



FOSTER & ADOPTIVE CARE COALITION
FOR EVERY CHILD... A PLACE TO CALL HOME

The Holidays in Foster Care

Why Things Might Get Rough

During the holidays, we are inundated with messages from a number of sources (movies, music, TV, social media, commercials) about how we should be feeling joyful, happy, and thankful. Surrounded by loving (and attractive) family, laughter, fancy food served at perfectly set tables and loads of expensive gifts, these images rarely reflect the truth for the majority of people. For children in foster care, conflicting loyalties and lost dreams can make the holidays an even more especially difficult time. They often report feeling especially vulnerable, lonely and sad, at a time when they are expected to feel exactly the opposite.

What can those of us caring for these children and youth do or say to ease the pain?

Here are some things you might do:

1. Prepare the foster youth in your care for the holidays in your home

Have a discussion with the young person about your family's holiday customs. Do you celebrate over multiple days, or is there one "main" celebration? Are there religious customs? Will gifts be exchanged? What should they wear? Who will they meet? What preparations need to be done in advance? Will there be visitors to the home? Will they be taken on visits to the homes of other family or friends? And in all of these events, will your youth be expected to participate? Knowing what to expect will help to decrease anxiety around the holidays. Avoid surprises and you will decrease seasonal tensions.

Of equal importance is to help them talk about their memories of the holidays. Be prepared for anything from fantasies to reports of no memories of anything at all. Give them space to talk and be prepared to validate any feelings they may share with you. Find ways to incorporate any traditions they remember into your family's celebration.

2. Prepare friends and family before you visit

Let people know in advance about new family members in your home. Surprising a host or hostess at the door with a "new" foster youth may set up an awkward situation — such as a scramble to set an extra place at the table — making the young person feel like an imposition right from the start of the visit. Your preparation of friends should help cut down on awkward, but reasonable questions such as "who are you?" or "where did you come from?"

Also prepare the youth for what to expect. Talk about upcoming events and the people who will be there. If they have not met before, introduce them with old photos or stories about them. Prepare them for the "characters" in your family. Tell them if the celebration will be formal or informal, what to wear, what they will do there, if it is a quiet or loud affair, and how long you will stay. If "please" and "thank you" will be expected, role play with the youth until they are comfortable with such expressions.



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3. Remember confidentiality

You may receive well-intended but prying questions from those you visit with over the holidays. If your young person is new to your home, it is natural that family members ask questions about your youth's background. As much as possible, have these conversations ahead of time, without the youth present. Understand that questions are generally not meant to be insensitive or rude, but simply come from a place of not knowing much about foster care. Think in advance about how to answer these questions while maintaining your youth's confidentiality. Use the opportunity to educate interested family and friends. Pre-establish the boundaries for information sharing.

Discuss with your young person how they would like to be introduced and what is appropriate to share about their history with your family and friends. (Remember, they have no obligation to reveal their past.) Help them to set boundaries and consider a private "signal" to use if they feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed.

4. Arrange meeting your family in advance, if possible

The hustle and bustle of the holidays can make it particularly chaotic for your young person to participate in your family traditions. Anxiety may run high for young people already, and the stress of meeting your relatives may be a lot to deal with. If possible, you can arrange a casual "meeting" in advance of "main events." If it is not possible or practical to meet beforehand, make a list of names of some of the people they'll meet and their connection to you. You can also encourage a quick call from relatives you plan to visit to deliver a personal message of "we are excited to meet you" so that your youth knows they will be welcome. Consider making a "hostess" gift with the youth to present to the host of the party. Homemade gifts are always welcome!

5. Have extra presents ready to help offset differences

It should not be expected that all relatives purchase presents for your youth. Be prepared with other small gifts and for those family members that express concern over not having brought a gift, offer one of your "backups" for them to place under the tree. Extra presents may be addressed "from Santa", even for older youth, to help offset a larger number of gifts other children may receive at the same time. Children often keep count of the number of gifts received (right or wrong) and use it to compare with other kids, so sometimes quantity is important.

At times, foster youth receive gifts from people they do not know. Asking a child to identify gift(s) for their wish list is often met with confusion, resistance or other equally charged emotions. We have to remind ourselves that our excitement and enthusiasm for these types of gifts may not be their experience. In some circumstances, these youth may not have celebrated Christmas before or they are not used to asking for a "gift" but rather for some basic need (i.e., toiletries or food). When encouraged to think "bigger"—beyond just what they need and ask for something that they want—foster children often struggle. Intense thoughts and fears arise: Am I disloyal to my birth parents by requesting/accepting gifts? Does this mean I won't be home by Christmas?

It's often our role to help foster youth understand that the community's desire to give them gifts means only that they are loved. You may need to guard against well-meaning people's desire to "give a happy holiday for such a deprived, abused little child," protecting the children from such toxic sentiments.

6. Facilitate visits with loved ones

The holidays can be a busy time for everyone including foster parents and caseworkers. But it is especially important during this time of year to help your young person arrange for visits with loved ones. Don't allow busy schedules to mean the postponement of these important visits. Try to get permission for your youth to make phone calls to relatives. A youth may wish to extend holiday wishes to relatives and friends from an old neighborhood, but may need your help getting phone numbers together. Use the opportunity to help the youth develop their own address book. If the youth cannot visit, consider including their birth families in your thoughts and prayers. If you are making homemade gifts, consider making ones for the birth family, even if they cannot be delivered immediately.

This is a time when many foster youth feel deeply conflicted about their birth families and worry about them. It is a good time to let them know it is okay for them to be safe and cared for even if their birth family is struggling. Reassure them, if you can, about the safety and care of those they are missing.

7. Help them make sure their loved ones are okay

Young people may worry that their family members are struggling through the holidays. If homelessness has been a regular issue, the winter season may bring cold weather and extreme hardship. Your youth may experience guilt if they feel a loved one is struggling while they, the youth, are living in comfort. Knowing that a biological parent or sibling has shelter from the cold or has their other basic needs met may ease a young person's mind through the always emotional holidays.

8. Extend an invitation

If it is safe and allowed by your foster care agency, consider extending an invitation to siblings or birth parents through the holidays. It need not be an invitation to your "main" holiday event, consider a "special" dinner for your youth to celebrate with their loved ones. If this not a possibility to do within your home, consider arranging a visit at a local restaurant (ask the caseworker is it would be appropriate for the visit to be unsupervised or if your supervision would suffice). Extending an invitation to their loved ones need not signal to a young person that you support their birth family's lifestyle or choices — rather it tells a young person that you respect their wish to stay connected to family. You will also send a message to the youth that they aren't being put in a position to "choose" your family over their bio-family and that it is possible to have a relationship with all the people they care about.

9. Understand and encourage your youth's own traditions and beliefs

Encourage discussion about the holiday traditions your young person experienced prior to being in foster care, or even celebrations they liked while living with other foster families. Incorporate the traditions the youth cherishes into your own family celebration, if possible. Use the opportunity to investigate the youth's culture and research customary traditions. If the young person holds a religious belief different from yours, or if their family did, check into the traditions customarily surrounding those beliefs.

10. Assist in purchasing or making holiday gifts or in sending cards to their family and friends

Allow young people to purchase small gifts for their relatives, or help them craft homemade gifts. Help send holiday cards to those that they want to stay connected with. The list of people that your youth wishes to send cards and gifts to should be left completely to the youth, although precautions may be taken to ensure safety (for example, a return address may be left off the package, or use the address of the foster care agency) and compliance with any court orders.

11. Understand if they pull away

Despite your best efforts, a young person may simply withdraw during the holidays. Understand that this detachment most likely is not intended to be an insult or a reflection of how they feel about you, but rather is their own coping mechanism. Allow for "downtime" during the holidays that will allow the youth some time to themselves if they need it (although some youth would prefer to stay busy to keep their mind off other things — you will need to make a decision based on your knowledge of the young person). Be sure to fit in one-on-one time, personal time for your youth and you to talk through what they are feeling during this emotional and often confusing time of year.

12. Call youth who formerly lived with you

The holidays can be a particularly tough time for youth who have recently aged out of foster care. They may not have people to visit or a place to go for the holidays. In addition, young people commonly struggle financially when they first leave foster care. A single phone call may lift their spirits and signal that you continue to care for them and treasure their friendship. Be sure to include these youth on your own holiday card list. A small token gift or gift basket of homemade holiday goodies may be especially appreciated. Most importantly, it is essential to let adoptees, foster children, and those who have aged out of the system know that they are not alone and they are not to blame for their losses.

Understandable behavioral reactions:

- Be prepared for the sadness and grief. Talk about your child's feelings throughout the season.
- Give your children time and space to grieve. Grief takes many forms and may be exhibited in lots of ways, including:
 - Reverting back to younger behaviors developmentally
 - Soiling themselves or bedwetting
 - Becoming withdrawn and isolated
 - Having temper tantrums
 - Being rebellious
 - Complaining more than usual
 - Needing to be extra busy to avoid feeling

Try to remember the developmental age of the children you foster. It will also help you to stay patient if you keep in mind the challenges of the season for your child before you react.

Expressions of gratitude don't often come readily from kids in foster care. Not because they aren't grateful, but more often because they are in survival mode, especially during the holidays. Amazingly, more kids than not want to know who they can thank for their gifts. Help them to write thank you notes or make "thank you" phone calls to those who made their day extra special.

Religious Differences & the Holidays

The holidays can be tough for foster families. Children in care miss their families and their traditions, while at the same time they may want to be part of the activities of the foster family. When there's a religious difference between the child's family and the foster family, things can become even more complicated.

Religion can be a sensitive issue. Legally, birth parents have the right to choose their children's religion or lack of religion. Placement of their child in foster care does not take away this right.

Of course, most foster parents try to respect the culture and religious customs of the children in their care. But what does this mean when it comes to religion?

The answer lies in establishing open lines of communication among foster parents, DSS, and the birth family. If your agency knows how you feel about religious issues (for example, if prayer makes you feel uncomfortable, or if you feel compelled to convert children and their families), it will make informed placement decisions.

This communication works both ways. The more you know about the religion, traditions, and preferences of birth families, the easier it will be for you to act in a way that honors their beliefs.