

## **Grief and Separation- What is a Child Feeling?**

A child has to leave home. His parents cannot look after him for a time. He (or she) comes to live in your home. What are his feelings? How does he show them? Sometimes a child must leave home very suddenly. Sometimes the experience can be made less frightening by visits to the new home beforehand, and by talking about what is going to happen before it happens. It helps if he has his familiar clothes and belongings with him.

A child always grieves when he has to leave his familiar home. He has to go through a period of grieving before he can look happily forward and involve himself in what is going on. How does he do this?

There are four stages in grieving. The first is shock. A child is in shock when taken from his home and brought to yours, though he may have worked through some of the shock by talking about it beforehand. Shock may last a few days, or much longer. The child is aimless, and is not really aware of his surroundings. He is probably easily persuaded to co-operate, but does not really take part in what is happening. He may get into a lot of noisy, aimless chatter, and show no feeling. You can very gently help him to take part in routine things like mealtimes, bedtimes, but he has to come out of shock at his own speed. It may take weeks or months.

Stage two is protest. It is a very difficult stage for foster parents. The child is angry with everyone and shows his anger, usually by various forms of difficult behavior, such as fighting, destroying things (often his own things), harming himself, soiling himself, running back to a familiar place. He feels helpless, and may weep a lot. If this behavior has only started since the child left home it will not last long, and foster parents can help by realizing that it is not the child's

normal behavior. You can encourage him to talk about how angry and sad he feels. It is very important to his future that his feelings should not be suppressed. If they are talked about he will have less need to engage in difficult behavior, and will get through this stage more quickly.

The third stage is despair or hopelessness. This is very painful. In this stage a person is apathetic and doesn't appear to care about anything. He does not want to do things with other people. He is depressed, disorganized and quiet. A small child may return to babyish habits such as wetting, inability to feed himself, headbanging, rocking. Foster parents cannot push a child out of this. They can only be gently accepting and understanding. You can encourage him to say how unhappy and hopeless he is feeling.

When and only when a person has worked his way through these stages, he moves on to the next stage, recovery. This can happen quite suddenly. One morning he will wake up and feel cheerful. He can enjoy life, and respond to other people, maybe laugh at something he couldn't laugh at earlier. He has "come through", "made it", and life will be worth living again. It may have taken six months for him to get to this point.

Separation is something that gets no easier each time it is experienced. People try to protect themselves from some of the pain, if they have been through it several times, by refusing to get involved. A child may remain detached from new foster parents because he cannot risk being hurt again when he has to leave them. This means that he may never get through his angry and hopeless feelings because he will not have had a chance to talk about them and in that way understand them.

When your foster child leaves your home he may go through all the stages of grieving again. This will partly depend on how long he has been with you, of course. It will make it easier if the move can be made slowly, and after full discussion with the child. If possible, he should have visited the home to which he is going, and should be allowed to say what he thinks about moving to it. If he is going back to his parents, the move will be much easier if you and his parents are on friendly terms. It is better for the child if he can get over the shock and some of the protest involved in moving before he actually moves. It will make it much easier for him to settle down again if he can express some of his anger and protest before he leaves, although he may do so in a way that hurts you because he is so angry at leaving. Again, the best way to help is to talk about it and acknowledge that you know he has mixed feelings and that you understand.

And what about you? How will you feel when a child you have come to love deeply leaves your home? In theory, foster parents accept the fact that they are substitute parents who will look after their foster children until they can return to their own families. But even though you may be prepared for it, the parting can be very painful. You may go through the same stages of grieving- shock, protest, despair, and then, thank goodness, recovery. If your foster child is returning home it will help greatly if you have a good relationship with his natural parents, and can continue as a friend to the family.

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