

'Tis the Season for

STRESS

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Shopping, decorating, traveling...the holidays can be wonderful AND stressful! Here are some tips for foster parents regarding the holidays.

Preparation

As you know, children feel and behave better when they are informed and are not anxious. It is helpful to explain to the child what to expect about the holiday season in your home. What will be different? Will they meet new people who are visiting your home?

It is important to prepare any new visitors about your foster children, especially if they are not familiar with foster care and the sensitivities that should be considered.

Before attending special events, tell children about what to expect. Describe the home or place where the event will be held, who will be there, and tell how it usually proceeds.

Children in foster care may not be happy about the holidays

Families that are already under stress can experience many more pressures from the holiday season. Perhaps the holidays were a time when the child actually experienced more abuse.

Over the holidays, many children have conflicted feelings about their birth families, such as anger, sadness, worry, and concern. It is a good time to let them know it is okay that they are being cared for even if their birth family is struggling. Reassure them (if you can), about the safety of their birth family.

Giving and receiving gifts

Children may have come from homes where gifts could not be afforded. Other children may have come from homes where money was not a concern, but still the children did not receive gifts.

Sometimes well-meaning foster parents try and "make up" for a child's past by showering them with gifts over the holidays. This may be overwhelming for the child.

Some foster children have not experienced giving gifts to others. This concept may not even cross their minds, so be there to offer guidance. When appropriate, ask if they would like to make holiday cards to send to relatives. Perhaps this could be a good time for the youth in your home to send cards to their birth families, old teachers, neighbors or friends.

Even if you do not have an address for the parents or relatives, you could give the cards to the caseworker. Or you could place them in a special "memory box" (a decorated shoe box works perfectly for this!) that the child can place things that if/when they get to see their family, they have them in a safe place.

If you are feeling especially giving, one great idea is to give birth families a framed photo of their children or a photo album.

continued, next page

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continued from Page 1

Behavioral or emotional issues

There may be painful reminders from the holiday season, and children may miss their families even more. These feelings may lead to new or more difficult behaviors. Children may regress and act as they used to in the past.

This might be their way of expressing grief about missing their families. No matter how dysfunctional or harmful you may perceive their past history with their families, children have positive feelings for them.

Children may withdraw from you during the holidays. Try not to take this personally, it is just the way they may need to cope.

Be prepared for potential triggers (reminders) of traumatic experiences. They may have very painful memories. Try and listen without giving any advice. "Thanks for sharing that with me" in a kind tone can be the best response you can give.

Explain about your family's holiday traditions

Every home has specific cultural, religious, or historical traditions. Being in your home gives children an opportunity to learn about the diversity of families.

Ask them about holidays they celebrated before and any favorite traditions or memories. Honor their religion, or lack thereof.

Follow their lead. Let them reminisce, or not. Whatever they share, acknowledge and thank them for sharing.

Make memories! Take pictures and make extra copies for the child to keep.

Building connections is one of the most important things you can do for children in your care. Helping them preserve memories is both a benefit and a skill that you can teach them.

Perhaps you could give your child a camera so that they can record your family's celebration. They could also bring it to holiday visits with their birth families.

Take care of you!

If you have foster children in your home, you are an expert at balancing many things! You likely have to keep track of weekly appointments, visits, and meetings. Day in and day out, you attend to the needs of others. This season, try to make sure some of your own needs are met, and recognize your crucial role in helping children in this community. You make a difference!