



Helping Children Cope with Loss

As foster parents, 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 shapes children allows you to do a better job of parenting them in a way that promotes 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" (Wordnik). 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, perhaps the child explodes at the slightest frustration, or is defiant to an extreme

degree. Maybe he tells 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 for 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 from a place 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, because of that, these feelings 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 actually 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

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By consciously working to be present with the child in your care and actively promoting a home environment that is non-threatening, you are helping to 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 to 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 different and 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 that the child that you are caring for is in, as you think about preparing them for challenges in the future.

Infants

Are you caring for a baby? 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, such as being removed from home, can cause developmental problems. Foster parents know that being consistently and warmly responsive to the baby's needs is the most effective way to help the infant in their care heal.

If a baby has experienced loss, such as moving to a new foster home, you might help the infant heal by keeping consistent the baby's routines, as well as by responding quickly and calmly to the infant's stress. You want to do everything possible to enhance

the infant's feelings of safety. If possible, encourage a series of visits to your home that get incrementally longer. This will help a baby adjust to the new sights, smells, and sounds of their new parents.

Preschoolers

The preschooler in your home may be a "magical thinker," and this may mean the child believes their thoughts, feelings, or actions caused their loss. This child will probably not share their magical thinking, so you may want to monitor their behavior or participate in play therapy. Time is not a clear concept for them, so consider that fact when a preschooler is about to experience loss.

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. Also, 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, as well as time. The school-aged child in your care has the ability to 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.

Maybe the child in your care is not being reunified. While you may understand the positives associated with this, the child will likely have feelings of loss around their

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relationship with their family, neighborhood, school, pets, and countless other relationships. 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 him or her beginning 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 as much of a choice as possible in how to respond. They may need your advice on what choices are available. Many adolescents in care have not been given a lot of 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 then assist the youth in problem-solving and making decisions about how to proceed and not give up.

Remember that loss may cause the child in

your care to stall or regress in their areas of development. It may be good for you to know whether the child in your care is developmentally the same as their chronological age. The professionals working with the child may have done assessments that have determined if the child has some developmental challenges. Your own 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 foster parent, you provide the healing thread running through all of these means of

helping the child in your care heal from loss. With you as the trauma-informed, perceptive, nurturing parent you already are, children have a better chance of coping with and overcoming loss. Children are resilient. They can and do survive significant loss all the time. 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*.



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Resources

From our Lending Library

- Tip Sheet: [What Do These Behaviors Mean?](#)
- Tip Sheet: [What Grief Looks Like for Children and Youth in Foster Care](#)
- *Child Trauma Handbook: A Guide For Helping Trauma Exposed Children*, by Ricky Greenwaid
- *The Elephant In The Room—A Children’s Book For Grief And Loss*, by Amanda Edwards and Leslie Ponciano

Additional Resources

- *Beyond Consequences*, Vols I & II, by Heather Forbes
- [Helping Traumatized Children: A Brief Overview for Caregivers](#)
- [Parenting a Child who has Experienced Trauma](#)
- [Alvarado Consulting Group](#)
- [Coffee Colored Sofa](#)
- [Confessions of an Adoptive Parent](#)



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