

# Self-Study Course

## The Grief of Letting Go: Support and Care for Foster Families Transitioning a Child

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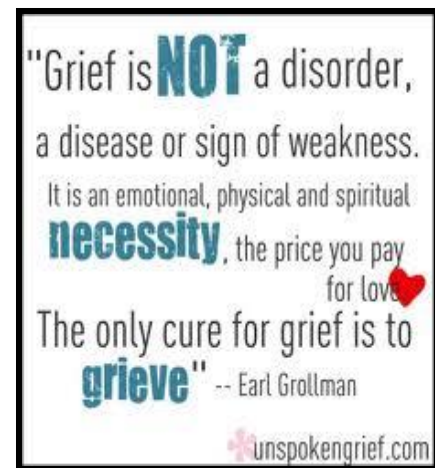
# The Grief of Letting Go

## *Support and Care for Foster Families Transitioning a Child*

### **Introduction: The Shared Experience of Grief and Loss**

Foster families provide a safe and healing home for children who have been hurt in their birth families. Many foster families know from the beginning that they do not want to adopt children and their focus is to provide care and stability until the children return home or transition to an adoptive family. Foster care is by definition temporary, but sometimes in the foster care system, “temporary” can be anywhere from days to years. During this time, many foster families come to care deeply for the children who have flourished in their care and become very protective. While foster parents may know in the beginning of the placement that they will not adopt this child, often they do not realize how difficult it would be when a child leaves their home. They do not expect to feel like *this*. They did not realize that they would become so attached to a child.

The foster and adoptive process is saturated in loss and grief. These emotions are not limited to the child, but are shared by the foster parents, the system, the birth family, and where applicable, the new adoptive family. Grief impacts each member of the child’s team because each person has an investment in the life of the child. Often, so much of the focus is on the child’s grief that the foster parents’ grief experience is overlooked or discounted. Yet the grief of a family saying good-bye to a child they have cared for can be profound.



Are you a foster parent who has had a child leave your home? Did you feel a mixture of relief, resignation, pain, anger, or sadness? Every situation will be unique, but most foster parents have some kind of grief when a child who has been with them for a long-time leaves.

The purpose of this study is to explore the loss and grief experience of foster parents during the transition of a child from their home. Foster parents and team members will learn tools to recognize and care for foster families as they grieve the move of the child from their family. If you are a foster parent, you may see your family’s experience in the words written here. Foster parenting is a tough job. Foster parents need support through their grieving process. When families are supported and understand the grief they feel, they will turn be able to focus on doing what is best for the child as he or she transitions out of the home. When you can understand your own pain and loss as a foster parent saying good-bye, you can get the support you need and be more available to help the child in your home.

## **Foster Parents are Healing Parents**

Have you ever heard the phrase, “*Just a foster parent*”? Did it sound like fingernails on a chalk board to you? Foster parents embrace a very difficult and often thankless job. Yet we know that time with a skilled foster parent can help a child heal from the hurts of his past. Foster parents need to recognize the powerful role they have. The nurturing and safety provided by a foster family can be an anchor in a child’s life, giving hope and strength to child to weather his journey through foster care.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding a child’s move, when a child moves from your home, you have the opportunity to influence the success and stability of that youth for years to come. The influence of foster parents in a child’s life cannot be underestimated. The time spent with a foster family is part of that child’s history that they will carry with them forever.

However, you may have many conflicting feelings regarding the child’s move from your home. You may agree or disagree with the decision to move the child. It may have been at your request that the child move due to the severity of the child’s behaviors. It may be a move to an adoptive family, relative or to a higher or lower level of care. You may even be relieved that the child has moved but feel guilty about that feeling. Whatever the reason, the move is always some kind of loss for both the foster family and the child. The child needs you to help him or her understand and process this loss. You can’t give a child what he needs unless you are able to work through your own feelings and grief. Remember the safety talk from the flight attendant on the airplane? She demonstrates how to use the oxygen masks that falls from the overhead panel. “Put on your own mask first before attempting to assist others in need.” Just like they teach on the airplane, when things get tough, make sure you take care of yourself so you are able to tend effectively to the needs of the child leaving your care. That means preparing, thinking about moves, and being able to separate your feelings and needs from the needs and feelings of your child.

## **Storm Front Moving In**

Let’s say you have cared for a child for over a year. It took months of holding, rocking and comforting him before she felt safe enough to sleep through the night. Then there were the endless appointments, tantrums, school issues, and meetings. You were there through it all. Despite the effort and frustrations and the setbacks, your little girl is doing much better, and you are proud that she has come so far in your home.

From the beginning, you knew you could not adopt this child, but you love her. You feel like you know her as well or better than anyone, even her birth parents. You learn there is an adoptive family interested in your foster daughter and plans are being made to move her in with the new family so she can begin to attach to them. The team expects you to help with the transition and to be cooperative, though it didn’t seem like anyone was interested in asking your opinion about the move. You feel stuck. You know you can’t commit to “forever” with this child, but you are not quite ready to let go.



*Sometimes when a child moves, it feels like a storm front moving in...*

You are afraid to entrust her to a strange, new family's care because they really don't know too much about her.

The storm is coming at you from all directions. You feel a million different emotions: anger, hurt, confusion, worry, fear, betrayal, failure, and inadequacy. You even ask yourself why the child needed to be adopted. She was thriving in your home and was settling in. She didn't seem to know the difference between foster care and adoption. Now, as the plan moves forward toward adoption with another family, she is regressing back to behaviors you haven't seen in months. You begin to question your decision, the system, the timing-- *everything*.

## **Getting Honest about Grief**

Let's be honest. Our culture does not know how to grieve very well. We don't like to talk about and we don't like that it is a part of the foster care system. Loss is an unpleasant reminder we are not in control of events. We feel helpless and at the mercy of circumstances. These strong feelings can be overwhelming, so much so that we feel them physically through crying and tension, headaches, body aches, and illness. Grieving is painful, which is why so many people try to avoid or deny it. Just as adoption are born from loss (one family has to end before another family can begin) so is foster parenting filled with good-byes. Loss and grief are the price of caring and getting involved. A move for a child creates a loss, both for the child and for the foster family. The natural response to a loss is grief. Grief is not a pleasant experience, but it is a necessary and normal response to loss. It is necessary for healing to take place.

*So if it is necessary, normal and hurts a whole lot, what's a foster parent to do?*



The first step to dealing with your grief is to accept what is going on and allow yourself to grieve. Sound easy? *It is not.* This is often where the battle between the head and the heart begins. You may know all about grief and the transition process, yet, you find yourself acting in a way that surprises you. You know what you should do, but you can't bring yourself to do it.

Grief and sadness are often hidden under other less vulnerable emotions like anger, apathy and opposition. Unless we acknowledge and allow ourselves to feel the pain of grief, we cannot work through it. The brain is a historic organ -- it remembers even if you don't want it to. Unresolved grief does not go away. It builds. It hides. It disguises itself. Sometimes, the grief the child is experiencing triggers a reservoir of unresolved grief for the foster parents. The transition of the child triggers a host of emotions that emotionally "floods" the foster parent. Overwhelmed with grief, the foster parent is unable to tend to the needs of the child in her care.

Have you ever felt like this? You know what you are "supposed to do," but somehow can't find the will or the energy or the motivation to use your best skills or communicate with other people or to focus on a child's needs during a transition. You just know that this is painful, and you want it over with.

There is a scene in the movie, *Look Who's Talking* where the character played by Kirstie Alley (who just had a baby) is reading about post partum depression. Her response is, “Well, I’M not gonna!” The next scene shows her in tears while watching a FTD flower commercial. This can be exactly how foster parents react when faced with the reality of their own feelings regarding a child’s move. Transition grief? “ Well, I’M not gonna! I won’t let that happen to me.” Unfortunately, grief is a powerful emotion that will not be denied expression. If grief is not dealt with directly, it will find expression through other means. Consider these two transition stories.

## **A Tale of Two Transitions**

### **Tale #1: The Richardson Family**

Dan and Sarah Richardson knew they couldn’t adopt 14-month-old Mara, who had been in their home since birth, but they loved her. They wrestled with their decision for months before deciding to let her go to another family who would adopt her. Dan and Sarah worked with the social worker to find an adoptive family. They identified the Bryant family and at first, everything was great. Dan and Sarah introduced and worked closely with the Bryants, sharing pictures and doing activities together. They felt like they had some control in this process.

Unfortunately, as the time grew closer for the child to move to their new family, the Bryant family began to notice a shift in how they were treated by Dan and Sarah. They were abrupt with the Bryants and cold and distant in their demeanor. They seemed to be angry over the smallest things and began openly criticizing them to other members of the team. They planted doubts in the mind of the birth family as to the Bryant’s ability to parent Mara. Though they had agreed to the transition plan, they were constantly late for visits and often changed the plan at the last minute. Dan and Sarah did not want to give any of the child’s belongings to the Bryants.

As the transition day approached, Dan and Sarah stated the child was sick and could not move to the new family. They were reluctant to share any information with the new family and passively accused and attacked them for not being good enough. The relationship between the two families became toxic. After the final transition, the families severed all contact between them.

### **Tale #2: Strongheart Family**

Kenny and Jennika had been in the Strongheart family for almost two years. The children were making incredible progress in their family and the Stronghearts were doing an amazing job in helping the children heal from their traumatic past and teaching them skills to be safe and successful in everyday life.

The Stronghearts loved the children, but they knew they could not commit to adoption due to the severity of the children’s needs and their future living plans. Though it was hard, they were committed to helping the child move to a family who could adopt them.

When a pre-adoptive family was identified, the Stronghearts lived up to their name. Working closely with the children’s team, they embraced the new family

and helped them understand the children's needs. Mrs. Strongheart facilitated an introduction between the new family and the children using a photo picture book and DVD the family had made. She helped the children process their feelings as they learned about the new family and their new home.

The Stronghearts invited the new family into their home so they could learn the children's routines. During visits, they were the tour guide for the new family and the children so the children could feel secure as they got to know their new family. When the children visited their new family, Jennika, stayed with them, to help the children engage and embrace the adoptive family.

After the move, the families continue to visit and check in with each other. The adoptive family recognized the importance of protecting the relationship the children had with their foster family and the Kenny and Jennika continued to provide support and caring for the new family.

## **Grief in Action**

In the two tales above, both the Richardson and the Strongheart families experience grief due to the move of a child. Both families experienced "transition grief" or the strong feelings of loss and emotion that can accompany the move from a child from one home to another. However, the families responded to their transition grief in very different ways.

The Richardson's could not use the support around them and they lacked the internal resources to manage their grief in a healthy manner. Their grief manifested through passive aggressive behavior and misdirected anger. This is commonly referred to as "sabotaging a placement". This family is stuck in the anger stage of grieving and is not able to work through the situation and come to acceptance. They cannot help the child come to resolution and acceptance because they have not experienced it themselves.



Here are some statements and behaviors that are common to grieving foster parents.

### **What Does Transition Grief "Sound" Like?**

- The *child* is not ready to move.
- The *child* is sick today and cannot do a visit.
- This new family does not have the right (color, size, brand) of furniture for the child.
- The *child* does not want to go, is feeling apprehensive. (When in fact the foster parent is the one feeling this way)
- We don't believe the child should move towards adoption.
- The new family won't parent like we do.

- The child must move NOW! Faster is better for everyone.
- A long transition is better for everyone.
- I changed my mind --this is too hard for me.
- Sorry, we can't make that day, we have a .....
- I don't agree with the permanency plan.
- I have a better/different family for them.

### **What Does Transition Grief “Look” Like?**

- Aligning with the birth family against the new family.
- Missing appointments or visits.
- Negative statements to the child about the new family.
- Finding fault with the new family.
- Abruptly changing the transition plan.
- Being uncooperative with the transition plan.
- Passive /aggressive behavior. No follow through.
- Withholding the child's belongings or pictures.
- Refusing to help prepare the child for a move.
- Dropping off the child abruptly.
- Avoiding or ignoring calls or contact with the child's team.
- Avoiding post placement contact.
- Changing your mind about moving the child.

Remember how kids returning from visits often act out because they are feeling so many mixed emotions about seeing and then leaving their birth parents? Feelings that can't be expressed with words will be expressed through actions. So when your foster child kicks the door, it is not the door he is mad at. It is the same thing with transition grief. Grief may be at the core of sabotaging behavior. The child's actions may serve to delay or prevent or quicken the move. These actions are often met with frustration and anger by other team members. But underneath, there are real feelings of loss and grief. A grieving foster parent will have a tough time helping the child in her care grieve and make a good transition to the other home. Children can't do that naturally—they need help. And foster parents need support with their grieving process so they in turn can help that child. This is tough stuff, isn't it?

In the second tale, the Strongheart family was able to accept the support around them, manage their feelings to in turn help the children prepare and manage the change. The family felt validated and confident in their role in the children's life. They could honestly grieve the change while giving the children the blessing and support they needed to move forward. They were willing to continue contact with the children and family after the transition and were available to help the parents navigate as they learned to parent and care for the children. Transition grief was able to turn into “good grief,” meaning that it was acknowledged and dealt with in a way that supported the foster family but did not get in the way of the important task of helping children make this tough transition.



***“Okay. So we know that transition grief is there. We know it is hard. We know we can’t avoid it. And we know we don’t want it to hurt the children in our care. But what can I do?”***

1. Separate your grief from the child’s experience. Traumatized children cannot manage their foster parent’s grief, nor protect them from it. It is not their responsibility. Foster parents need to acknowledge the pain and grief of their own experience and take care of their business so they can in turn do what is best for the child. Children need you. They look to their foster parents for cues on how to handle moves and how they should feel. If you are anxious and angry about the move, the children will mirror that emotion.
2. Identify a person that you can be honest with, that will hold you accountable and will support you as the child transitions. Don’t go through this alone. What is sharable is bearable. The point of acknowledging grief in transition is not to make it go away, but to recognize it and manage it thoughtfully.
3. Figure out where you are in the grieving process. Grief usually follows a predictable pattern. The cycles of grief are shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Review the above listed behaviors and statements. Each of these fit into the grief cycle. Listen to your words and take stock of your behaviors.
  - *I know a better family for them.* (Bargaining)
  - *I changed my mind this is too hard for me.* (Depression)
  - *I don’t agree with the permanency plan.* (Anger)
  - *Missing appointments or visits* (Denial)
4. Embrace, don’t avoid your grief and hard feelings. The only way out of the grief is through it. Let others help you. You are not alone. Foster parents are an invaluable part of the child’s team. Take good care of yourself, so you in turn, can give the child what they so desperately need.
5. Recognize and acknowledge the importance of your role to help this child heal. The memories you created with the child and the experiences he gained from their time with you will stay with the child forever.
6. Draw on your support system to help you. Talk with a therapist or counselor to help you sort through your feelings and get support. Attend a foster parent support group or talk to a sympathetic foster family or start a support group of your own. And remember, you can always call the Alaska Center for Resource Families. We are here to help you. We understand. This is tough work—we know that and can offer an empathetic ear.



## Finding Support through the Grieving Process

How do you find support through this process? When the storm comes and you are battered with lots of different emotions, how do you anchor yourself? How do you hold on and do the best you can? Who helps you?

Healthy grief occurs in the context of a relationship. While you cannot dump your grief on the child or expect them to help you cope, there are many ways you can share the sadness of the move in a manner that provides healing and closure for both of you. If you take good care of your own grief, you will be in a good place to help the child through theirs.

Most major life events are marked with ceremony. Changing families is a major life event, one that is all too common for foster children. Prior to moving out of your home, find a time in which you and the child come together to acknowledge the move, talk about the happy and the hard times and help the child understand the reason for the move. Share laughter and tears together. Provide pictures and favorite memories with the child. You are creating a memory marker for the child that they will carry with them forever. This will also help you reflect on the time spent with the child and the influence you have had in their life.



Can you imagine being torn from your family and life abruptly with no chance to say goodbye or see anyone for the last time? How hard would it be to focus on your “new life”? You would be consumed with the memories and what ifs of those left behind.

You as a foster parent need closure. Your child also needs closure. As you enter into the child’s grief experience, help make goodbyes special. Here are some ideas:

- *Take a camera and cupcakes to his school.*
- *Ask classmates to sign a memory book to wish him well.*
- *Talk with him about his feelings about the change.*
- *Plan a special goodbye dinner.*
- *Give your child and yourself a chance to say goodbye and thank you.*
- *Reassure your child that you wish him the best.*

The child in your home will watch you for cues about how to handle the move. Even in the hardest circumstances, he needs to know he is loved, precious, and valued. All children need to know they are lovable, even when they are at their worst. Give the children who leave your home your blessing and well wishes for the future. Put it in writing so they can hold it close to their heart and review it when they need it the most. There is power in the written word. Many adults, who have had rough starts in life, will pull out a tattered and well-read piece of paper with words of kindness and encouragement, from an adult who cared.

If possible and with the permission of the adoptive or birth family, maintain some form of contact with the child. His life may have been filled with broken relationships. Send him a

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letter or invite him for lunch. Send your former foster daughter a card on her birthday. Let your children know that even if they are not living in your home, you still care and think about them.

Help the child create a lifebook. Create pages to capture the moments of the time spend in your family and preserve this part of the history. Don't let the memories of your child's life and history drown in a sea of bureaucracy. You cannot do everything, but everyone can something.

Finally, help the child pack his belongings in a suitcase, never in a garbage bag. Provide the child dignity and respect as he moves. You can't take this moment back and do it again, so do everything you can to make it a good move and a good memory for the child.

## **A Final Note**

You may not hear thank you from the child. You might not hear thank you from the adoptive or birth family. You may not hear thank you from the social worker. You may feel overworked and underappreciated for your efforts. But sometimes the biggest satisfaction comes from the most difficult things we do. The fact is you stepped up to "do the hard thing." You provided safety and family for a child who had no one or nowhere to go. You gave a child the experience of love, family and safety, maybe for the first time in his life. Never underestimate the power of your kindness and care. Many investments take years to come to maturity. Think of that as you deal gently with yourself and the loss you feel.

And *thank you*. From all of us:

- *Thank you* from the child for whom you cared
- *Thank you* from the birth parent who needed someone to care sensitively for her child;
- *Thank you* from the adoptive family who can build on your good work with this child and provide a forever home; and,
- *Thank you* from your social worker and from all of us in the State of Alaska for stepping forward to care for vulnerable children.

*Thank You!*

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