

Helping Children in Care Build Trusting Relationships

Trust is defined as, “reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, surety, etc., of a person or thing; confidence,” or “confident expectation of something; hope.”

Imagine losing your home, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your friends, your school, your pet, your toys, and even your bed. Now imagine losing these things over and over again.

Many children in foster care have had these types of experiences. These losses that children experience are traumatic events, and they often have to relive these traumas. Maybe they were told by an adult, who they trusted, that “this is the last move,” or “you’re coming home to stay,” only to have those promises broken for whatever reason. These are children whose lives have been turned upside down due to the trauma of abuse and/or neglect, followed by the trauma of being removed from their home—both of which are counter to how trust is defined.

Factors that can impact trust

There are many reasons why children in care have a difficult time developing positive connections and establishing trusting relationships with others, including:

Trauma is a significant factor impacting children’s ability to trust—people, relationships, situations, and themselves. Trauma is defined as “an extremely distressing experience that causes severe

emotional shock and may have long-lasting psychological effects.”

Traumatic experiences such as physical and sexual abuse, neglect, separation from birth family, and multiple moves are all examples of trauma that children in care may have experienced.



Author and therapist Arleta James explains the effects of trauma well: “First and foremost, we must come to understand that trauma interrupts ‘normal’ child development. The child that is chronologically age 12, may really be functioning as a three- or four-year old.”

She goes on to say, “In essence, all children have a *chronological age* and a *social and emotional age*. Usually, the two are in **accord**. However, institutionalization, neglect, abuse, etc., causes a **discord**

between the two ages.”

Ambiguous loss and Unresolved Grief.

Children in care have experienced a lot of loss and separation from their homes, families, school, friends, and siblings — everything that was familiar and comforting to them. These are types of ambiguous losses and unresolved grief. Children in foster care often experience multiple moves and may not have time to grieve the loss of one family before they move to a new family. Or if they *do* have time, kids don’t often get the chance to have those feelings validated or even named.

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Lack of Control. Some children in care may feel that they lack control over what happens to them in their lives. They've had several adults dictate where they live, when they move, what school they go to, who they will live with, without ever being asked what they want—all of which contributes to not being very trusting of adults.

Lack of Consistency. Another possible reason for their mistrust is that they have not had consistency in establishing healthy relationships with adults, or anyone, and are unsure how to do that.

Fear is also a major contributing factor; namely, fear of the unknown. What if I begin to trust them? What if I don't? What will happen? Will I have to go to another place? What if they reject me?

Divided Loyalties and Feeling Like They Have to Choose. Children in care are often experiencing divided loyalties between their foster families and their birth families. By establishing a relationship with you, they may feel they are being disloyal to their mom or dad. Or, that by connecting with you, they are rejecting their birth families.

They may feel that their birth families do not want them to like their foster parents or vice versa. The desire to be with their birth families is very strong—not being with them feels like a piece is missing from them.

Children in care usually want to go home so desperately—to be with their mom, dad, and siblings. By getting close to their foster parent, they may feel they are telling themselves that they will not be going home. See [Heather's letter](#) to read a good example of this.

Low Self Esteem. Some children in care have low self esteem and may not feel like they deserve love, respect, and a family who cares.

Multiple Transitions: A Young Child's Point of View on Foster Care and Adoption

by Michael Trout. Excerpted from the Parent-Institute video

After a while, I had just lost too many people that I might have cared about. I had been with too many "parents" who really weren't, because they couldn't hold me tightly in their hearts at all.

None of you got how I was being changed by all these losses, (in my heart and in my behavior).

After a while, I began to get some pretty bad ideas about how things work.

I wasn't going to let anybody like me. Not even me.

And so, now, I won't let you imagine even for a minute that I like you. That I need you, desperately. That I might ever grow to trust you.

Are you ready to have me not believe you?

Are you ready for me to fight you for control?

Are you ready to hold me, and then hold me some more (when all the time I act like I don't want you to at all?)

Are you ready to really stay with me, through a battle that might last almost my whole growing up? Are you willing to feel as powerless as I do?

So have I told you anything that you wanted to know? Have I helped you to understand how we feel - all of us kids who fell into the world of foster care and adoption?

They also may feel different because they are in foster care. They sometimes internalize the

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negative stigma associated with being involved in the child welfare system, such as that they are “bad” or have “bad parents.” Children want to feel like they belong and don’t want to feel different from their friends.

How can I build trusting relationships?

There are several ways that you can help begin to build a trusting relationship. Following are some ideas to help you start to build a connection and a relationship that your child can count on.

Acceptance. Accepting children for who they are, as well as accepting their birth families, goes a long way in building a meaningful relationship. Let them know they have value as a person in your family and they’re a part of your family now, too.

Stability and consistency. Providing children with a stable, consistent environment will show them that they can know what to expect from day to day. Part of being able to trust is knowing that they can be confident in you to keep them safe.

Be a positive role model. By showing what trusting relationships are, kids can begin to learn by your example. Children are always observing. Demonstrating healthy relationships can help them know how to begin to build them.

Make yourself available. By engaging kids in meaningful conversations about feelings and expectations, you can help them begin to feel comfortable coming to you about how they feel without fear of judgment or rejection. By simply giving your time and attention, you are showing children that you are there for them.

Space. Giving your children space and not trying to force a relationship shows that you’re willing to let the relationship between you grow at *their* comfort level. This can give

them some control over their life and let them begin to trust themselves again.



Education and Training.

Gaining a better understanding of the developmental and emotional level of your child in care can help you better respond to situations that may leave you feeling frustrated and may create a distance between the two of you.

Patience. Children will likely test your patience and may plan (intentionally or unintentionally) to sabotage the placement before risking the possibility of trusting you and liking you. It’s a powerful defense mechanism, but your patience may help break through that barrier.

What else can I do?

Self Care. Sometimes we’re so focused on trying to help others, that we forget that it’s okay to focus on ourselves, too. Make time to read, go on a date, take a bath, or whatever else you need for a break.

Be patient. Things do not always happen as fast as you might like. So, be patient with your child in care and with yourself.

Continue to be consistent.

Seek help and feedback. Talk with your caseworker, respite providers, other foster parents, and any other helpful resources who may have insights and solutions for you.

Celebrate the small accomplishments and goals! Progress may not come in a huge package. Remember: you are making a difference in the life of your foster child.

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Life experiences have taught many children in care not to trust. You are making a positive difference in the life of the child who  is entrusted in your care.

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Resources

Lending Library

- Trust-Based Parenting, Creating Lasting Changes in Your Child's Behavior, by Dr. Karyn Purvis (DVD)
- Healing Children through Trust and Relationships, by TCU Institute of Child Development (DVD)

Web Resources

- [Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook: Chapter 3, Caring For Children](#)
- [Multiple Transitions: A Young Child's Point of View About Foster Care and Adoption](#) (video)
- [Eric Erickson's Eight Stages of Development](#)

Youth in Care Personal Stories

[Heather's letter](#)

Tip Sheets

- [Working with Children who have Been Traumatized](#)
- [Self Care for Families](#)
- [Stressed Out!](#)
- [Coming Out of the Dark: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children & Youth](#)



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