

When Children Move: Foster Parents' Loss Experience

(Participants' Workbook)

Loss

- Anticipatory Loss
- The Loss Itself
- The Grieving Process

Material adapted from: "Helping Foster Parents Cope with Separation, Loss and Grief," by Susan B. Edelstein, Dorli Burge and Jill Waterman. Child Welfare. Vol. LXXX, #1. Jan/Feb

Ways Foster Parents Experience Loss and Grief

1. Grief of the parent whose child you are caring for
2. Grief of the child
3. Grief about losing the child to reunification, another placement, or adoption
4. Grief of others in your family as the child leaves

Factors Influencing Foster Parents' Grief

1. Characteristics of foster parent-child relationship
 - ✓ Age of child when placed
 - ✓ Length of time in placement
 - ✓ Emotional "fit," i.e., special match, ambivalence, feelings of relief about child leaving family
2. Circumstances of child's transition to and from placement
 - ✓ Well-planned, cooperative transition from one home to another
 - ✓ An abrupt, unexpected move out of home
 - ✓ A move that foster parents have serious misgivings or conflicts about
3. Concurrent planning
4. Culture and Belief System
 - ✓ Expression of grief seen as weakness
 - ✓ Demanding and multiple roles of the foster parent
 - ✓ Agency's plan to place another child as soon as vacancy in home is expected

Ambiguous Losses

There are two kinds of loss:

5. A loss that has a resolution and/or an ending, e.g., the death of a loved one.
 - ✓ The loss is recognized and accepted by society.
 - ✓ Rituals and roles are known.
 - ✓ Public recognition is available, e.g., funeral services.
 - ✓ A period of grieving is expected.
 - ✓ Social support often comes from others.
 - ✓ Memories, anniversaries, etc., are often noted and supported.

6. Ambiguous loss
 - ✓ There is a lack of clarity that the loss “qualifies” as a loss.
 - ✓ There is no final resolution.
 - ✓ Unresolved grief can be felt.
 - ✓ Often there is no public recognition of the loss.
 - ✓ People are unsure how to respond and therefore don't provide social support that validates the loss.
 - ✓ The ambiguity leads to disenfranchised grief.

Ambiguous Losses (continued)

Ambiguous losses lack clarity and can lead to sharply different views of exactly who or what has been lost. Examples:

- *Infertility.* This may not even be known by anyone other than the infertile woman for whom the monthly menstrual cycle acts as a painful reminder of this loss.
- *Perinatal death.* This refers to a death before birth or in the month immediately following the birth.
- *When a pregnancy has been terminated.* Although most women who terminate a pregnancy appear to experience relief as their primary emotion, others – especially those who terminate because of a fetal anomaly – experience grief at the death of their child.
- *Giving a child up for adoption.* Birth mothers often experience recurrences of deep grief long after they have given their child up. This commonly reaches its greatest intensity on the child's birthday.
- *Being adopted.* Children who were adopted describe grieving over their fantasy parent-child relationship that might have been.
- *Adoptive parents grieving their “wished for” biological child.* They may reexperience grief if their child decided to seek out her/his birth family.
- *Couples experiencing infertility.* They often describe a sense of isolation (sometimes from each other). Their loss, if recognized, is commonly minimized by others, e.g., “Just relax. I know someone who....”
- *Death of a pet.* A pet may be viewed by others as “just an animal.” Yet, this may be a particularly significant loss for a child or an elderly person.

Ambiguous Losses (continued)

- *Suicide or murder.* These losses are so “large” that they overwhelm the imaginations of others. Such loss overwhelms everyone involved, but the tragedy is that this is a time when the bereaved most need their loss recognized and, at the same time, when their social network is most likely to avoid any and all discussion of the person who has been lost.
- *Alzheimer’s Disease.* The family member, although alive, may be seen as “dead” by other family members, because the person they know and love doesn’t seem to be there anymore.
- *Death of an ex-spouse or a lover.*
- *Multiple losses,* particularly if they are *serial losses.* A curious ambiguity surrounds losses that take place over a period of time. The bereaved may come to be seen by others as “marked” or “cursed” (or may feel that they are seen this way by others).
- *Stopping visitation.* In the case of divorce, when a parent stops visiting and essentially abandons the family, the children experience grief.
- *Child involved with drugs or criminal activities.* When this occurs, the child’s parents may feel they are being blamed for their child’s choices. They grieve the loss of the child they had and/or hoped for, but do not feel supported in this grief.
- *Illness or disabling condition.* When an illness or condition is invisible but disabling (e.g., diabetes or an injury), each new limitation results in new grief.
- *Deterioration.* One’s own deterioration or the deterioration of a loved one can result in unresolved grief.

Ambiguous Losses (continued)

- *Caregiver sorrow.* Caregivers can be hidden grievers, too. What has been viewed as burnout may, in fact, be unresolved grief at ambiguous loss.
- *Moves.* Children and adults can experience grief at moving to a new home and a new community because there are so many small losses attached to the move.

Phantom Losses are losses that occurred before a person was born or had the opportunity to meet the deceased, yet the deceased had a significant effect on the person's life, e.g., a grandparent whose life and death forever shaped a family's system, boundaries, and communication patterns.

My Experience

What are some things you have done in the past when you have experienced loss?

Disenfranchised Grief

Grief that people feel when they experience a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned, or publically mourned.

- The relationship, the loss, and the griever are not recognized.
- Feelings of powerlessness, anger, and guilt are often intensified.
- The grief is not understood by the agency, birth parents, relatives, and the adoptive parents because of the *temporary* nature of the foster parents' caregiving role.
- The expectation for foster parents to help others can compete with managing their own feelings of loss.

Consequences of Unresolved Grief in Foster Parents

- Emotional distancing/unavailability
- Anger
- Guilt
- Depression

Impacts

- New foster placement(s)
- Other foster children in the home
- Family members – spouse, partner, children
- Self
- Other relationships

Coping with the Loss of a Child in Care

As foster parents, you have opened your hearts and homes to children in need. Often you have accepted a child who has many issues to deal with and taken on the large task of teaching him/her to trust, love, care, and become responsible or independent by patterning such behavior for him/her. You may or may not have developed close bonds.

Terminating a placement can be heart-wrenching for you, your family, and the child in care. There is no way that separation can be made easy and painless. The following suggestions may help make the separation as positive an experience as possible.

For the child that is leaving:

- In addition to accepting a child's feelings, help him/her to identify them.
- Give the child permission to express his/her feelings.
- Talk straight to the child about why he/she is leaving and where he/she is going.
- Make a life book or souvenir box.
- Share information about the child with the social worker so the best plan can be made for the child's next placement.
- Give the child permission to leave you.
- Do not let the child "make" you reject him/her.

For your own children:

- Talk straight with your own children about the move and why.
- Give them permission to identify and express their feelings about the move.
- Communicate the positive aspects of the change.
- Allow your child(ren) to grieve.

Coping with the Loss of a Child in Care (continued)

For yourself:

- Take time to sort out your feelings and think about where they are coming from.
- Allow yourself time to grieve.
- Talk to someone about your feelings.
- Ask the child's social worker to involve you in the planning process and keep you informed of developments as they occur.
- Establish with your social worker what future contacts, if any, you may have with the child after the move takes place.
- Remember your good times and accomplishments.
- Draw your family closer and "regroup".
- Make a scrapbook of events and times spent together.
- Develop an album that shows each child in care who the foster parent has been involved with. Develop a short ceremony for putting the child's photo in the album when the child is about to leave.
- Start a garden in which you add a plant in remembrance of the child each time a child leaves your home.
- Create and practice other rituals and/or ceremonies.

Tips for Managing Loss

Talk about your loss.

Accept help and support when offered.

Exercise moderately.

Keep a journal.

Be attentive to maintaining healthy eating and sleep patterns.

Read.

Listen to music.

Go gently.

Seek spiritual support.

Be patient with yourself.

Develop a ritual.

Do something you find pleasurable.

Supporting Others Who are Grieving

Be a good listener.

Let them feel sad.

Do not minimize grief.

Do not be judgmental.

Share your feelings.

Ask about their feelings.

Acknowledge the pain.

Be available when you can.

Talk openly and honestly about the situation unless the person does not want to.

If symptoms of depression are severe or persistent and the person is not coping with day-to-day activities, encourage seeking professional help.

Saying Goodbye Is One of the Hardest Things About Being a Foster Family

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My family and I had been fostering Zhaire and Akeelahⁱ for almost two weeks and my house was in a state of nearly constant chaos. Our foster care status is "respite," meaning that we will provide emergency care for a few days but we are not available for long-term foster care. My children are at an age where caring for a foster child for months and then having to say goodbye would take too great an emotional toll. Originally, we were supposed to have the children for a weekend. Then it was a full week, and then it was longer because Child Services felt their previous foster parent wasn't providing adequate care so they were trying to find them new placement.

"Give me ice cream! I WANT ICE CREEEAM!!!!"

"Zhaire," I said for the five-hundredth time, "When you ask for something you need to say 'please.'"

"Whyyyyyyyy!!!" he whined.

"Because it's good manners."

"Why you like manners so much?" he growled.

"Because manners and hard work will take you anywhere you want to go in this world."

He switched on his biggest, most charming smile. "Can I have ice cream, pleeese?"

It was a conversation we had had in some form or another over and over again since he'd come to us, but it never ended this peacefully before. Whether it was manners or homework or dinner, Zhaire wanted things his way. Sometimes he would throw himself on the floor and kick and scream for twenty minutes. Sometimes my three year-old would join in. Sometimes my older son and/or daughter would come in and try to help but this would end up escalating the situation and they'd end up getting upset themselves. Sometimes I would give in simply because I was exhausted and my older kids would cry foul and demand to know why the rules were different for Zhaire. Sometimes I'd have an extra glass of wine at the end of the day.

Saying Goodbye Is One of the Hardest Things About Being a Foster Family (continued)

As a foster parent, you're conscious of the fact that the kids you're caring for are not used to the foods, sounds, and general goings-on in your house. They might be afraid of dogs because they've either had a bad experience or have never been around them, so we kept our dogs in their crates to make Akeelah feel safe. When I would finally hit on a healthy food that Zhaire liked (he thought most of my cooking, even things as simple as chicken nuggets and mac and cheese, was "nasty"), he would eat so much of it he would get a stomachache. He would keep asking, "When I'm done can I have more? Is there more of this? Can I have it all?" My kids have never known hunger, so they would get annoyed until I explained privately why he was so anxious. But nothing was more startling than Akeelah's fear of the bathtub. No matter how many bath toys, bath crayons and water wheels I put in the tub, no amount of tenderness and reassurance could soothe Akeelah's terror. Maybe it was just an innocent childhood phobia. Or maybe it was something far more sinister. With that thought my gentle words caught in my throat.

"What's wrong, Mom?" my daughter asked. She's been able to see through me since the day she was born.

"Nothing," I lied, and swallowed hard. I lifted Akeelah out of the tub and finished washing her with a warm washcloth on the bath mat.

New placement had been found and it was two nights before the children were scheduled to leave. My husband and I were both sick, the decreased sleep and increased stress finally taking its toll. My daughter carried Akeelah around the house on her tiny fourth-grade hip like a little mommy and Akeelah loved it. She was on antibiotics and an inhaler and was doing much better than when she'd first arrived. She was turning two and her brother was turning 6 in a few days, their birthdays only 3 days apart.

"What kind of birthday cake would you like, Zhaire?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what's your favorite?"

"I don't know. I never had a birthday cake."

The next day, while he went for a supervised visit with his father, my kids and I baked Zhaire and Akeelah a cake and wrapped their presents. Zhaire kept asking if he could have my daughter's Razor scooter, so we knew he was going to love unwrapping a new one that was all his.

We hung balloons and streamers and piled their gifts on the dining room table. Their eyes flew open wide when they came through the front door.

Saying Goodbye Is One of the Hardest Things About Being a Foster Family (continued)

"Can we open them now? Can we have the cake now?" I was planning on giving them dinner first, but what the hell. 9 out of 10 times Zhaire just demanded Honey Nut Cheerios anyway. Zhaire went to stab the cake with a fork.

"Wait! We have to light the candles," my husband told him. "Then you make a wish and blow them out."

We all sang "Happy Birthday" and Zhaire and Akeelah blew out their candles. My 3 year-old had his tenth tantrum that day, this one over the fact that it wasn't HIS birthday. Zhaire's teachings combined with Sean's own toddler volatility had succeeded in creating a super-hellion. I wearily marched him over to the "naughty step" yet again. I imagined seeing, "Sean Was Here 2013-2028" carved into the wood. Then Zhaire had his nightly tantrum over homework. And then another over going to bed. After he'd calmed down and was in his pajamas I explained to him that he and his sister were going to a different foster home the next day, and that soon he'd be with his dad. He didn't react at all. Just handed me a book to read. I tucked him in and sat on the edge of the bed in the dark holding his hand until he fell asleep, praying that his father comes through. Child services had already approved his grandmother's apartment and said that she and Zhaire's father would be getting custody in a few weeks.

I stayed up late doing all of their laundry and packing their new toys and clothes into their bags. The social worker picked them up in the morning. I kissed them both and told them what good kids they were. They started walking toward the social worker's minivan.

"You know, they really like it here," the social worker whispered as she gathered up their stuff. "If you want, they could stay a couple more weeks until his father completes drug counseling."

If I didn't have three other kids. If Zhaire was easier. If my three year-old wasn't such a handful. If Akeelah wasn't so little.

If. If. If.

I shook my head. "Much as I wish I could, I just can't right now."

I shut the door behind them and wept.

ⁱ Children's names have been changed