



**The New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children, Inc.**  
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## **Parents' Feelings About the Separation Experience**

*Source: B. Ruttger, *The Parent's Guide to Foster Family Care*,  
Child Welfare League of America, NY, NY*

This is one parent's description of the feelings she experienced when her children were placed in foster family care. Knowledge about parents' feelings coupled with helping parents express their feelings, leads to more meaningful contact with parents.

### **Stage I—Shock**

When the loss of your child hits you, it is like going into shock. You may cry, feel shaky, and find it hard to hear what people are saying to you. You can't think of anything except the child who has been placed. You take care of the rest of the family or go to work like a sleepwalker without really knowing what you're doing. You wonder what the child is doing now. If you know where the foster home is, you may drive by just to be sure it is there.

You wonder if the foster parents are taking good care of the child and doing all the things the way the child is used to. You may think you hear the child or see him in his old room. You remember all the good times, even if there weren't very many. You try to keep busy and not think at all, but keep coming back to your last glimpse of your child. This shock usually lasts from a few days to a few weeks. Other people may try to be comforting to you, but you feel distant and "outside" the rest of the world.

### **Stage 2—Protest**

As you come out of the numbness of shock, you experience sadness, anger and physical upset. Some people lose their appetite, others eat constantly. It may be hard to fall asleep. You may increase your use of alcohol, cigarettes or sleeping pills. You may find yourself suddenly tearful "over nothing." You are afraid of what people think of you.

You are angry at perfect strangers on the street because it is you going through this and not them. You are angry with God. If your child was placed in foster care against your wishes—even if he wasn't—you are furious at the social agency, the court and everybody there. You are mad at yourself and go over and over and over in your mind what happened to see what you could have done to make it different. You can't come up with anything, but you can't quit thinking about it either.

You are angry at your child and feel he was difficult on purpose. You tell yourself you are glad he is gone and never want him back. You think how nice it is without him. Above all, you resent him for making you go through all this pain.

Many parents get scared at how angry they are or feel guilty about the anger and start avoiding their child or their work. But it is normal to feel angry when things are not the way you would like them to be. Anger sometimes helps us act to change things. When anger doesn't help, we learn to give it up and try something else to get what we want. Some people stay with being angry because it hurts less than the next step, which is despair.

### **Stage 3 - Despair**

When the anger has worn off, you go into the blues. You may feel you don't care about anybody or anything. It isn't worth getting up each day, and nothing interests you. You may feel worthless and no good. Some people think about killing themselves. Some get ill.

If you are a single parent and all your children have been placed, you may feel desperately lonely. You don't know who you are without your children to care for, or what to do with your day with no one to fix meals for. The world seems barren and silent, and you feel empty and hollow.

Some parents feel guilty because there is less stress with the child out of the home. They find they can survive without the child, but feel bad because this is true.

### **Stage 4 - Adjustment**

One day things just seem to be better. You begin eating and sleeping well again. You miss your child but are now more realistic about his being in foster care. You again pay attention to the house, your work and the rest of the family. You get interested in keeping your agreements about visiting your child and making your appointments with your worker. You begin to realize that you may actually have more time with your child now and feel better when you're with him that you did before foster care, when you were trying to handle too much. You begin to see both you and your child need relationships with others to deal with the loneliness, and now you have some energy for that.