodiness, anger, or even trouble making decisions.

In the webinar [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#), presenter Dr. Samantha Wilson explains that "naming" adversity and loss is the path that provides hope for the future. Here is an overview of how grief may present at different ages and how you can help the child in your care at each stage.

- **Infants and Toddlers:** Infants and toddlers can remember, even when they are preverbal. They are egocentric, meaning they are the center of their own universes. This is when kids may be hungry for details about their life stories because they play the starring role. Keep in mind that losses relating to foster care and adoption are complex. At this stage, be careful with the language used. Strive for positivity while being truthful.
- **Preschoolers:** Preschoolers can differentiate between "then" and "now." Acknowledge what happened in the past while ensuring safety and stability now. You want to convey the message: "You are loved, safe, and valued." Children in this age group may need to reenact past events through play. Don't be alarmed if the child acts out previous trauma. You can be their protective shield. As a caring adult, be there to bear witness and give voice to their emotions.
- **School Age:** At the ages of 6-12, you may see that the child continues to revisit their pre-adoptive or pre-foster care experiences. Through this, they are making meaning. They may ask the same questions over and over. They may misremember due to their understanding of cause and effect. Here is where you can introduce the concept of life books to tell the story. See our tip sheet,

[Life Books: A Lifelong Priceless Treasure](#), for tips on creating one.

- Adolescents: A child's sense of loss may increase when identity needs become more pronounced in the teenage years. You may find the child longs for more information, which is normal. Please continue to help them regulate their emotional experience. Give them the language and space they need to process their grief. In adolescence, the "thinking" part of the brain can be isolated from the "feeling" part. Finding language that describes their moods or experiences can be challenging for teens. Move at a pace that is comfortable for them. It may be best to have conversations during a stress-free time, such as a walk around the block or a basketball game. You might find that you have the best talks when you're in the car or when the youth is looking at their phone, as it can be hard for teens to maintain eye contact when having difficult discussions.

Grief Triggers

Sometimes, everything seems to be going great. Then, out of the blue, the child explodes with anger, begins lying again, or picks fights with their siblings more than usual. They may have encountered a grief trigger. You might notice that certain things trigger negative behavior. Memories of the past are often to blame. For example, the child might cry or act out at birthday parties because they remind them of past birthdays, good or bad.

In the Champion Classrooms course [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#), therapist Jaclyn Skalnik shares some possible grief triggers:

- Moving
- Anniversaries
- Pregnancy or birth of another child
- Times of financial hardship
- Changing schools
- Holidays
- Divorce
- People who ask intrusive questions or attempt to exert control

Remember, no matter how frustrating the negative behavior may be, do your best to be inquisitive, listen well, and let the child grieve with you.

Good Grief

According to Dan Siegel, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, it's necessary to address grief because "we name it to tame it." This is an ongoing task. Kids use behaviors, play, and conversations to communicate and heal. This can take place with family, friends, or therapists.

Good grief is allowed through the following:

- Permission to feel
- Respect for their current emotions

- Safe adults
- Models of how to handle loss

Keep in mind that any partnership requires give-and-take. Allow the children in your care, especially teens, to practice caring and listening by sharing your emotions. It may feel unnatural to let yourself cry in front of the child when you're sad or frustrated; however, this honesty allows them to see how much you care for them. It's a meaningful way to model trust and build genuine connections.

Finally, remember that elimination of grief is NOT the goal. Instead, feelings of grief should be expected and accepted as a part of life. As an adoptive or foster parent, you have the opportunity to help the hurting child heal. Grieving behavior can be challenging, but it is understandable when seen through the lens of compassion.

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

- [Helping Children Cope With Loss](#)
- [What Grief Looks Like for Children and Youth in Foster Care](#)
- [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
- *Healing Days – A Guide for Kids Who Have Experienced Trauma*, by Susan Farber Strauss
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [Supporting the Emotional Healing of Children in Your Care](#)

Learn in the [Champion Classrooms](#)

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

Additional Resources

- [Developmental Trauma Disorder](#)