

Children in Care During the Holidays

The holiday season can be a time filled with warmth, celebration, and family connection—but for children in foster care, it can also bring up feelings of grief, confusion, and loss. While many families eagerly anticipate traditions and gatherings, children in care may be struggling with painful reminders of separation, uncertainty about where they belong, or worry about their biological families. As foster parents, you play a vital role in helping children feel safe, seen, and supported during this emotionally complex time.

Understanding Emotional Triggers

Children in care may have mixed feelings during the holidays. Excitement about gifts or family events can coexist with sadness about not being with their biological families. Even small things—like a certain song, food, or holiday tradition—can bring up strong emotions. You might notice changes in behavior such as withdrawal, irritability, or acting out. These behaviors often reflect deep emotional pain rather than “bad behavior.”

Take time to talk gently about their feelings. Simple statements like, “The holidays can bring up a lot of feelings,” or “It’s okay if you’re feeling sad or confused right now,” can help normalize their emotions and open the door for connection.

Creating New Traditions While Honoring Old Ones

The goal isn’t to replace a child’s past but to help them integrate it into their present. Ask what traditions are meaningful to them. Maybe they used to bake cookies with their mom, open one gift on Christmas Eve, or celebrate a different holiday altogether. Incorporating even one of their traditions can help them feel respected and valued.

At the same time, invite them into your family’s traditions without pressure. Make space for them to observe or participate at their own comfort level. Over time, these shared experiences can become part of their new memories and sense of belonging.

Maintaining Family Connections

If safe and appropriate, maintaining contact with biological family members during the holidays can be healing for children. Work with the case team to explore options like phone calls, video chats, or sending cards. For some children, creating a holiday card for their parents or siblings can help them express love and maintain emotional connection in a safe, supported way.

Managing Expectations and Big Feelings

Children may not always express gratitude or joy during the holidays—and that’s okay. Their emotional world may be too complicated to match the “happy holiday” mood around them. Be patient and keep your expectations realistic. Focus on connection over perfection. Sometimes, the most meaningful gift you can give is understanding and consistency.

Foster parents should also care for themselves during this time. The holidays can bring stress, busy schedules, and emotional fatigue. Taking time to rest, set boundaries, and reflect helps you stay grounded and present for the children in your care.

Final Thoughts

The holidays can be a time of both joy and challenge for children in foster care. By showing compassion, honoring their history, and creating safe, inclusive spaces, you help them experience a season of true belonging. Small gestures of care—like listening, validating feelings, and making memories together—can have a lifelong impact.