

'Tis the Season!

Navigating the Holidays with Children in Care

by Anne-Marie Abruscato, LCSW

Shopping, decorating, visitors, sweets, music, parties—the holidays can be such a joyous time! On the other hand, holidays can also be stressful with extra time constraints, financial pressures, etc. Just as we experience some stress over the holidays, so do children in foster care. While it is expected to be the happiest time of the year, foster children may experience sadness, anxiety, and frustration.

How can we help? The more we can keep the child's past trauma in mind, the better we can create a peaceful holiday season. Here are some trauma-informed tips to help make the holidays as happy as possible for everyone in your family.

Preparation

Explain to the child what to expect about the holidays in your home. What will be different? Will there be special decorations, meals, or rituals that will occur? Will they meet new people visiting your home? Tell the child about these things ahead of time.

Your foster child may experience *surprises* as dangerous and negative (just as in their past). The more information a child has, the more prepared, and safe, they will feel. The safer children feel, the more calm they will be, and the better they will communicate and behave.

Tell visitors who are new to your home about your foster child ahead of time, especially if they are not familiar with foster care. They may not realize the sensitivities that should be considered, like not asking “where did you come from?”

Expectations

Do not expect that children in foster care will be as excited about the holidays as you are. It is possible that the child's association with the holidays is a negative one. The pressures of the holidays may have created more difficulties in the child's birth home.

Also, it is possible that in the past, their peers came back to school showing off new gifts and clothes while your child may not have gotten anything at all.

Do not expect a perfectly behaved, grateful and happy child. Though you are doing your best to include the child, they may still feel like an outsider. The child may believe if they enjoy the holidays they are betraying their biological families. If the child withdraws from you during the holidays, try not to take it personally. If they do not want to

be there for a special meal or for gift opening, and if it is possible to let them spend time alone—you may be doing them a favor by giving them the space they need to cope.

At the same time, remember that children are almost always loyal to their biological parents, no matter what has happened in the past. Regardless of the stresses they may have experienced over the holidays, they may have positive memories as well. Let them tell you about these memories.

Behavioral or emotional issues

During the holidays, children may miss their biological families even more than usual. These emotions may lead to new or more difficult behavior issues. They may regress to behaviors they used to have in the past. They may have more anger outbursts, moodiness, or crying spells. This might be their way of expressing grief about missing their families.

No matter how dysfunctional or harmful you may perceive their family history, children usually have positive feelings for their families and miss them greatly. Try to have patience with behavior problems over the holidays, knowing they are probably a result of grief and sadness.

Your traditions

Every home has specific cultural, religious, or historical traditions. Being in your home over the holidays gives children an opportunity to learn about the diversity that exists among families. As the days go on, share information about your family's history and how your traditions developed over time.

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Their traditions

Encourage your child to tell you about their family's traditions, culture, or religion. If they hold a religious belief different from yours, ask them to tell you about what that religion means to them. If they cannot identify special traditions, perhaps you can help them research the customs typical to their heritage. If they have a special request for a ritual, try and incorporate it into your traditions.

Connections

When appropriate, ask if they would like to make and/or send holiday cards for their relatives. Even if you do not have addresses, you could give the cards to the caseworker. This is also a great time to create a special "memory box," which is a place the child can put things they plan to share with their family eventually. A decorated shoe box works very well for this purpose!

Making memories

Building connections is one of the most beneficial things you can do for children in your care. Helping them preserve memories is an important skill that you can teach. Take pictures and make extra copies for the child to keep. They may not be in your home next year, and pictures will help them remember the special times you shared over this holiday season.

Do not overdo it!

Sometimes well-meaning foster parents try and "make up" for a child's hurt and neglect by showering them with gifts over the holidays. Try to not go overboard, as this may overwhelm your child, increase loyalty struggles, or make them feel that they are not worthy of such extraordinary attention.

Take care of you

If you have foster children in your home, you are probably an expert at balancing many things—meetings, visits, appointments—to take care of everyone else. This season, take a moment to acknowledge **YOU**. Take time for yourself, and do some of what makes you happy.

Your dedication to fostering children includes giving of yourself, your home, knowledge, compassion, and guidance. These are the most valuable gifts of all. Your generosity truly embodies the spirit of the holidays, so celebrate you!