



**Saying Goodbye:
Separation and Loss
Issues for Foster
Parents**

Anticipatory Loss

The Loss Itself

Grieving Process

Handout 1

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. January / February

Loss

There are two kinds of loss:

1. A loss that has resolution and/or ending e.g. death of loved one

- ♦ recognized and accepted by society
- ♦ rituals and roles
- ♦ public recognition
- ♦ grief process
- ♦ social support from others
- ♦ memories, anniversaries, etc.

2. Ambiguous Loss

- ♦ lack of clarity
- ♦ no resolution
- ♦ unresolved grief
- ♦ often no public recognition

- ◆ people unsure how to respond, therefore lack social support for validating the loss
- ◆ leads to disenfranchised grief

Ambiguous Losses

Losses that lack clarity and can lead to sharply different views of exactly who or what has been lost.

- ♦ ***Infertility***, which may not even be noticed by others, but, at least for infertile women, the monthly menstrual cycle acts as a painful reminder of this loss
- ♦ ***Perinatal death***, in particular death during pregnancy
- ♦ Cases where a ***pregnancy has been terminated***. Although most women who elect to 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.
- ♦ ***Birth mothers*** who give their child up for adoption 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.
- ♦ ***Children who were adopted*** describe grieving over their fantasy parent-child relationship that might have been.

- ♦ ***Adoptive parents*** who describe grieving their “wished for” biological child, and may re-experience grief if their child decided to seek out her / his birth family.

- ♦ Couples who are struggling with ***infertility*** often describe a sense of isolation (sometimes from each other). Their loss, if recognized, commonly is minimized by others (“Just relax. I know someone who...”).

- ♦ ***The death of a pet***, often seen by others as “just an animal”. Yet, this may be a particularly significant loss for a child or an elderly person.

- ♦ Losses that are so “large” that they overwhelm the imaginations of others, such as ***suicide*** or ***murder***. Such a 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***, which may create a situation in which a family member, although alive, may be seen as “dead” by some family members, because the person they know and love is seen to no longer inhabit the body of their loved one.

- ♦ ***The death of an ex-spouse or a lover.***

- ♦ A curious ambiguity surrounds **multiple losses**, particularly if they are **serial losses**, taking place over a period of time. The bereaved may come to be seen by others as "marked" or "cursed" (or may feel they are seen this way by others).
- ♦ In the case of divorce, when a **parent stops his / her visitation**, and, essentially, abandons the family, children experience grief.
- ♦ When their **child gets involved with drugs or criminal activities**, 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.
- ♦ When an **illness or disabling condition** is invisible but disabling (e.g. diabetes or the result of an injury), with each new limitation comes new grief.
- ♦ One's own deterioration or the deterioration of a loved one can result in unresolved grief.
- ♦ **Caregivers** can be hidden grievers, too. What has been viewed as burnout may, in fact, be unresolved grief at ambiguous loss.

- ♦ Children often experience, but even 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 you were born or had the opportunity to meet the person but the person had a significant effect on your life e.g. grandparent.

Ways Foster Parents Experience Loss and Grief

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

Handout 3

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Some Factors Influencing Foster Parents 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 which foster parents have serious misgivings or conflicts about

3. Concurrent Planning

4. Culture and Belief System

- ◆ 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

Handout 5

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Experiencing Grief

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

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
- Have an album that shows each child in care the foster parent has been involved with and 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

IMPACTS

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

Suggestions of Things to 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.