

## Learning to Let Go: Coping with Reunification Anxiety

**F**rom the moment a child enters your home, the fear of reunification can also move in. How will you say goodbye? Will the child be returning to a safe and stable environment? How will the other kids in your care react when this child leaves?

The first goal of foster care is often reunification. And, while you may have known that this was the goal from the start, that doesn't mean that, when the time comes to say goodbye, anxiety can't happen.

Reunification anxiety can happen to anyone, but understanding what to do in certain situations may help you cope with some of those feelings.

### What is Reunification Anxiety?

Reunification anxiety is something that can be common for foster parents. Feelings of worry, nervousness, or unease about the child in your care returning to his birth parent(s)/home may enter your mind when you learn that the reunification is drawing near. You might also feel excited or apprehensive; happy or sad; heart-full or heartbroken. The feelings can be mixed and complicated. And, just as you may be feeling a complicated and heady mix of emotions, the child in your care and his birth parent(s) may also be feeling those same or very similar emotions.

During the time that the child has been in your care, his birth parents have been

making several complicated and possibly difficult changes. They have been concentrating on all of the things that will make them stronger parents, that will allow them to learn and use new skills, and that will, ultimately, lead to the return of their child to their home. And now that their child will be returning home, they may be feeling anxious and fearful. They may be thinking about what is going to happen when the child returns. How will they manage and cope with the stress of day-to-day parenting? What if things don't go perfectly or

according to plan? The stakes are high and the fear of failure can be very daunting.

The child may be experiencing worries and anxieties in the wake of returning to his birth home, as well. Depending on his age, he may have memories of living with his birth parents before entering foster care and he may worry that some of those same unhealthy or negative circumstances will be there again. And, even if going back to his birth family is what he says he really wants, moving back home means being uprooted again. For a child who had to change schools when he entered care, for example, he may now have to once again leave his school and his friends and teachers, as well as foster siblings and neighborhood friends.

### Ways to Cope

Everyone reacts differently to feelings of fear, worry, and anxiety. Some harbor them

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inside, silently fretting about an anticipated event. Others express their feelings openly, confiding in a friend, spouse, partner, or other support person. Regardless of how you deal with feelings of anxiety, they can begin to affect your family as a whole. Over time, unresolved or unaddressed feelings of anxiety can take on a physical form, such as lack of sleep, a change in appetite, irritability, or pulling away from family members or friends. Children pay attention to your words and actions and may pick up on these changes, regardless of how subtle they may seem. As a result, your parenting relationship may shift. Your relationship with your spouse, partner, or other loved ones may also shift.

Regardless of the method of expression, it is essential to find a way to release the anxiety that you may be feeling. Look for the silver linings and remember what the song says: accentuate the positive. It can be easy to find the negatives in any situation; but searching for the positives provides for a richer understanding and experience.

### *Reach Out*

Everyone has days when they simply don't know how to cope. When you are feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or just need someone to talk to who will listen, please know that you can call us here at the Coalition. We have a team of Resource Specialists who can help by simply being your sounding board, by offering possible solutions, by helping to locate resources that you might need, or by connecting you with another foster parent. Sometimes talking with

another person who has first-hand knowledge of how you may be feeling and what you may be thinking is part of the best medicine. You aren't alone on your journey; support is just a phone call away.

### *Support Groups*

Support groups allow foster parents to share ideas, experiences, and ways to cope, in addition to providing support to one another. You might find that being with or talking to others who have been where you are and who know how it feels to help support a child's reunification process can give you a feeling of belonging and understanding.



### *Self-Care*

In any stressful situation, you can benefit from finding a positive and helpful coping mechanism. This could be something as simple as taking a walk around the block after dinner every night. Doing so may give you time to relax and unwind, can be a

source of exercise, and may even provide you with alone or one-on-one time with one of the children in your home.

Another idea is to unleash your creativity in expressing yourself and your feelings. You might write in a journal, keep a scrapbook, or start a blog about your adventures and experiences. Sometimes it's easier to write about the things that are on your mind instead of having a conversation.

There is much to be said about the importance of self-care. Whether by yourself or together as a family, finding and making time to take care of *you* can help restore a

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healthy balance. Take some time to think about ways to help you deal with feelings of anxiety. What activities or actions make you feel calmer? Which things refill your emotional bucket and give you renewed inner strength and energy?

### Taking a Break

There may come a time when you feel that you need to take a break from fostering. Taking time between foster placements is understandable and may be beneficial for you and your family. Building up anxiety upon anxiety can have mental, emotional, and physical affects not only on you, but on everyone around you. Taking a little time in between placements to rejuvenate yourself and the other members of your family may have a positive result on you; and it might also make your home and your family an even better place for the next child who enters your care.

Reunification is the goal for many children when they are placed with a foster family. Part of being a foster parent, means helping to support that reunification and caring for the child for the short-term; but it doesn't mean burying your feelings. And, while reunification anxiety may be common, there are ways to plan, take care of yourself, and replenish your individual and family strengths.

By opening your heart and your home to a child needing a safe place to stay while their parents learn, grow, and enhance their skills, you have played an important and essential role in the life of that child – and that family. The child will remember the care that you gave during his stay, and he and his family will be stronger for it. It's not goodbye when the child leaves, but the beginning of a new chapter.



### Resources

You can find more tip sheets on our website, [www.wiadopt.org](http://www.wiadopt.org). Some in particular you might be interested in are titled:

- The Balance Beam of Life: Caring for Yourself, While Caring for Your Kids
- Self Care for Families
- The Challenges of Foster Care: Grief and Loss

Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook, Chapter 5: Foster Family Self Care  
[dcf.wisconsin.gov/publications/pdf/dcf\\_p\\_5000\\_chapter5.pdf](http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/publications/pdf/dcf_p_5000_chapter5.pdf)

### Books

- *The Foster Parenting Toolbox*, Edited by Kim Phagan-Hansel
- *The Foster Parenting Manual*, by John Degarmo
- *Success as a Foster Parent: Everything You Need to Know about Foster Care*, by NFPA with Rachel Greene Baldino