

## When Foster Parents Experience Grief

*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. January / February*

### **Foster Parents experience Grief and through multiple sources:**

1. grief of the parent who's 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

### **Some Factors Influencing Foster Parent Grief:**

1. Characteristics of foster parent – child relationship
  - ◆ age of child when placed
  - ◆ length of time in placement
  - ◆ emotional "fit"
    - 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 where the foster parents have serious misgivings or concerns.
3. Concurrent Planning: (establishes a case plan with a primary goal of family reunification, and at the same time an alternative permanency plan is developed for the child, such as adoption or guardianship, if the family is unable to achieve the primary plan). If family reunification efforts fail, the alternate plan will already be in place. Concurrent planning is intended to reduce the total period of time a child remains in foster care before being permanently placed with a family.
4. Culture and Belief Systems:
  - ◆ expression of grief may be seen as a weakness
  - ◆ demanding and multiple roles of the foster parent
  - ◆ agency's plan to place another child as soon as vacancy in home is expected

**Disenfranchised Grief:** Grief that people feel when they experience a loss that is not or cannot be publicly validated and openly mourned.

- ◆ Feelings of powerlessness anger and guilt are often intensified
- ◆ Not understood by agency, birth parents, relatives and adoptive parents because of temporary care giving role
- ◆ Expectation for foster parents to help others vs. dealing with their own feelings / loss

### **Experiencing Grief:**

- ◆ No two people grieve in the same way
- ◆ Some of the more common experiences listed below:
  - difficulty concentrating
  - sleep disturbance
  - numbness
  - guilt
  - irritability
  - anger

- |                    |              |
|--------------------|--------------|
| - weepiness        | - loneliness |
| - loss of appetite | - apathy     |
| - anxiety          | - depression |
| - powerlessness    | - tense      |
| - overwhelmed      | - pain       |

### **Coping with the Loss of a Child in Care**

As foster parents, you have opened your hearts and home 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 to trust, love, care and become responsible or independent by patterning such behavior for him. 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 however, are suggestions for making the separation as positive an experience as possible.

#### **For the Child that is Leaving:**

- Give him permission to express his feelings
- In addition to accepting a child's feelings, help him to identify them
- Talk straight to the child about why she is leaving and where 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" your reject him

#### **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 to grieve

#### **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
- Make an album with pictures of each child you have cared for; develop a short ceremony around putting in the last photo when the current child is about to leave
- Start a garden in which you add a plant each time a child leaves your home in remembrance of the child
- Other rituals and / or ceremonies

### **Consequences of Unresolved Grief in Foster Parents**

- Emotional distancing / unavailability

- Anger
- Guilt
- Depression and loss of energy

#### **What Unresolved Grief can Impact:**

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

#### **Suggestions of Helpful Things You Can Do:**

- Talk about 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

#### **How to Support 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 the use of professional help

#### **You know you are recovering when...**

- You can laugh and enjoy being with others
- Taking care of yourself is not only O.K., but it feels good
- The future is not so frightening
- You can handle special days without falling apart
- You want to reach out to others in need or pain
- You now enjoy activities that you had given up
- You can share humorous memories without crying
- Your emotional roller coaster is slowing down
- You can actually see the progress you've made

**Caution:** *Don't get alarmed if you're suddenly feeling the pain of grief again, this doesn't mean you are regressing, these feelings will come up from time to time when you least expect them.*