

PARENT RESOURCE

Caring for Infants and Young Children in Foster Care

Young children in foster care have often experienced sudden and unexpected losses and transitions. We know that foster parents also often receive children very quickly and unexpectedly! This can feel challenging for both kids and caregivers. It can feel like many things are out of your control when you are interacting with the child welfare system, yet there are many things you can do to be a supportive healing presence for the child(ren) in your care.

What you might notice

When young children are first adjusting to this big change, you might notice that they aren't able to do things that you would expect for a child their age. For example, a toddler that you would expect to be able to sleep 8 hours at night wakes up a lot throughout the night when they first come to live with you. Or a preschool-aged child may not appear to be fully potty trained. Perhaps the child doesn't seem to demonstrate age-appropriate language skills. Often young children will have a hard time regulating their emotions during this adjustment period and this may look like crying, screaming, shutting down, yelling, hitting, etc. This can feel challenging or even confusing for the adults trying to take care of them.

Big feelings!

Young children in foster care have experienced a lot of loss and transition, and likely have big feelings showing up both emotionally, and in their bodies. One of the first things you can do for them is to practice strategies to stay calm yourself. Then it is often helpful to support young children in labeling their feelings, while sending the message that all feelings are ok, and you will not leave them when they have big feelings. This can simply be saying, "You look like you might feel sad right now. I am here with you." You can also read books about feelings like: *Once I Was Very Scared*, or *The Invisible String*.

So Many Transitions!

Transitions are the name of the game in foster care! These can be due to moving homes, attending visitation, starting at a new child care facility or school and many others. As an important adult in the child's life, you can help! Transitions

can be bumpy, but there are things we can do to help them feel smoother for everyone. First, it helps if adults can work together to establish a routine around when transitions happen. Unexpected and abrupt transitions are generally more difficult for children. When you know a transition is coming, you can help the child to prepare. You can communicate to the child what is going to happen, and it helps to use time references that they can understand. For example, "When you get home from school, you will go to see your mom. Then you will come back here for dinner time." For young children, having an object like a favorite book, toy or blanket that travels with them between homes and caregivers can be very comforting.

You are so important

Babies and young children, more than anything, need to feel safe and taken care of in order to grow and thrive. The difficult experiences young children have before entering foster care, and the experience of being removed from their home and placed into another home, can make it difficult for children to feel safe. Young children feel safest when there is a caring adult in their life who consistently provides comfort, nurturing and boundaries to keep them safe. You are very important to them as they navigate the big feelings and transitions that come with foster care.



Let's review some of the things you can do that will be so helpful to the child(ren) in your care.

Take care of yourself

Caring for young children in the foster care system can be challenging and exhausting for caregivers! There are so many appointments, reports, hearings, visits and more. As you manage so many transitions and ups and downs, make sure to find the people, relationships and experiences that bring you some comfort. Some caregivers find it very helpful to connect with caregivers in similar situations as their own. Other caregivers enjoy meeting regularly with their own counselor or mentor. No matter where you find this support, the young children in your home will benefit when you also feel healthy, loved and cared for!

Creating Routines

Young children feel safest when they can predict what their days will look like and what will come next. Setting up daily routines, with reminders about what is coming, can be very helpful in helping young children regulate their bodies and emotions. Little ones benefit greatly when adults in their lives narrate what is happening as they move through their days! Throughout the daily routines of caregiving, it is also important that you are able to experience moments of fun and delight with your foster child. This can happen during mealtimes, when playing with favorite toys, singing, dancing, anything at any time that makes you feel warm and connected!

Telling the Story of Foster Care

Young children are taking in experiences and trying to make sense of them. When kids don't have clear words and stories for what is happening, they will "fill in the blanks" with their own stories. For young children who still don't understand the adult world, these made-up stories are often scarier than having the actual information and can often include blaming themselves for bad things that happen. For this reason, it is important to talk with young children, even babies and toddlers who may not talk yet, about what is happening. Adults can share pieces of information that are appropriate for the young child's age and development. The important thing is to make sure that the way you talk to them and the tone you use will help them to know that they are safe and taken care of. You don't need to use too many words. Little



ones can't handle too much information and will let you know they are done by looking or moving away and on to something else. It's most important to convey that you are there to keep them safe, that they didn't do anything wrong, and that they are loved.

Example: "Your mom and dad love you very much and they are working hard on learning how to make safe choices to take care of you. While they are learning, you are staying with us so that we can take care of you."

Additionally, many families find it helpful to have some kind of scrapbook or photo book that includes pictures of important people and events over the child's life. If you do not have photographs of some people or events, it's ok to draw them or create them in some way. Young children often need to hear their story many times as they try to

understand, and a book about their life is a wonderful concrete way to support this process for them!

Finally, many families enjoy reading books about children in foster care as a way to process their story together.

Some examples that you can find online or in a bookstore include: *Maybe Days*, *Foster Care: One Dog's Story of Change*, and *Home for A While*.

Play

Children process so many of their experiences through play! Parents can support their children simply by offering opportunities for play throughout the day, such as make-believe, coloring, and dress-up. Parents can "join in" the play. Sometimes just being there and describing what the child is doing (for example, "oh, you are making a big tower!" or "you are comforting that baby doll") with delight or interest is just right. Having fun together is a wonderful way for everyone to manage stress!

Naming Caregivers

How to choose what to call yourself and the child's birth parents can be tricky, and sometimes can bring up lots of feelings! There is not one right way to choose labels or names for different caregivers. The most important thing to consider is what would be easiest and most comfortable for the child. It's also important that all of the adults use the same names for each caregiver so that the child does not get confused. Young children are able to have two different moms, for example, and understand the difference. To distinguish them in

name, there are multiple ways to expand on the title, “mom,” such as mama, mommy, mom, etc. Some families might say “Mama [birth parent name] and Mama [foster parent name]”; this approach can help the child know that there is a parent figure (“mama”) there to care for them, and leaves space to acknowledge that there is more than one person in the “mama” role.

Talking positively about birth parents

Young children can identify very strongly with their birth parents - after all, this is where they came from! For this reason, it is incredibly important that kids hear positive language and messages about their birth parents. There are ways to help young children understand that their birth parents have some challenges and also love them very much. For example, “Mommy is working on learning how to be a safe parent for you, and I know she loves you very much.” It is also helpful for kids to hear messages that convey to the child that it is not their job to fix whatever feels hard and that lots of grown-ups are helping their birth parents. For example, “What is happening with your mom and dad is a grown-up problem that grown-ups need to figure out and we are all working hard to do that.” Finally, it is critical that young children learn from you that it’s ok to love and miss their parents. There is enough love in their heart for them to love you and their birth parents too!

Talking about parental substance use

When a child’s parent struggles with substance abuse, it is important to find language to talk with the child that is developmentally appropriate, acknowledges the impact on the child, and reminds the child that it is not their fault. Talking about substance abuse can feel sensitive and tricky. It will be helpful to talk with the child’s caseworkers, the child’s therapist and, if possible, get input from parents to co-create the language that everyone will use when talking to the child about the parent’s addiction or substance use disorder. For example, some parents may use words like “sick” or “getting help from doctors” related to addiction and recovery, and these descriptions may help the child make sense of the experience in a way that is not blaming. Yet at the same time, those words may raise questions or fears about what

happens when they, or other trusted adults, get sick, or have to go to the doctor. For this reason, there is no one “right way”, and it is important to be curious and pay attention to what your child might be thinking or feeling, helping clarify any misunderstandings.

Talking about parental incarceration

It can be tricky to find just the right words to help young children understand why their birth parent is incarcerated while being sure to not make them feel bad about their parent. An example of developmentally appropriate language might be: “You know how our house has rules? Some rules are so important they are called laws and everyone has to follow them, even grown-ups. When someone breaks a law they have to go away to time-out and learn how to follow the rules to keep everyone safe. So you are staying with us until daddy is out of time-out.” Some families might find it helpful to read books together about having a parent who is incarcerated. Some examples include: Visiting Day, Mama Loves Me From Away, Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a Family When a Loved One is Incarcerated.

Helpful Books for Caregivers

- **We Belong Together** by Todd Parr
- **The Family Book** by Todd Parr
- **The Invisible String** by Patrice Karst
- **Maybe Days** by Jennifer Wilgocki and Marcia Kahn Wright
- **Foster Care: One Dog’s Story of Change** by Julia Cook
- **Families Change: A Book for Children Experiencing Termination of Parental Rights** by Julie Nelson
- **Murphy’s Three Homes: A Story for Children in Foster Care** by Jan Levinson Gilman
- **Love You From Right Here: A Keepsake Book for Children in Foster Care** by Jamie Sandefer and Pamela Goodman
- **Home for a While** by Lauren Keirstein
- **Mommy’s Waves** by Chandra Ghosh Ippen
- **Daddy’s Waves** by Chandra Ghosh Ippen

Helpful Resources

Big feelings: <https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/the-feeling-basket/>

Talking about parental substance use: <https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/parental-addiction/>

Talking about parental incarceration: <https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/incarceration/>

Foster Care: <https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/foster-care/>

Creating Routines: [Z2T Routines Infographic](#)