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When Foster Children Leave: Helping Foster Parents to Grieve

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Foster parents are expected to take into their home a child who has been abused, neglected, emotionally deprived, or who has, at the minimum, suffered significant separations. They are to invest emotionally and physically in that child, nurture him, and cope with and help him through his behavioral and emotional difficulties. Then, somehow, foster parents are expected to separate gracefully when it is time for the child to move on, in a way that is helpful to the child and not disruptive to the natural parents, adoptive parents, or placement agency. All parents must face loss as they help their children move through childhood to emancipation. However, for the foster parent, the knowledge that full separation is likely to occur before the foster child grows up is a critical issue. Yet how little attention is given to the foster parent's grief over the loss of a foster child.

Brief Theory of Grief and Its Resolution

There is no way to set an exact timetable for the duration of grief or to prescribe a standard approach to helping the bereaved because there are so many different variables that affect how an individual reacts to loss and grief. And because recovery to pleasure, acceptance, and a feeling of peace is through the painful process of grief itself, there are no shortcuts. Many procedures to speed up the process only serve to avoid, delay, or dam up the grief, which can cause future physical, emotional, and mental problems. Time alone does not heal grief; rather it is the ways in which time is used that determines when recovery takes place. The bereaved needs to do the grief work necessary to separate himself from his loss and to reinvest his energies and feelings elsewhere. The thousands of memories associated with the lost person must be experienced, lived through, and transcended. Only absorption in the pain can the bereaved begin to let go and reinvest in the present and future.

The Role of the Helper

Grief must be shared with another person to be most effectively resolved. Any major loss arouses in us feelings of helplessness, loss of self-esteem, and fears of abandonment, and sharing the grief with a supportive, understanding person helps the bereaved feel less isolated and deserted. The qualities the helping person must have are caring, warmth, respect, empathy, hope, and the desire to understand. He or she must also be strong and not join the bereaved in helplessness, and yet be able to cope with the bereaved person's vulnerability and dependency. It is difficult to mourn with another who has suffered the same loss because the bereaved needs a helper to lean on. And one cannot be both bereaved and strong at the same time without holding back one's own expressions of grief.

The bereaved needs to hear that tears, confusion, disorganization, and dependency in the face of loss is normal and does not indicate weakness or mental illness (13:991). One who faces loss needs someone who is patient and willing to listen to the repetition necessary to integrate the loss, someone who will not cut off expressions of

pain and loss by advice to shape up. The bereaved also needs people who can occasionally provide healthy distraction from the intense pain of mourning

Obstacles to the Healthy Resolution of Grief

There are many barriers in our society and in our personalities to expressing grief fully. There are four important areas that make it very difficult for people to grieve, and foster parents are at risk in all of these.

Ambivalent Relationship

First, grieving is often difficult when the relationship to the lost person was ambivalent or hostile. Foster children are often troubled, which makes for strained relationships. There may be a good deal of relief when they leave, especially because of the acting out which so frequently is part of the child's separation anxiety. There may also be relief in no longer having contact with a biological parent who was troublesome. And, many people, foster parents included, disparage the value of what was lost in order to defend against the pain of grief. An example of this is, "Why should I miss him? He really never fit in here anyway, he caused so many problems and wasn't happy here."

"I'll leave him before he leaves me," is another attempt to avoid emotional pain. How many times have we seen a foster parent ask to have a child removed a couple of weeks or days before the child is supposed to move to an adoptive home or return to a biological parent? Certainly there are times when the child's behavior becomes extraordinarily difficult to handle, but more often the grief of impending loss is so great, in both foster parent and child that the foster parent asks for an earlier replacement to defend against the pain. However, the loss is not any less painful because one has had a part in bringing it about. In fact, the pain may even be increased.

Also, the foster parents represent the child's past and thus are frequently avoided and disparaged by those biological parents and adoptive parents who cannot tolerate the child's links to, and feelings about, his past. This can only increase the foster parents' pain at a time when they are most vulnerable, and make them wonder not only about the value of their work, but even of their lives.

Demanding Role

Important reality demands that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the bereaved to grieve constitute a second complication. Foster parents usually have several other children, foster and biological, in their home, and the demands of childcare and homemaking often offer little opportunity for the expression of grief. In addition, with the scarcity of foster homes, a social worker will often put in a new child as soon as the other child leaves, or sometimes even before, in anticipation of a vacancy. But it is most important that the bereaved be discouraged from making critical decisions because of the danger of creating secondary losses at such a vulnerable time. For example, the decision to take in another child, or to drop out of the foster parent program, should not be made right after a special foster child has left.

Social Expectations

The third important factor is whether there are social supports for grieving. Often the expectation is held by the placement agency, the biological parents, adoptive parents, and even other foster parents that foster parents are not supposed to get too attached, and that somehow deep sorrow and grief on losing a foster child is “neurotic” and a sign that all is not well in the foster parents' understanding of their role. In addition, how much more difficult it all becomes if the foster parents decided after the child left that they would have wanted to adopt the child, or knew before but the agency did not agree that this would be in the child's best interests, or if the child is going into a situation about which the foster parents have grave concern.

Personality

The fourth barrier to grieving is a personality based on avoiding feelings of loss and dependency and the need to always appear independent and competent. If this is the situation, then expressing grief fully would be regarded as a sign of weakness and thus grief is inhibited. Our society values the ability to cope and carry on, and many bereaved persons become very, absorbed in everyday activities, only, delaying the grief work. Foster mothers are accustomed to being nurturers and taking care of needy children. Feeling dependent and helpless for a time may be very difficult for them.

Grieving, in some degree, accompanies all change and growth. From a growth perspective, it is often through the modification of goals and expectations that a person comes through these changes and losses with renewed interest and zest. A negative outlook causes an individual to remain fixated on the past and old losses. These are the choices that confront foster parents as well. For example, a foster parent can look only at fixed outcomes (the child is gone, he went to a family I don't like and who doesn't like me) or they can look at a growth process (the child was with me for three years, I gave him a great deal during that time, I did my best in preparing him for the move, and that nurturing will always be part of him).

Possible Supports to Foster Parents in the Grief Process

There are several ways agencies can help foster parents through fear of loss, loss itself, and the grieving process.

Communication

First, the social worker should be as direct and honest as possible with the foster parents regarding the duration of the placement. Any unnecessary vagueness on the part of the social worker heightens the foster parents' anxiety, and this anxiety is often transmitted to the child. This does not mean that the worker must share every detail of every court hearing and every conversation he has with a biological parent. However, although the foster parents usually are not and cannot be empowered to make independent decisions for the child, their relationship with the child requires that they participate in the decision-making process. Otherwise how can they emotionally accept the decision and help the child to understand and accept it?

Relationship with the Social Worker

For some foster parents, the relationship with the social worker is not satisfying and is to be endured. This is not a relationship in which to share grief and reveal vulnerabilities. For other foster parents, the relationship with the social worker is meaningful and involves frequent and lengthy phone calls, visits, and interviews. However, when the child leaves the foster home, the social worker's energies almost always go toward helping the child and his new family adjust to one another, and the foster parent is lucky to get a phone call from the worker. This loss of the relationship with the social worker adds further pain to an already grieving foster parent. One way an agency can provide support to foster parents is to assign each foster home a social worker of its own, separate from the child's worker. This social worker would not leave when the child leaves, would get to know the foster parents well, and can help them through the painful periods.

Social and Educational Programs

Some agencies provide gratifications to the foster parents through a planned agency social and educational program, and/or through the relationship with the caseworker. These purposeful sources of gratification can make a significant difference in helping foster parents remain with the program during periods of extreme strain on their energies and emotions.

Foster parents can also benefit from educational programs and training related to loss and the grieving process, and this could and probably should begin with the orientation for new foster parents. This kind of training can help foster parents to understand their own reactions to loss as well as those of the children they are caring for. All helping persons, and child welfare workers in particular, need and should receive such courses as well. This should help them be more sensitive to the foster parents as well as to the placed children in times of loss. Foster parents may need to be more assertive about saying "no" to the placement of a new foster child when they are not ready, and social workers may need to be more sensitive to the timing of a new placement.

Self - Help Groups

Self-help groups are prevalent today for people with common interests and problems. Perhaps a self-help group for foster parents, which among other things could help with the loss of a child and the subsequent grieving process, could be of much value. Although complicated grief reactions need the expertise and skill of a professional, the empathy of a self-help group can go a long way toward helping with a normal grief reaction.

Legislation

Note: This was written prior to enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997

Finally, there is a need for strong supports for keeping children in their own families and intensive efforts at reunifying families when placement is inevitable. There must be definite time limits on how long a child can remain in the emotional and legal limbo of foster placement. It is unfair to all involved that a child can remain in foster care for three years or longer without the opportunity for a permanent plan. How can children, as well as foster parents, be expected to cope effectively with separations after such lengthy periods of time, and when

often the child can barely, if at all, remember ever living elsewhere and hardly knows the people to who he is going.

It is crucial that we provide foster parents with the supports, tools, and education that they need to work through their own separations and losses – integral tasks of the foster parent experience – if we expect them to help foster children, who are some of the neediest, most deprived children, with these same issues.

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