Celebrating the Holidays with Children You Foster

Conflicting loyalties and lost dreams often make the holidays a difficult time for children in foster care. Just as studies show that holidays are stressful times for most of us, these reactions are compounded for youth placed in your home. Here are some suggestions for the holidays.

How can my family make it easier for the children in foster care while they are in our home?


• Help children in foster care imagine what to expect in your home. Much of what we assume to be commonplace can be new to the children you foster.

• Share the religious meanings the holidays may have for your family. Talk about your family’s specific customs and activities.

• Use this time of sharing to learn especially about the religious beliefs, customs, and activities of the children you foster.

• Try to incorporate at least some of their traditions into your traditions.

• Some parents try to keep the holidays low key in order to help minimize some of the stress.

• How can we work with birth families during the holidays?

• Again, ask children about their experiences and try to incorporate some of their traditions. The children placed in your home may miss some activities that they experienced with their family or in a previous placement.

• If possible, ask your child’s family members about their holiday traditions. Ask about their beliefs and observances. Although you may feel stretched at the holidays, try to coordinate schedules with the birth families.

• This gives the children a chance to share what is familiar while experiencing new traditions.

• This is a good time for the youth in your home to make small gifts and send cards to their birth families or old neighbors and friends.

• This is a time when many children feel conflicted feelings about their birth families and worry about them. It is a good time to let the young person know that it is okay for them to be safe and cared

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for even if their family struggles. Reassure
them if you can, about the safety and care
of their birth family.

What are some of the ways I can help
the children who I foster get through
the holidays? What are some signs of
grief or sadness that I can look for?

- Be prepared for the sadness and grief.
  Talk about your child’s feelings
  throughout the season.

- Give your children
time and space to
grieve.

- Grief takes many
  forms and may be
  exhibited in lots of
  ways, including:
  - Reverting
    back to
    younger
    behaviors
developmentally.
  - Soiling
    themselves or bedwetting.
  - Becoming
    withdrawn and isolated.
  - Having
    temper tantrums.
  - Being
    rebellious.
  - Complaining more than usual.
  - Try to remember the developmental
    age of the children you foster. It will
    also help you to stay patient if you
    keep in mind the challenges of the
    season for your child before you react.

What are some things we can do to
make family get-togethers easier?

- Talk about upcoming events and the
  people who will be there. If you cannot get
  together before the big event, introduce
  your 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.

- Tell them if your celebrations are quiet or
  loud, sacred or silly, big, or small.

- Describe the home or place where the
  event will be held, and tell how it usually
  proceeds.

- 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 your children a
  camera so that they can
  record the celebration,
  and also give them one
  for holiday visits with
  their birth families.

What can I do to
help my children
learn what is
expected of them at
family celebrations?

This is an opportunity to teach the behaviors
and manners that you would like the youth
you foster to learn. Go over basic manners
such as “please” and “thank you.”

- Explain the expectations of children prior
to family get-togethers, and practice those
  behaviors ahead of time.

- Use role playing at home so that they
  can practice.

- Make sure you and your family/friends
  are on the same page regarding gifts from
  and to your children. Perhaps try to have
  your child bring a small hostess gift to the
  get together: baked goods, nuts, candles,
  an ornament, etc.

- Tell family and friends about your
  children and try

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to introduce them before the holidays. It's a good time to remind others about the confidentiality you honor concerning the children you foster, and it might be a good time to practice some polite but firm answers to some questions.

- Remember especially to ask your children what they would like to have shared about themselves.

**Resources**

- *Before You Celebrate the Holidays in Foster Care* by Carrie Craft
- *When A Child Can’t be Home For Christmas*
- *Honoring the Holiday Traditions of Children in Care*