

Supporting Kids in Care Through Winter Break

Winter break can bring excitement, rest, and fun — but it can also create stress for children in care. The sudden shift away from school routines, increased downtime, and disruptions to normal patterns can heighten anxiety and emotional responses. For many youth, long breaks from school also mean fewer support systems, more opportunities for memories or grief to surface, and a higher need for stability at home. Foster parents play a vital role in helping kids feel grounded and supported during this transition.

1. Maintain Predictable Routines (as much as possible)

School provides structure, and the abrupt pause can feel overwhelming. Keeping a basic rhythm helps kids regulate.

- Wake-up and bedtime remain mostly the same
- Consistent mealtimes
- Daily blocks for activities (chores, rest, free play, outings, etc.)
- Visual schedules for younger children or youth who benefit from clarity

Predictability lowers stress and helps kids feel safe.

2. Prepare for Emotional Ups and Downs

Winter break often means more unstructured time, which can allow big feelings to surface. Some kids may become withdrawn; others may show increased behaviors. This isn't defiance — it's communication.

Common emotional triggers during winter break:

- Loss of routine
- Past memories surfacing
- Increased sensory overload
- Anticipation or anxiety about visits
- Feeling “different” from peers
- Weather restrictions limiting outdoor play

Respond with empathy, co-regulation, and simple grounding strategies like slow breathing, taking a walk, weighted blankets, or sensory breaks.

3. Build in Connection Time

Kids in care need consistent signals of belonging. Winter break can be a good time to strengthen attachment through low-pressure bonding moments:

- Cooking together
- Short outings
- Board games
- Reading aloud
- 10–15 minute “special time” each day

These efforts help them feel valued and emotionally anchored.

4. Support Social and Family Connections

Winter break can amplify both excitement and stress around family time. Whether youth do or don’t have scheduled visits, emotions may increase.

Support them by:

- Offering space for kids to talk about their feelings around family
- Helping them understand schedules and upcoming changes
- Letting them know their emotions are normal and OK

If they don’t want to talk, offer gentle invitations instead of pressure.

5. Fill Downtime with Purpose (but not pressure)

Kids don’t need an overpacked schedule — but too much empty time can lead to boredom or dysregulation. Provide a balance of choices:

- Arts, crafts, or building projects
- Time outdoors when possible
- Helping with simple household tasks
- Screen time with reasonable limits
- Social opportunities with friends or siblings

The goal is engagement, not perfection.

6. Watch for Signs of Stress in Yourself

Caregiver stress often increases during long breaks, too. Your emotional health sets the

tone in the home.

Pay attention to:

- Feeling easily frustrated
- Feeling overstimulated by noise or activity
- Difficulty sleeping
- A sense of overwhelm

Building in your own small breaks — even 5 minutes of quiet — can help you stay regulated and responsive.

7. End the Break with Gentle Transition Routines

A few days before school begins again, help kids prepare mentally and physically:

- Reinstate school-year routines
- Review bus schedules, drop-off plans, or classroom expectations
- Reset sleep patterns
- Practice calm morning routines

Gradual transitions reduce anxiety and help school restart smoothly.

Final Thoughts

Winter break can be a meaningful time for connection, healing, and rest. With structure, patience, and nurturing support, foster parents can help children feel safe and capable during these long stretches away from school. Your consistency and compassion make a tremendous difference — especially during seasons of change.