

The following article is adapted from *Wounded Children, Healing Homes* (2009) by Jayne Schooler, Betsy Keefer Smalley, and Tim Callahan

All parents experience crises and challenges. However, foster parents are faced with challenges that families raising birth children don't share. And at times, these additional challenges can escalate into full-blown crisis. Crises for foster children can be triggered by events, anniversaries, or even times of the year that remind children of losses or traumatic experiences. Some of the more common triggers for foster care-related crises are:

- Birthdays
- Mother's Day
- Moving
- Transition to a new school or graduation from high school
- Illness or death of a parent or grandparent
- Death of a pet
- Divorce of adoptive parents
- Holidays
- School assignments (the dreaded Family Tree, etc.)
- Visits with members of the primary family
- Court hearings
- Visits from the social worker

Parents can prevent or alleviate adoption-related crisis for most of these triggers through strategies that anticipate and avoid triggers, promote communication and understanding that the child is now safe and protected, and express empathy and support as the child moves through his grief process. Generalized survival skills for foster parents include:

- Acknowledge the child's grief. Don't assume grief will disappear if losses are not discussed. The only way out of grief is "through."

- Network with other foster families. Foster families understand the challenges of parenting a traumatized child. Others may offer solutions that won't be relevant or useful for foster families.
- Don't over-react to behaviors; not all behaviors are related to foster care.
- Don't under-react to foster care-related issues. Your child may be afraid to express his sadness regarding earlier losses or traumas, fearing that you will interpret this as an act of disloyalty.
- Get as much information as possible about the child's birth family and history.
- Communicate openly and honestly about the child's history. Encourage the child to have realistically positive feelings about his birth family. To enjoy positive self-esteem, he must feel good about his "roots."
- Remember the child is able to love more than one set of parents at the same time. Your child should not be asked to choose. It is natural and expectable that he will have strong feelings for people who have cared for him or who should have cared for him during his life.
- Be alert for reactions to foster care-related triggers.
- Allow the foster father to become the primary parent during adolescence. Much of the child's grief, anger regarding abandonment, and divided loyalties are directed toward the birth mother. This anger is often transferred to the foster mother (a dynamic known as "splitting"). The foster mother/foster child relationship can become very strained. The foster father should handle limit-setting whenever possible.
- Choose your battles and win the war. You can't work on everything at once. Avoid control battles whenever possible.

Raising children is rewarding, but stressful business. Foster parents are vulnerable to even higher levels of stress related to raising children. Some of the added stressors for foster families include:

- Unmet expectations regarding foster care and family life
- Feelings of failure and resulting guilt

- The impact of foster care on other relationships (with the spouse, other children in the family, extended family, close friends)
- Coping with child's needs or challenging behaviors
- Dealing with multiple service providers (or the lack of foster care-competent service providers)
- School issues
- Difficulty in finding substitute caregivers to provide occasional respite or relief
- Managing either openness in the relationship with primary parents or the lack of a relationship with birth parents (including the psychological, rather than physical, presence of birth family members)

Even when exposed to high levels of stress, foster parents can prevent crisis through effective coping strategies. The following list of coping strategies can assist foster parents in preventing stress from escalating into crisis.

- Recall often that you are not source of your child's problems. Your child's history of abuse, neglect, institutionalization, separations has created trauma from which he will need to heal. Though you did not create the trauma, you will be a place of healing for your child as he recovers.
- Maintain a sense of humor. Connecting with other foster parents can help you find some comic relief in foster family life.
- Stop comparing yourself to other families. You are comparing your "insides" with other people's "outsides."
- Find a foster care-competent family therapist. Your family needs a therapist who understands trauma and also knows typical stages of foster family adjustment.
- Stay regulated. Don't jump into the child's fear. Your child is counting on you to be a port in the storm when she feels out of

control. Heather Forbes, a therapist and adoptive mother, directs parents to “Stop, Drop, and Roll.” (Stop talking. Drop into your breathing. Roll back into your relationship with your child.)

- Find outlets for your own emotional, spiritual, and physical needs and design opportunities to enjoy those.
- Do a role check. Is one parent carrying most of the load? Occasionally, one parent over-functions as the nurturing parent or as the disciplinarian. In these situations, one parent does not allow his or her partner to participate fully in the parenting role. One helpful technique to address this difficulty is to explore and list which parenting tasks each parent can do very well and which parenting tasks are problematic or disastrous for each parent. The parents can then engage in “role differentiation.”
- Identify who owns the problem. The people who own the problem are in charge of solving it. If it isn’t your problem, don’t try to control it.
- Take a break--find respite care. Re-charge your batteries with some time away from the challenge.
- Remember the child’s progress will not always be consistent. Growth is not always linear, but can happen in fits and starts. Children who have learned to distrust adults need significant time to trust and attach.
- Look for patterns in your child’s outbursts. If you understand her triggers, you may be able to prevent an explosion altogether, or lessen the intensity significantly.
- Use family meetings creatively. Family meetings are good opportunities to teach children about planning, problem-solving, and decision-making.
- Find ways to have fun with your child—increase your positive interactions. Having fun builds attachment for both of you.

- Reframe your definition of success and celebrate small gains. We sometimes sabotage ourselves with unrealistic expectations of the family's adjustment to foster care. Pay attention to the significant improvements you have made in your child's life situation and acknowledge the positive impact of your ongoing commitment to his effort to heal earlier wounds.