

Holiday tips for foster parents

The holiday season brings many joys, and always seems to bring some extra stress as well! This year, the pandemic only adds to that stress, as some holiday plans will have to be adjusted. Here are some tips for foster parents about supporting foster children this holiday season.

Preparation

As you know, any change in the typical routine can increase uncertainty and anxiety in foster children. Children feel and behave better when they are calm. Providing them with information is one way to reduce anxiety. You can talk to the child about what to expect about the holiday season in your home. What will be different than usual? Will they meet new people who are visiting?

For any new family members or family friends that the child will meet – it might be beneficial to prepare those individuals about your foster children. They might not be familiar with foster care and the sensitivities that should be considered (such as not asking questions about why they are in care). Also, you may want to be prepared in the event that your relatives/visitors bring gifts for others in the home but forget gifts for foster children.

Before attending special events, tell children what to expect. The more information, the better! You can describe the place where the event will be held, who will be there, and how the event is expected to unfold.

Not everyone is happy about the holidays

Some foster children may not be excited about the holidays. First, there is so much talk and expectation about being around “family” during the holidays, they may miss their parents, siblings, pets, extended family, and others even more. Second, there may not be positive memories associated with 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* stress and *more* instability.

Over the holidays, many children have conflicted feelings about their birth families, such as sadness, worry, or anger. 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 were not provided. Sometimes we might be tempted to “make up” for a child’s past by showering them with gifts over the holidays. Although this is a generous gesture, too much 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 adults can offer guidance. When appropriate, you could ask if they would like to make holiday cards to send to relatives, old teachers, neighbors or friends. Even if you do not have addresses, 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!). This box could store things until they are able to be given to the recipients.

Behavioral or emotional issues

As stated earlier, 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.

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 is sometimes the best response.

Talk 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. The more you share about the history of your own traditions, the more children can learn.

Children can be asked about how they celebrated holidays with their birth families, and any favorite traditions or memories. Providing them an opportunity to reminisce is a gift.

Make memories!

Helping children preserve memories is both a benefit and a skill that you can teach. By making copies of holiday pictures for them to keep, they will have lasting memories of your special time together.

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!