

Foster Care Forum

Waukesha County
Health & Human Services
March 2010



The Challenges of Foster Care: Grief and Loss By: ARW/FCARC

You can't help but get attached to a child in your care—whether he or she is with you for a few days or a few years. Just like most parents experience some sadness when their kids leave home for college or jobs, foster parents may also grieve when the kids in care leave...only the circumstances are often bittersweet and complex.

Foster parent grief isn't talked about much, but yet it's cited as one of the most common reasons for not continuing to foster. Months or years of care and love for a child who moves can leave a hole in the hearts and lives of foster families.

Sometimes parents grieve when they cannot bond with a child or cannot meet the needs of a child. Many grieve when they give a 30-day notice (of terminating the placement). The situation is fraught with emotion for all.

Stages of Grief and Loss

There are as many ways to experience loss and express grief as there are people. One cries. Another is stoic. A child becomes defiant. A teen cannot sleep. Others *only* want to sleep. Some throw themselves into work.

Here are some examples of the stages of grief with some common examples of reactions foster parents may experience.

Denial

Parents may deny an attachment to a child. Some who have to give a 30-day notice, may deny any feelings of sadness but grieve even though they know that were unable to help. *"I won't miss him. He was so naughty."*

Anger

Parents may blame social services, the system, or some other person for a removal of a child. They focus on issues that are not at the heart of the matter. *"That social worker is responsible for Lula going back to her mom."*

Bargaining

It is not uncommon to try to substitute other people or activities to avoid experiencing grief. *"I will just take another nine-year old. He'll help me forget about Billy."*

Depression

Grieving has components of depression. A person feels constant tiredness, irritability, or inability to deal with life. It becomes hard to handle family, work, and marriage. *"I can't deal with these kids anymore. It all makes me feel like I can't do anything right. I am tired, cranky and worn out."*

Acceptance

In the end, grief over a loss diminishes and a sense of balance and well being returns. A foster parent acknowledges the losses and moves on. *"It's hard to see him go, but I know that each day of love and care I gave to that child was a blessing for him and me. I can deal with his move and do what I can to make it the best situation for all involved."*

Foster parents who do experience grief in foster care are likely to experience all of the above stages. A foster dad may become quiet and withdrawn one day, while he feels angry and denies feelings of loss in another.

Experiencing grief in foster care also happens to children in the home.

As one child says about his foster sister, "She learned to walk and talk at our house. She stayed with us for over a year. After a while, her dad did the stuff he needed to do to have her. He took classes and he promised he would be a good parent. After she visited him for a few days, she was given to him. When she left I was so sad. She had been part of the family, and I loved her so much!" (From *The Wisconsin Foster Handbook* <http://wifostercareandadoption.org/library/513/chapter5.pdf>.)

Guilt

Guilt can be another stage in the grieving process for foster parents. Parents often search themselves for what they did "wrong" and cannot share in the happiness even when the child's transition to a new home is a happy occasion. Others may feel guilty if they cannot continue to care for a child. According to a Wisconsin foster mom, another subtle but difficult situation occurs when foster parents love and provides for a child who cannot return that affection or bond with the parent. These parents have to find their hope in their sense of providing love and safety when there is little emotional connection in return.

Preparing to Let Go

Parents can do some things to prepare for the transitory nature of foster care.

Remember that fostering is not a guarantee of a forever placement from the start. This, of course, is especially difficult if you're a "concurrent" home - it takes a lot of courage to both prepare for adopting and prepare for reunifying children with their parents.

Keep a record of the child from day one. Take pictures of yourselves and your families, the pets, the house, the inside of the house.

Babies or toddlers may not remember you, but those children can see the love you gave them in photos of their life when you loved and cared for them. Even if the ending is not what you would have chosen, photos, letters, and memorabilia can give them a glimpse of what was good and safe with you.

Life books are great tools, not only for children, but also for families. Create a life book reflecting your journey as a foster family.

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Pre-Placement Training for Prospective Foster Parents

Tuesday, March 2, 2010 6-9 PM
Tuesday, March 9, 2010 6-9 PM

Tuesday, April 6, 2010 6-9 PM
Tuesday, April 13, 2010 6-9 PM

All Classes are held in the Brookfield Room G137 in the Human Services Center located at 500 Riverview Avenue.

Please enter the building at door 6. Call Shari Rather at (262)548-7267 to register.



Jesse's Corner

Jesus Mireles
Manager of the Children and
Family Division

Training

Waukesha County Department of Health and Human Services Presents Foster Parent Foundation Training Winter Session 2010

Saturday March 6, 2010
Dynamics of Sexual Abuse

9-12

Effects of Fostering on the Family
1-4

All Classes are held at Health and Human Services in the
Brookfield Room . Enter the Agency at Door #6.
Call Shari Rather to register 262-548-7267

Parents Place Programs
262-549-5575
www.ppacinc.org

Throughout most of my adult life, we have had dogs. We had several dogs including Mugsy, Fred, Raven and Sally. All of our dogs were friendly except Fred. At one time or another, Fred has bitten someone including our daughter! The reason I am sharing this is that we have foster parents that own pets and I have heard some of these pets may be aggressive towards children. For those of you that have pets, I am assuming you were like me and you "loved" your pet.

Dogs can respond in a variety of different ways when we place foster children in your home. Some dogs are easy going and adjust well to the new family addition. Others, however, may struggle. Some may become anxious and others, aggressive. As you know, anytime we place a foster child in your home we expect that you will pay particular attention to ensure the safety of your foster child, especially with dogs that are protective of you and their territory. Also, we expect that the needs and concerns of the foster child will supersede whatever concerns your dogs may be experiencing. During the foster home licensing process, our foster home licensor will review and discuss this issue.

Despite these discussions and this expectation, some foster parents appear to minimize this issue and may not take the necessary steps to protect their foster child. In some cases, we removed the foster child for fear that the child would be seriously hurt. In other circumstances, foster parents have asked for the removal of the foster child because the "dogs have not adjusted well". When this occurs, this significantly affects the foster child and the foster family. As you are aware, placement disruption is not good for children. As a Department, our job is to minimize the number of placements that a child experiences. With this stated, I would like all new foster parents and any foster parent with pets to be aware of this issue and make sure you've taken steps to ensure your foster child is safe and you've considered the impact of fostering on ALL family members before being licensed.

While I appreciate the love and joy pets bring to our lives I want to make sure you are aware of the impact this has on our foster children.

Jesse

Please Join Us...



Waukesha County and the Southern Training Partnership present Shared Parenting for Foster Parents

April 17, 2010
Elmbrook Church
777 South Barker Road
Brookfield
8:30 Registration
9-4 Presentation
Child Care Provided

Call Shari Rather at 262-548-7267 to register.
Space is limited.

Highly Recommended for all new foster parents.

Prices for some classes may apply. Call 262-549-5575 to register. Free pre-registered childcare is available while attending most classes. Space is limited.

New Ideas For Parenting Children & Adolescence with ADHD/ADD

Tuesdays, March 2 - 30

6 - 7:30 p.m.

Regardless of whether your child is on medication or not, as a parent you still need to deal with your child as a person. These classes will explore the five gifts of the ADHD child, and teach parental coaching skills that cultivate the child's emotional intelligence.

Love and Logic®

Tuesdays, March 3 - 30

5:30 - 7 p.m.

Love and Logic is a philosophy founded by Jim Fay and Foster W. Cline, M.D., and provides simple and practical techniques to help participants have less stress and more fun while raising responsible kids. This curriculum provides immediate results with techniques like: setting limits with enforceable statements, sharing control through lots of small choices and many more.

The Argumentative Child

Mondays, March 1 - 22

6 - 7:30 p.m.

When parents get caught up in arguments with their children, they give away their power and expose that they don't know a better way to handle the situation. Put an end to parent-child arguments with these effective problem-solving techniques.

Controlling Conflict in the Family

Tuesdays, April 6 - 27

6 - 7:30 p.m.

Conflict resolution and anger management aim at peaceful resolutions when the storms are raging. Learn positive ways to control conflict and keep the peace in your family.

Disciplining the Child

Mondays, April 5 - 27

6 - 7:30 p.m.

Many parenting experts recommend a variety of discipline techniques, focusing on punishments and rewards, but too often they just don't work. This class will give parents essential skills for effectively disciplining their child.



The Challenges of Foster Care: Grief and Loss Continued from Page 1

For more information, see our Lifebook tip sheet at: <http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/650/lifebooks-parents.pdf>.

Acknowledge that children's sense of fear and loss when they move is probably greater than yours. Knowing that you supported a child through a difficult move, even if the placement with you was not a good fit and had to be changed, will help you deal with your grief.

Preparing for Separation

If possible, prepare for the separation before it occurs. Discuss it with workers. Ask to be included in decisions. Communicate your concerns and recommendation throughout the time a child is in your home.

Work with the birth family while the child is in your care. This frequently establishes a pattern for future communication after the child returns home. The children also fare much better if they see some continuity in their journey through foster care through contact with birth parents and the folks from former placements...even if the placement ends in a less-than-ideal way. In fact, that's probably when some extra contact is especially needed - for both of you.

When the Move is Happening

When it is determined where the child will go, prepare for separation with visits, conversations with the new family or birth family, and especially with the child who will be moving.

Talk to all of the members of your household about the upcoming move so that you are all on the same page during the stages of transition. If you're not sure how to do this, ask your social worker for help in how to share the information about the move and how to talk to your children. It helps to prepare what you will say.

The Importance of Rituals

Establish rituals around the separation.

- Have a going away party, even if things didn't end in an ideal way.
- Pack the child's clothes together, if that's not possible, pack your child's things respectfully
- Talk about memories, even with young children.

Warning Signs of Grief

Grief that lasts too long or becomes too difficult, grief which interferes with work and disrupts family relationships are red flags for seeking support. When the grief is unremitting or becomes destructive, it's helpful to get help from a therapist.

Reach out when you or your spouse or children need extra support. Talk to your social workers, therapists, community or religious staff who understand the losses in foster care and can provide grief counseling.

In an ideal transition and when appropriate, there is continuity of contact with visits, letters, emails and phone calls after the move too.

Recognize that family members may grieve, and that they will do so in their own individual way. The children in your house may also experience grief and loss even when living with the other child was a difficult experience. They may feel both relieved and sad that the child is gone. Then, like you, they may also feel guilty that they feel relieved!

Sharing Your Grief

Share your grief with your partner, the birth, foster and adopted children in your household as appropriate, and with workers and people in your support network who understand. Talk to foster parents involved with WAFPA (<http://wfapa.org>) and other foster parents.

Consider reflecting on the foster care you provide on a regular basis, and write your thoughts down. You can find a helpful **When a Child Leaves the Foster Home Debriefing Form** at: <http://family-works.com/forms/debrief.pdf>

Assess what you will continue to do and examine what you can change. Good relationships are good only when they evolve and grow with changing situations. Try not to give up on yourself for what you have done.

Know that just as you will find grief and loss are interwoven in the extraordinary work you are doing, so you will find what you give to the children in your care, day by day, week by week, is immeasurable. Reflect on your mission as a foster parent. Let your hear soar, so that in times when the losses come, you will have the reserve to continue your commitment to the children who need you so much.



When a Child Must Move By A Foster Parent

Being a foster parent is full of firsts. There is the first child that becomes part of your family, the first child that returns to his or her birth family, the first child placed with birth family members who are strangers to the child, the first time you say no to a proposed placement.

And then there's the first time a child needs to leave your home to move to another foster home.

A Traumatic First

My husband and I have been foster parents nearly forever (over 20 years and counting). Our family has experienced countless firsts, but none has been harder than our most recent first. For the first time, two foster children (a youth and her toddler age daughter) left our home for new foster placements. To say that we are passionate about foster placement stability would be an understatement. Our mantra is "If this were our birth child, what would you be recommending?"

It wasn't that these youngsters arrived at our home and it just did not work out. They lived with us and completely shared our lives for 18 months (the young mother) and 20 months (the toddler arrived at 5 months of age). What went wrong? Was it even wrong? How do we regroup from this experience? What could we have done differently? And, finally, what will we do next time?

Our Perspective

Let me back up. Being a foster family requires ongoing education and support. The support has to be provided by other foster parents. Only foster parents have "been there and done that." They don't think you were crazy in the first place to have opened your lives to strangers.

We have taken multiple workshops dealing with grief and loss. We absolutely understand that socio-economics has nothing to do with being able to be a wonderful parent. Our own two adopted children (one an open adoption and one a closed adoption) are daily reminders of the incredible importance of birth family connections no matter the cause of the placement. Yes, I know that a child sexual molester can never have unsupervised contact with the child, but even so, to ignore that relationship is to harm the child. Being in protected contact with those who have hurt them can be very healing at some point to children in the foster care system.

My husband and I struggle more when children are placed with relatives with whom they have had little or no contact for the vast majority of their lives. Sometimes it seems to us that establishing an ongoing relationship with the relatives and placing the child with the foster parents as adoptive parents might be better for the mental health of the youngster. Attachment can be a very fragile thing.

Out of the Blue

But, then comes our recent first. The young mother had a planned, temporary move to a higher level of care so she could focus on mental health issues. The toddler was going to stay with us, with frequent visits with her mother. Then it all went so confusingly wrong. The mother decided she could not spend even one more night in our home and she bounced from home to home while waiting for her therapeutic placement to be finalized. The young mother told the judge that she did not want to be placed in the same home as her daughter until she was 18 (12 months in the future). The judge, knowing that we did not consider adopting the toddler an option due to our age, told all of the parties to the case to return to court at the next scheduled hearing with a concurrent plan in place. We supported wholeheartedly the need for the toddler to move to a home where she could grow to adulthood if her mother was not going to be able to regain custody. There was a transition period for the toddler, but at this point, a month and a half into the placement, things seem to be going very well.

And what about the mother? What would we have wanted to have happen if she had been our birth child?

In Hindsight

We second guess ourselves, wondering what would have been the best course of action. We felt that she should have been receiving much more intensive mental health services than she was prior to leaving our house and that she is receiving even now. Perhaps family therapy for the entire foster family - my husband and me plus our two children and the mother and her child - would have offered all of us emotional support and things to do as a family that might have stabilized the situation. At the time the mother stated she could no longer stay in our home, we were rather blind-sided. Family therapy might have allowed issues and feelings to be shared so that the family unit could have remained intact.

Foster parents are truly a work in progress. Every child is different. Their needs are different, their responses are different. Yet we must try our best to care for each one as though they were our birth child.

To protect the confidentiality of the children described in this essay, the author has requested to remain anonymous.

March 2010 Foster Parent Spotlight

Andrea & Dan Balister



Andrea grew up in Brookfield, Wisconsin and Dan grew up in Milwaukee. They now reside in Brookfield. They were introduced by mutual friends. Andrea was friends with the couple's wife and Dan was friends with the husband. Andrea and Dan have been together for five

years and will be married for four years in March. Andrea has worked for eighteen years with Wheaton Franciscan Health Care and currently is working in a family practice office as a LPN. Dan has worked the last eight years with Valente Transport driving dump trucks. Dan and Andrea do not have any birth children.

Andrea and Dan look to family, friends and other foster parents for support but mostly they look to each other. Andrea and Dan enjoy traveling, camping, spending time at Grandma's on the lake, and spending time with friends and family. They cannot wait until they can take their daughter to Disney for the first time after they adopt her.

Originally it was Andrea's idea to become foster parents but after not being able to have children of their own they knew they both loved children and had a lot of love to offer so they decided to open their home and hearts to foster care. Andrea and Dan have only had one placement and she was placed with them when she was only six months old. She is now seventeen months old. Dan and Andrea are in the process of adopting this little girl.

Andrea and Dan would compare the experience of being foster parents to being on an emotional rollercoaster but one that they feel is the most rewarding experience ever. They never know from day-to-day what will happen.

Dan and Andrea have taken the foundation training and multiple other trainings that have been offered. Currently they are attending adoption training. They both feel the most rewarding part of being a foster parent is the great friends that they have made, and not only the great friendships, but the wonderful support system they have found. Truly the best part was finding out that they are going to be able to adopt their wonderful daughter. Andrea and Dan feel foster children go through so much, it is so rewarding to know that they can make a difference in these children's lives whether they are with them for a short time or forever. They feel that the most difficult part of being a foster parent is that it can be very challenging. It was very difficult to watch the birth parents continue to fail at meeting their goals thus leading to a TPR. Their advice for other foster parents is that it is an awesome experience but to be prepared anything can happen and will.



**First Day of Spring
March 20th**

Happy St. Patrick's Day!

Contact Numbers:

Waukesha H & HS
262-548-7212

Children's Mental Health Outreach
262-548-7666

Medical Emergency: 911
Family Emergency: 211

Foster Parent Mentor
Nikki Mertens
262-246-6180

Lisa Roberts, Supervisor
262-548-7271

Shari Rather, Foster Care
Coordinator
262-548-7267

FASPP (Support for Allegations of
Abuse and Neglect)
Norma Schoenberg
920-922-9627

January 2010 Placements

Regular Foster Care:
46 Children

Treatment Foster Care:
16 Children

Group Homes:
5 Children

Residential Care Facilities:
3 Children

Relative Placements:
54 Children

Total Homes Assisting Other
Counties
22 Homes

Social Workers:

Bob Alioto
262-548-7262

Suzanne Arnold
262-548-7348

Angie Briggs
262-548-7275

Margaret Johnson
262-548-7265

Cindie Remshek
262-548-7639

Elizabeth Russo
262-548-7349

Kim Sampson
262-548-7273

Linda Senger
262-548-7698

Deanna Stevlingson
262-896-8570

We Need You!

For more information
about becoming a foster
parent in Waukesha
County, please contact
Shari Rather at:

srather@waukeshacounty.gov

262-548-7267

Or visit our website at
www.waukeshacounty.gov
And follow the links to
foster care.

