

# Families First

a newsletter for Nebraska Families

November / December 2022

N F A P A

## THE HOLIDAYS IN FOSTER CARE: WHY THINGS MIGHT GET ROUGH

During the holidays, we are inundated with messages from a number of sources (movies, music, TV, social media, commercials) about how we should be feeling joyful, happy, and thankful. Surrounded by loving (and attractive) family, laughter, fancy food served at perfectly set tables and loads of expensive gifts, these images rarely reflect the truth for the majority of people. For children in foster care, conflicting loyalties and lost dreams can make the holidays an even more especially difficult time. They often report feeling especially vulnerable, lonely and sad, at a time when they are expected to feel exactly the opposite.

**What can those of us caring for these children and youth do or say to ease the pain?**

**Here are some things you might do:**

### **1. Prepare the foster youth in your care for the holidays in your home**

Have a discussion with the young person about your family's holiday customs. Do you celebrate over multiple days, or is there one "main" celebration? Are there religious customs? Will gifts be exchanged? What should they wear? Who will they meet? What preparations need to be done in advance? Will there be visitors to the home? Will they be taken on visits to the homes of other family or friends? And in

all of these events, will your youth be expected to participate? Knowing what to expect will help to decrease anxiety around the holidays. Avoid surprises and you will decrease seasonal tensions.

Of equal importance is to help them talk about their memories of the holidays. Be prepared for anything from fantasies to reports of no memories of anything at all. Give them space to talk and be prepared to validate any feelings they may share with you. Find ways to incorporate any traditions they remember into your family's celebration.

### **2. Prepare friends and family before you visit**

Let people know in advance about new family members in your home. Surprising a host or hostess at the door with a "new" foster youth may set up an awkward situation — such as a scramble to set an extra place at the table — making the young person feel like an imposition right from the start of the visit. Your preparation of friends should help cut down

on awkward, but reasonable questions such as "who are you?" or "where did you come from?"

Also prepare the youth for what to expect. Talk about upcoming events and the people who will be there. If they have not met before, introduce them with old photos or stories about them. Prepare them for the "characters" in your family. Tell them if the celebration will be formal or informal, what to wear, what they will do there, if is a quiet or loud affair,



Nebraska Foster &amp; Adoptive Parent Association

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Call NFAPA at 877-257-0176 or 402-476-2273.

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# Attention Foster Parents!

## Earn Your In-Service Hours While Getting the Chance to Win a Great Prize!

Answer these 10 questions correctly and you will not only earn .5 credits toward your in-service hours, but your name will also be put in a drawing for a prize. For this issue we are offering a \$10 Walmart gift card.

There are a variety of ways to do this. You can email the information to [Corinne@nfapa.org](mailto:Corinne@nfapa.org), send the questionnaire to the NFAPA office at 3601 N. 25th Street, Suite D, Lincoln, NE 68521 or you can complete the questionnaire online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NovDec2022>

We will then enter your name in the drawing! We will also send you a certificate for training credit to turn in when it is time for relicensing. Good Luck!

1. True or False. You may receive well-intended but prying questions from those you visit with over the holidays.
2. True or False. Anxiety may run low for young people already, and the stress of meeting your relatives may not be a lot to deal with.
3. Fill in the blank. Do not force your foster child to say what they are \_\_\_\_\_ for, remember it is hard for anyone to feel \_\_\_\_\_ when they are in crisis.
4. True or False. Your foster child may not want to talk about good or difficult memories from past holiday seasons. Do not negate their renditions. Just be a listening ear.
5. True or False. The holidays can be jam-packed with family activities that could be overwhelming for foster youth. Always remember to invite inclusion and not force it and accept when it's declined.
6. True or False. Your recognition of adoptive families can go a long way to supporting the development of strong and successful adoptive families.
7. List eight things People Should Know about Adoption.
8. True or False. Even children adopted at birth have a nine-month history with their biological other—and that history matters.
9. Fill in the Blanks. "Adoptees deserve the space to \_\_\_\_\_ what's been lost and to define what \_\_\_\_\_ looks like on \_\_\_\_\_ terms."
10. List seven examples of exhibited behavior your child might do while grieving. Grief takes many forms and may be exhibited in lots of ways, including:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_

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and how long you will stay. If “please” and “thank you” will be expected, role play with the youth until they are comfortable with such expressions.

### 3. Remember confidentiality

You may receive well-intended but prying questions from those you visit with over the holidays. If your young person is new to your home, it is natural that family members ask questions about your youth’s background. As much as possible, have these conversations ahead of time, without the youth present. Understand that questions are generally not meant to be insensitive or rude, but simply come from a place of not knowing much about foster care. Think in advance about how to answer these questions while maintaining your youth’s confidentiality. Use the opportunity to educate interested family and friends. Pre-establish the boundaries for information sharing.

Discuss with your young person how they would like to be introduced and what is appropriate to share about their history with your family and friends. (Remember, they have no obligation to reveal their past.) Help them to set boundaries and consider a private “signal” to use if they feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed.

### 4. Arrange meeting your family in advance, if possible

The hustle and bustle of the holidays can make it particularly chaotic for your young person to participate in your family traditions. Anxiety may run high for young people already, and the stress of meeting your relatives may be a lot to deal with. If possible, you can arrange a casual “meeting” in advance of “main events.” If it is not possible or practical to meet beforehand, make a list of names of some of the people they’ll meet and their connection to you. You can also encourage a quick call from relatives you plan to visit to deliver a personal message of “we are excited to meet you” so that your youth knows they will be welcome. Consider making a “hostess” gift with the youth to present to the host of the party. Homemade gifts are always welcome!

### 5. Have extra presents ready to help offset differences

It should not be expected that all relatives purchase presents for your youth. Be prepared with other small gifts and for those family members that express concern over not having brought a gift, offer one of your “backups” for them to place under the tree. Extra presents may be addressed “from Santa”, even for older youth, to help offset a larger number of gifts other children may receive at the same time. Children often keep count of the number of gifts received (right or wrong) and use it to compare with other kids, so sometimes quantity is important.

At times, foster youth receive gifts from people they do not

know. Asking a child to identify gift(s) for their wish list is often met with confusion, resistance or other equally charged emotions. We have to remind ourselves that our excitement and enthusiasm for these types of gifts may not be their experience. In some circumstances, these youth may not have celebrated Christmas before or they are not used to asking for a “gift” but rather for some basic need (i.e., toiletries or food). When encouraged to think “bigger”—beyond just what they need and ask for something that they want—foster children often struggle. Intense thoughts and fears arise: Am I disloyal to my birth parents by requesting/accepting gifts? Does this mean I won’t be home by Christmas?

It’s often our role to help foster youth understand that the community’s desire to give them gifts means only that they are loved. You may need to guard against well-meaning people’s desire to “give a happy holiday for such a deprived, abused little child,” protecting the children from such toxic sentiments.

### 6. Facilitate visits with loved ones

The holidays can be a busy time for everyone including foster parents and caseworkers. But it is especially important during this time of year to help your young person arrange for visits with loved ones. Don’t allow busy schedules to mean the postponement of these important visits. Try to get permission for your youth to make phone calls to relatives. A youth may wish to extend holiday wishes to relatives and friends from an old neighborhood, but may need your help getting phone numbers together. Use the opportunity to help the youth develop their own address book. If the youth cannot visit, consider including their birth families in your thoughts and prayers. If you are making homemade gifts, consider making





ones for the birth family, even if they cannot be delivered immediately.

This is a time when many foster youth feel deeply conflicted about their birth families and worry about them. It is a good time to let them know it is okay for them to be safe and cared for even if their birth family is struggling. Reassure them, if you can, about the safety and care of those they are missing.

## 7. Help them make sure their loved ones are okay

Young people may worry that their family members are struggling through the holidays. If homelessness has been a regular issue, the winter season may bring cold weather and extreme hardship. Your youth may experience guilt if they feel a loved one is struggling while they, the youth, are living in comfort. Knowing that a biological parent or sibling has shelter from the cold or has their other basic needs met may ease a young person's mind through the always emotional holidays.

## 8. Extend an invitation

If it is safe and allowed by your foster care agency, consider extending an invitation to siblings or birth parents through the holidays. It need not be an invitation to your "main" holiday event, consider a "special" dinner for your youth to celebrate with their loved ones. If this not a possibility to do within your home, consider arranging a visit at a local restaurant (ask the caseworker if it would be appropriate for the visit to be unsupervised or if your supervision would suffice). Extending an invitation to their loved ones need not signal to a young person that you support their birth family's lifestyle or choices



— rather it tells a young person that you respect their wish to stay connected to family. You will also send a message to the youth that they aren't being put in a position to "choose" your family over their bio-family and that it is possible to have a relationship with all the people they care about.

## 9. Understand and encourage your youth's own traditions and beliefs


Encourage discussion about the holiday traditions your young person experienced prior to being in foster care, or even celebrations they liked while living with other foster families. Incorporate the traditions the youth cherishes into your own family celebration, if possible. Use the opportunity to investigate the youth's culture and research customary traditions. If the young person holds a religious belief different from yours, or if their family did, check into the traditions customarily surrounding those beliefs.

## 10. Assist in purchasing or making holiday gifts or in sending cards to their family and friends

Allow young people to purchase small gifts for their relatives, or help them craft homemade gifts. Help send holiday cards to those that they want to stay connected with. The list of people that your youth wishes to send cards and gifts to should be left completely to the youth, although precautions may be taken to ensure safety (for example, a return address may be left off the package, or use the address of the foster care agency) and compliance with any court orders.

## 11. Understand if they pull away

Despite your best efforts, a young person may simply withdraw during the holidays. Understand that this detachment most likely is not intended to be an insult or a



### Thanksgiving With Your Foster Child

*Keep safe food on hand. Some kids may not recognize your family's traditional Thanksgiving foods. Remember, a "home cooked meal" is different for every family and culture. Fruit, cheese/crackers, bread/butter are easy to include in a Thanksgiving meal.*

*Consider the child's culture and traditions. Ask their family if they want you to incorporate anything into your day/meal.*


*Don't force your foster child to say what they are thankful for. Remember, it is hard for anyone to feel gratitude when they are in crisis.*

*The day can be overwhelming with new people, food, smells, experiences. Build in breaks and resets. It is OK to ask people to leave if your child is overwhelmed and dysregulated.*

*If you have family visits, consider bringing a Thanksgiving craft for the bio family.*

*Your foster child may really miss their family this Thanksgiving. Create an open dialogue to talk about how they are feeling.*

[@FOSTER.PARENTING](https://www.fosterparenting.com)



reflection of how they feel about you, but rather is their own coping mechanism. Allow for “downtime” during the holidays that will allow the youth some time to themselves if they need it (although some youth would prefer to stay busy to keep their mind off other things — you will need to make a decision based on your knowledge of the young person). Be sure to fit in one-on-one time, personal time for your youth and you to talk through what they are feeling during this emotional and often confusing time of year.

## 12. Call youth who formerly lived with you

The holidays can be a particularly tough time for youth who have recently aged out of foster care. They may not have people to visit or a place to go for the holidays. In addition, young people commonly struggle financially when they first leave foster care. A single phone call may lift their spirits and signal that you continue to care for them and treasure their friendship. Be sure to include these youth on your own holiday card list. A small token gift or gift basket of homemade holiday goodies may be especially appreciated. Most importantly, it is essential to let adoptees, foster children, and those who have aged out of the system know that they are not alone and they are not to blame for their losses.

### Understandable behavioral reactions:

Be prepared for the sadness and grief. Talk about your child’s feelings throughout the season.

Give your children time and space to grieve. Grief takes many forms and may be exhibited in lots of ways, including:

- Reverting back to younger behaviors developmentally
- Soiling themselves or bedwetting
- Becoming withdrawn and isolated
- Having temper tantrums
- Being rebellious
- Complaining more than usual
- Needing to be extra busy to avoid feeling

Try to remember the developmental age of the children you foster. It will also help you to stay patient if you keep in mind the challenges of the season for your child before you react.

Expressions of gratitude don’t often come readily from kids in foster care. Not because they aren’t grateful, but more often because they are in survival mode, especially during the holidays. Amazingly, more kids than not want to know who they can thank for their gifts. Help them to write thank you notes or make “thank you” phone calls to those who made their day extra special.

### Religious Differences & the Holidays

The holidays can be tough for foster families. Children in care miss their families and their traditions, while at the same time they may want to be part of the activities of the foster family. When there’s a religious difference between the child’s family and the foster family, things can become even more complicated.

Religion can be a sensitive issue. Legally, birth parents have the right to choose their children’s religion or lack of religion. Placement of their child in foster care does not take away this right.

Of course, most foster parents try to respect the culture and religious customs of the children in their care. But what does this mean when it comes to religion?

The answer lies in establishing open lines of communication among foster parents, DSS, and the birth family. If your agency knows how you feel about religious issues (for example, if prayer makes you feel uncomfortable, or if you feel compelled to convert children and their families), it will make informed placement decisions.

This communication works both ways. The more you know about the religion, traditions, and preferences of birth families, the easier it will be for you to act in a way that honors their beliefs.

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<https://www.foster-adopt.org/blog/the-holidays-in-foster-care-why-things-might-get-rough/>

## BEING IN FOSTER CARE DURING THE HOLIDAYS

*by Shay Stinson*

Being in foster care during the holiday season can be tough! There’s no way to escape the reality of being separated from your biological family and your best efforts may be made to blend in with your foster family. Even with the best of intentions, the season can be difficult and may result in holiday blues.





To understand what the holidays in foster care mean to youth in foster care, Synethia Davis, a former foster child shares her perspective:

## “Being in Foster Care During the Holidays”

An essay by Synethia Davis

As a small child, I loved [the holidays] because I was focused on presents and not on who I was with [or without]. That all changed once I became a teen. I hated it. When it started to get closer to the holidays, I knew I would have to fake being a part of someone else’s family. Every year, there was a new family, and every year I would be the outcast. I hated when families treated me as one of their family members because there was no way they thought I would be a long-lasting family member. There was no way they could love me as much as they loved their biological family members. There was not a Christmas or Thanksgiving that I shared the same family gathering as the previous year, except for [my days in] elementary school. I hated meeting new people.

As I got older, in my teen years, most of my holidays were spent in facilities and group homes. I liked being at the facilities because I knew the staff and residents were going to be there after the holidays. I did not really like spending the holidays at group homes because there were always other people that I never saw during any other time of the year. They would have volunteers that liked “giving back.” They would bring their kids and I was always envious, so I hated it.

I also hated having holiday respite. I know social workers may have thought it was a good idea, because many people believe a child should be with a family during the holidays. But that was just a slap in the face to me because I had no home. After the holiday is up, I continued to have no home. To this day, no matter whose home I’m at for the holidays, I never feel a part of the family. I always feel like an outcast. Even if I’ve been spending holidays with the family for a few years, I will find small things in someone’s actions or words and take offense quietly. To this day, being in foster care during the holidays made me envious of biological families. I don’t really celebrate holidays now, due to my own personal beliefs, but I want my children to experience what I didn’t. I’m not sure if any other foster kid felt as I did, but I would never want a child to experience my pain. I’ve never expressed this to anyone, but I’ve accepted it now.

*Davis, 30, is a 1st Lieutenant in the U.S. Army National Guard. She spent most of her life, from about age 4 until she aged forward as a young adult, shuffling through foster care.*

So, how can youth advocates and foster parents help guide children in foster care through the holiday season successfully? Here’s a list of helpful tips to consider during this season and for any time your child needs a little extra patience and love.

1. **Do nothing.** As odd as it sounds, sometimes the best thing to do when your youth in foster care is missing their biological family is nothing. Just support them in sorting out

their own emotions and give them space to feel.

2. **Listen.** Your foster child may want to talk about good or difficult memories from past holiday seasons. Don’t negate their renditions. Just be a listening ear.

3. **Give them space.** The holidays can be jam-packed with family activities that could be overwhelming for foster youth. Always remember to invite inclusion and not force it and accept when it’s declined.



4. **Include their traditions.** Your way of doing the holidays is not the only way. Be open and willing to incorporate other traditions or activities.

5. When possible, **include the biological family.** Usually, children in foster care still have some biological relatives. Even if they’re not close on the family tree, that’s still their family. You can offer to organize a small gift exchange, holiday phone or video chats, visitations, and written letter exchanges, etc.

Soon enough, the lights and decorations will come down and the guests will travel back home. Your foster youth will however remain away from their biological families and in your care. They may face a plethora of emotions before, during, and after the holidays that you may or may not understand. Just because they are safe in a foster home does not mean they are safeguarded from experiencing emotions surrounding them missing their biological families. Be patient and always be willing to show extra compassion and love.

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<https://seraajfh.com/being-in-foster-care-during-the-holidays/>

No longer a licensed foster parent? Folks leave for all sorts of reasons. We’d like to hear more about your experience-- and why you left-- so we can improve the foster parenting experience for those who follow.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Foster-Parent-Exit-Survey>



# Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association Workshops

The Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association offers three **FREE VIRTUAL** in-service trainings to foster and adoptive parents. **RSVP is required! Sign-up today.**  
Presented by Barb Clark from the North American Council on Adoptable Children.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NFAPAIIn-Service2022-2023>

## **Our Children's Roots: Simple Questions, Complicated Answers**

November 5, 2022 9:00 am—11:00 am (Central Time)

Whether adopted at birth or at an older age, whether adopted internationally or domestically, our children have a history that precedes our welcoming them in our family. In some form or another, at some time, our children will have questions regarding their past and the circumstances of their adoption. How do we handle these questions? What to respond? What if we don't have the answers? This session will discuss the various thoughts and questions adopted children may have and how to address them as adoptive parents.

## **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder from a Trauma Lens**

January 21, 2023 9:00 am—11:00 am (Central Time)

We are seeing high rates of children who have been prenatally exposed to alcohol, drugs and high levels of in-utero stress which can have a significant impact on the individual's brain development. Although Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) are twice as common as autism, this disorder often goes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. Children, adolescents and adults with an FASD have invisible brain injuries and typical parenting, teaching and therapeutic strategies are often ineffective. It is vital for anyone parenting, teaching or working with these individuals to understand the reasons behind the learning and behavioral challenges and to have an in-depth understanding of the strategies which are more effective with these neuro-behavioral differences.

## **Transracial Parenting; We Must Do Better**

February 25, 2023 9:00 am—11:00 am (Central Time)

How do you parent a child of a different race than you are? Is love enough? We know it's not. It is crucial that foster and adoptive parents are aware of how race impacts children in America, even if a child is only in your home for a few days or a few weeks. Damage can be done unintentionally, so let's roll up our sleeves and dig deep into tough discussions, as that is when we can see the most growth, in times of discomfort.

**You must register to attend! We will send you the Zoom link to log in. Registration closes the day before training. Questions? Contact the Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association at 402-476-2273 or [Corinne@nfapa.org](mailto:Corinne@nfapa.org)**

**Facilitated by the Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association  
Sponsored by the Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services**



## CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS IN FOSTER CARE

Children in foster care need a warm safe place to land, no matter the time of year they come into care, but the holidays can be especially painful and lonely for them. Foster parents and kinship caregivers can serve these precious ones more fully and respectfully when we take the time to understand the unique struggles that holidays present for them. This is one former foster youth's story of years of holiday seasons before one foster mother changed everything.

### The Holidays Before Foster Care

I grew up poor, in the 'hood. Christmas, for my parents, meant choosing between paying bills and buying food or buying us gifts. Sometimes we got toys from the dollar store or thrift shop. Sometimes we got expensive toys from Toys R Us when it was in business. Sometimes my parents would find good deals and stock up. Sometimes my aunt or grandmother would help. Most of the time, we didn't have a tree or Christmas lights. My siblings and I would create a tree out of paper and tape it to the wall. We would ask for stuff and hope we would get it.

I didn't even know I was poor because my parents did a good job of trying to provide for us and shielded us from this realization. I thought every family celebrated Christmas like this. The best thing was when my mom and grandma would cook things from scratch. Especially Christmas pudding,

Bueno, cake, and cheese. They only made them at Christmas. I remember watching the Christmas parade and movies on TV. We created our own Christmas. This was my Christmas.

### Losing My Dad Was Just the Start.

Then my dad died. Christmas wasn't the same. Life became harder. Christmas became harder. The year that he died, I didn't even care about anything else. He died suddenly from cancer. It rocked my world. "Here today, gone tomorrow," as the saying goes.

My mother also got sick. I feared losing my mother and the ones closest to me. If my dad can die from cancer suddenly, then everyone else can die too, right? Then I did lose everything suddenly as well.

### The Losses Kept Piling Up.

I lost everything within one day. They took me from everything I loved and everything I knew. I entered the foster care system. Christmas in foster care wasn't like Christmas at home. In fact, my foster parents stuck their noses up at not only my parents but the Christmas I had at home. They felt bad and sorry for me. They stuck their noses up and judging by the tone of their voice, my Christmas wasn't acceptable to them. They wanted me to acknowledge and accept Christmas in their home — their traditions and their gifts if I was lucky enough to not be placed in respite care for the holidays. The different foster parents I had never even asked what my family did for Christmas. They didn't acknowledge how hard Christmas was for me. Disruptions at Christmas time are common.

### There Was So Much Conflict and Inconsistency.

Not visiting your family for Christmas while in foster care is also common. Gifts? Well, that depended on many factors. One time rent wasn't paid, and my mother spent the rent money on gifts. Stupid? Sure, but she wanted us to have a Christmas. This caused so much conflict in my foster homes.

I remember being told to write down the things I wanted. One holiday, I got everything I put on the list. This created a conflict because the biological children in the home didn't get these things and it "was unfair." The foster parents brought up that they "treat them all equally and foster kids shouldn't get more than bios." So, I had to share or give some gifts away. Sometimes I knew Christmas was just put together at the last minute and that no thought went into the gifts for me. Other times I was punished and didn't get any gifts or Christmas celebrations.

### My Traditions Didn't Matter.

I was just expected to follow my foster families' ways to celebrate Christmas and ignore my own. Things I wanted or gifts I got were "unfair" to the bio kids. It didn't matter if Christmas triggered me or if I had my own traditions. As a foster kid, you're expected to fit right in and be grateful. Heck, my caseworker told me I was lucky I didn't have to spend Christmas in a group home or shelter. My foster parents





showed me (their feelings about this) and I could feel they wanted some gratitude from me, too. I wasn't dumb.

### **I Didn't Matter.**

When you are a foster kid, your inner senses are kicked in overdrive. I remember one foster home couldn't wait to get rid of me. She packed my things, called my worker, and said my Christmas gift is being removed from her home. She wanted me out now because I "ruined everything" for her family.

Sometimes I would just stay in my room and cry, wondering how my life ended up in foster care. What did I do so bad to deserve this? I was alone with nothing. I was being punished for things I had no control over. I had to be part of a family that wasn't mine. They were foreign to me. It didn't help that I'm shy and reserved. It didn't help I couldn't just be myself with these strangers. Only one foster parent actually gave a damn.

### **Ms. Harris Changed it All.**

Ms. Harris was my 24th foster home. She was the only one – I mean, THE ONLY ONE – who asked me directly what I would like to do for Christmas or if I celebrated Christmas. Even after I acted out, there was still Christmas in her home. She even called my mother and asked how to make the special Christmas pudding and Banuelos. She googled it too. Was it perfect? Nope. But it was mine. She tried. She went out of her way to get the ingredients and cook them for me.

She acknowledged Christmas might be hard for me and asked if I even wanted a tree. She asked if I wanted anything. I knew to say "no." The things I wanted were either too expensive in the eyes of foster parents and caseworkers, so I knew I wasn't getting them anyway. Or they would be taken away anyway, so why bother? Nobody cared what I wanted, and I knew my own family couldn't afford the things I wanted. It's still crazy to me that she didn't take my "no" for an answer.

### **You Fit the Kids, the Kids Don't Fit You.**

Ms. Harris took me shopping and asked me to pick out the things I liked. Things that I wanted. I thought it was a joke. I

knew the money she got for me didn't come in yet. She noticed the small things which even surprised me: nobody notices the small things that mattered to me.

Christmas with Ms. Harris wasn't Ms. Harris' Christmas. She wanted it to be MY Christmas. I had never had eggnog before, or cornbread dressing either. She made both from scratch and asked me if I wanted some. In my previous experiences, nobody asks you what you want when you are a foster kid. You just take it and fit yourself into the foster family. The foster family doesn't fit you.

Ms. Harris acknowledged and accepted how hard Christmas would be for me. Maybe it was due to her own background (she grew up poor too). Maybe it was her way of acknowledging "you fit the kids, the kids don't fit you."

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<https://creatingafamily.org/foster-care/fostering-blog/celebrating-the-holidays-in-foster-care-a-guest-post/>

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## **WAYS TO CELEBRATE THE NEW YEAR AS AN ADOPTIVE/FOSTER FAMILY**

**New Year's Day is a time of new beginnings.**

*by Lita Jordan*

The New Year is a wonderful time to celebrate new beginnings in new additions to the family. For some adoptive families, it marks the beginning of the first full year with their newly adopted child. For a foster family, it may be about making a child feel comfortable or celebrating the hope of a better year in the forthcoming year. Whatever the milestone, it only makes sense to want to celebrate the New Year in a special way as an adoptive or foster family.

New Year's Day has historically marked a time of new beginnings for all who choose to hope in something better for the next year. For many, they will seek out resolutions and plan to be better or try harder in some aspects of their life. For a foster child, there may be hope that they will be reunited with their birth family. For an adoptive child, it might mark the beginning of the first new year with their new family. Others may still be recovering from Christmas time and the sorted feelings the holidays may bring.

Your foster child may be at a place where the last thing he wants to do is celebrate another holiday away from his birth family. With this, it may be important to take that into consideration and celebrate some play by making the holiday lighthearted. If your child is older, it may be about letting her spend time with her friends or go to a New Year's Eve event. I remember as a teenager we had some years where we would go to "lock-ins" which were basically all-night events at places like

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laser tag arenas and trampoline parks. This happened more when we were teenagers. It didn't prevent us from celebrating New Year's with our family, as we just celebrated the actual day of New Year's rather than New Year's Eve. It just allowed us some freedom and lighthearted fun. That might be what your child needs more at this time. Take some time to think through what would be the most beneficial celebration for your child at this time in his or her life.

When we adopted my daughter, we brought her home at the beginning of December. She was in foster care for the first four months of her life. While Christmas was very joyful, I remember feeling a lot of varied emotions around New Year's. It really was a new beginning for all of us. It was the first year we would have her in our lives for the entire year. Yet, it also began the first year that she would not be with her birth mother. It was also the first year she would not be with her foster family. Both of these families loved her and still love her very much. While we were overjoyed to finally have our daughter home with us, there was a lingering sadness. I've always been someone who feels the emotions that other people feel. While I was happy, I could not help but feel the weight of the sadness from those who my daughter's story also affected.

In the world of adoption and foster care, it is important to remember that new beginnings are not always a joyful thing for some. For some, a new beginning might mean an incredible amount of loss. For a foster child, it might be the first year that he spends New Year's without his family. For a child who has been adopted, this may also be true. There may also be a lot of fear with starting a new year in a new place. For birth families, beginning a new year of their lives without their child can certainly be heart-wrenching.

As we talk about celebrating the new year, we must first understand that you may be in a place where the person you are trying to celebrate with does not feel much like celebrating. At this time in his life, it may be hard to find things to celebrate. However, it is important to look in a positive direction and try to make the best out of the New Year and what it may have to offer. The New Year provides hope for those moving forward. It provides a promise of a new beginning and the chance to make things better. Whether you are entering this New Year as an adoptive family or as a foster family or from a place of joy or sadness, there are a lot of ways you can spend time as a family celebrating the promise of a new beginning and the beginning of a new chapter.

For my family, New Year's Day has always meant a celebration. While this is largely due to the new year, it is also because New Year's day is my birthday. I remember being 8 years old and realized, for the first time, that not everyone in the world was having a party for my birthday, but that my birthday fell on a holiday. Say what you will about it taking me that long to figure it out, but each year was still quite fun. As kids, it was a night that we got to stay up late and eat a lot of junk food. My mom would give us Sprite in wine glasses that we would never be able to wait long enough to have any left to toast in the new year.

We would spend most of the night preparing food and sitting in our kitchen playing Scrabble with my granny. This

really sticks out to me because this was really a night that we all purposely made sure that we spent time together. We did that at other times, but New Years was family time, no exceptions until we were in our teen years. I loved sitting around the table without distraction and just eating good food with good people. We would laugh until we cried. As we got older, we played cards and talked about resolutions and things we were happy to leave behind from the past year.

As an adult, the New Year offers a lot of opportunities for us to provide a positive outlook for our family. A huge part of celebrating New Years for us is to talk a lot with our children about what the New Year might mean. We talk about what we plan to do in the new year and what we want to have accomplished. We still have the tradition of staying up late and eating lots of food. However, we also reflect on the past year and the new things that came to us. We often talked about our children's adoption stories and about the first year they were in our homes. We talk about everything we are thankful for as we spend time playing board games and being together as a family.



If you have introduced your child into your home this year, you might take some time to ask her what traditions she took part in at her previous home during the New Year. Whether she was in another foster home or with her birth family, this may open the door for a great conversation about celebrations that she would like to continue or celebrations that she never got to begin. If she is receptive to talking about this, it can make her feel included and also heard. It can also help her to feel a little less sad about missing another holiday with her birth family.



If you have adopted your child in the past year, whether he is older or an infant, it can be a great time to sit down as a family and discuss how you might celebrate your first year with him. You might want to make a special cake or have a special toast. You can have your family as a whole reflect back on their favorite parts of this past year with each other as family. Try to focus on celebrating their addition to the family and what it means for your family positively going forward.

Whether you are an adoptive, foster, or any other kind of family, you get the choice of what New Year's traditions to carry on or begin. These celebrations can range from things you have done for years to traditions your child had brought from his previous home. What ways did you celebrate New Year's as a child and now as an adult? I opened up this question on Facebook, and here were some great replies:

*"We have always stayed in for New Year's Eve. Our tradition is to order a ton of Chinese food and watch epic movies. This goes back to our early married days when we had no money (well, we still have no money). We would save for months to splurge on Chinese take-out. It was a really big treat."*

*"On New Year's Day, my whole family gets together at my mom's house, and we have pork and sauerkraut. Then we do predictions. We've been doing that since 1986, and we have them all saved. Last year, my sister went through them and typed them all out. It was hysterical to see some of the predictions over the years."* -Christie

*"We have a blessing jar. Throughout the year, we each will write down something that we feel blessed about and tuck it in the jar on a scrap of paper. New Year's Eve we open the jar and read aloud the blessings."* -Brenda

*"Black-eyed peas, collard greens or cabbage, pork, and cornbread on New Year's Day. Fireworks on New Year's Eve!"* -Misty

*"Go to bed early because my kids don't know the difference."* -Kara

Whether you order in a special meal, bake all day, play

games, or even go to bed early as a young family, there are many ways to have a great New Year! There is no right or wrong way to celebrate this time of new beginnings. A new beginning is such a wonderful idea to celebrate, especially as a foster or adoptive family. New beginnings are the central theme of both the foster and adoption world. It is new beginnings that bring hope to children in foster care and prospective adoptive families while they wait to become forever families.

There is also no better time than the present to start new traditions and have new celebrations. While we already have some established celebrations and traditions in our family, New Year's Day as a young family has not been as big of a celebration. However, hearing how other people celebrate really makes me want to invest a little bit more in this holiday.

As our family grows in size and age, I love the idea of focusing on new beginnings and starting the year on a positive note. I plan this year to have a board game night where we sit down and play all of our favorite board games and talk about all of our favorite memories from the past year. I want to focus on all the positive that happened in the midst of some hard times for us this year. Having that type of celebration is worthwhile for us to understand how fortunate we are to have each other as a family and put us in the right mindset to move through life together in the coming year.

There is an old wives' tale that whatever you are doing on New Year's Day when the clock strikes midnight is what you will be doing next year. Making sure that we spend that time celebrating with the ones that we love is very important to us. It also shows our children that they are the ones whom we love and who we want to be with for years to come. This type of celebration will be important for both adoptive and foster families as we attempt to show or express to the children in our home that they are loved and accepted and wanted.

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## ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ARE COMPLICATED — HERE'S 8 THINGS EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW

*By Rachel Garlinghouse*

My husband and I have been parents for thirteen years. When we adopted our first child, we had spent over a year self-educating. We read every adoption book and article we could get our hands on. This was before podcasts were popular — and adoption education materials were few and far between. Most were textbook-like, almost always authored by “adoption professionals.” We also met with adoption triad members — that’s adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents — seeking



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Register online at:

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Questions, please call 402-476-2273 or Toll-Free 877-257-0176

their wisdom. We did the best we could with what we had at the time, which really wasn't much.

Thankfully, today there are far more resources available, and they aren't all one-sided. Oftentimes, when people learn that we are an adoptive family, we're met with "how wonderful" and "God bless you for taking in children in need." Our kids have been told they are "lucky" to have such "great parents" — as if they are charity cases and not people. Adoption is often framed as a win-win-win situation. But the reality is, adoption and foster care are complicated. November is National Adoption Awareness Month, and here's what you need to know.

### **Don't assume an adoptee was unwanted.**

Jill Murphy, author of *Finding Motherhood: An Unexpected Journey*, is a birth mom to one son and a mom-by-adoption to two daughters. She shared with me in an interview that her decision to place her son, when she was a teenager, was "painful and difficult." It's offensive and hurtful when people assume that an adoptee — a child who was adopted — was "unwanted" by their biological parents. She shared with me that she had to put her feelings aside and "do what is better/best for the baby." She went through "loss, trauma, grief," when placing her son for adoption, something she won't "ever forget." Her son, she says, is always "on your mind and in your heart."



### **Foster care is not an adoption program.**

Mik Taylor, an experienced foster parent who runs the Instagram account *fosterwhileblackfam*, wants us to know, "The foster care system is not an adoption agency." The idea that you can just adopt for free and easily from foster care is false. Taylor reminds us that the goal of the foster care system is "reunification" and family preservation — not taking kids from fit parents and allowing them to be adopted. However, her experience has been that "the foster care system is broken at the federal and state levels." She adds that Black children "are disproportionately represented" in the system, and "teens are out of the system without proper support and resources." In my experience, too many hopeful adoptive parents attempt to use the foster care system as a "free" adoption program to

avoid the fees of a domestic or international adoption.

### **Children aren't blank slates.**

Parents who adopt or foster (as well as the general public) too often believe that "nurture" — the parenting they provide — will grossly outweigh "nature" — the child's biology and previous traumatic experiences. Tina Bauer, a former foster youth and adoptee who is now in reunion with her biological mother, wants us to know that even babies who are adopted at just a few days old are not "blank slates." She adds that younger children who experience abuse, neglect, and separation from their first families have trauma "literally being woven into their bodies and minds." The developmental years, she remarks (with experience as both a teacher and a former foster youth), are "extremely important." Even children adopted at birth have a nine-month history with their biological mother — and that history matters.

### **Adoptive parents — and families — are real.**

I can't tell you how many times someone has asked us about our children's "real" parents or ask if our kids are "real siblings." These statements are incredibly rude, especially toward the child. I often reply, "Well, they aren't fake siblings" or "I'm not their fake mom!" I've also elaborated that all of my kids' parents — by birth and adoption — are "real." It's unfair that adoptees are asked to justify their families, being put on the spot by strangers. It's especially dreadful when the adoptee is a child and is being interrogated by a nosy stranger. Furthermore, I do not refer to my children as my "adopted" children, nor do they call for me, let's say when they have a bad dream, as their "adoptive mom."

### **Adoptees shouldn't be expected to feel grateful.**

Michelle Madrid-Branch is an international adoptee, author, and adoptee coach. She shared with me in an interview that adoptees are often told to "just be grateful." I have experienced this through my own children, who are often told they are "so lucky" to be adopted by "loving parents." She told me that this grateful-adoptee narrative can "increase our sense of shame because we often are dealing with high levels of unspoken and unresolved grief." She adds, "Adoptees deserve the space to grieve what's been lost and to define what gratitude looks like on their terms." Instead of assuming, we can practice "leaning in and listening," even when adoptees "say things you don't want to hear." Madrid-Branch reminds us, "Our truth is what frees us."

### **Stereotyping birth parents is hurtful.**

Jill Murphy also shared, point-blank, that based on her experience as a birth mom, "Being a pregnant teen doesn't mean you're slutty." Birth parents are often stereotyped as young, poor, drug-addicts, who are sexually promiscuous. The issue is that people tend to degrade the birth parents and elevate the adoptive parents as the saviors, superheroes, or saints. Adoptive parents are often praised for "rescuing" a child "in need of a good and loving home." We need to remember that birth parents are the child's first parents. They deserve respect,



and there's no need to compare adoptive and birth parents. (Plus, the comparisons are usually based on stereotypes—not the individual facts of any situation.)

### Transracial adoptees need more.

Heba Freese, who was transracially and internationally adopted from Ethiopia, told me in an interview that in her experience, it's hard to “fit in with the white kids since you are considered racially Black.” Additionally, it's also difficult to fit in with the Black kids. Being adopted transracially, according to Freese, requires a “cultural assimilation” for the adoptee “to thrive” with their new family. The adoptive family cannot just love the child and think everything will be fine. Instead, they need to do all they can to regularly incorporate their child's racial culture into their family life. Keia Jones-Baldwin, content creator at Raising Cultures, cuts to the chase. As a mom of four children, three of whom are adoptees, she wants hopeful adoptive and foster parents to know, “If you aren't willing to put in the work to check your own biases, don't adopt transracially.”

### Adoptees need support.

Caroline J. Sumlin is an adoptee and former foster youth, as well as a writer and co-founder of Black Girl Voices. She shared with me in an interview that adoption is loss that causes “permanent, traumatic, psychological” life-long effects. For example, she struggles with “fear of abandonment.” When she faces gaslighting when she shares her experience and feelings, it can lead to “more trauma, shame, frustration, anger, and resentment.” She wants today's adoptive and foster parents to take classes on adoption trauma, have a trauma-informed therapist on standby, and make sure they're trained on their child's cultural identity. Adoptees can find refuge in other adoptees, because “no one else will ever understand these deep wounds.” By having the proper support, adoptees may be able to “share openly and not feel so alone.”



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<https://www.scarymommy.com/adoption-foster-care-complicated-8-things-everyone-should-know>



## NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY: IT'S NOT ABOUT A HOLIDAY; IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE.

National Adoption Month is a collective national effort to raise awareness of the more than 101,000 children in U.S foster care who are waiting to join a new family. Currently, a child waits an average of 3 years for an adoptive family. Nationally there are over 23,000 young people who age out of the DCF system on an annual basis without ever having found a new family to join.

Why is it important to find ways to recognize adoption? Adoptive families report that they often feel invisible or stigmatized due to forming their family through adoption. They also report feeling isolated within their communities. When children and families feel less alone; they begin to feel more hopeful of being ready to write the next chapter of their story. Being able to write that next chapter is what allows families to tell the unique story of each member's hopes and dreams for the future. Your recognition of adoptive families can go a long way to supporting the development of strong and successful adoptive families.

How can you acknowledge families formed through adoption? Some suggestions are: Identify ways to gather with others to recognize a family's journey into being. A brunch or a gathering may work for some; while working quietly and purposefully on a Lifebook or journal may be better for others. Consider posting articles, sharing resources, or simply putting something in your waiting room. No matter what form the acknowledgment takes, showing your support to those who identify as adoptive families is empowering and validating for both parents and children in your community.

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