



Placement Endings and Disruptions in Foster Care

**Irish
Foster Care
Association**

This booklet provides helpful information and advice for foster carers who have experienced loss and grief following a placement ending or disruption. It presents the use of ritual as a means of acknowledging this loss, highlights suggested steps around developing resilience and speaks to the necessity of self-care for foster carers.

1.1 Introduction

It is hard work, it is heartache, but you have the highest of highs when it comes to the kids' achievements, and the love you get from them and the love you give them... you have the depths of despair when a placement breaks down. The whole gamut of emotions goes into fostering.¹

Placement endings and disruptions are unfortunately a significant feature of foster care, often bringing a tsunami of feelings in its wake. Research details 'evidence of how commonly placement breakdowns are experienced, with rates ranging between 47%² and 20%³ of all placements offered'.⁴

The decision to become a foster carer is an extraordinary act. What can potentially be a rich experience for all, can also be incredibly challenging. Those who undertake this role open much more than their homes. Each child that crosses the threshold brings his or her own gifts, personality, uniqueness, and challenges. Each foster family is asked to contain and manage the imprint and impact of what has led to a child or children being placed in foster care. Each foster family and child will have a unique experience; attachments can be formed, and hearts are opened to create space for this relationship. Sometimes, despite best efforts, placements break down or to use an increasingly common term become 'disrupted' and it is natural for some to experience 'the depths of despair'.⁵

The pain and grief that ensues after a placement breakdown is often referred to in the literature as 'disenfranchised grief'. A disrupted placement, with the acute distress that can ensue, 'can engender a sense of failure and self-reproach,⁶ which can ultimately result in role disillusionment and reluctance to offer future placements'.⁷

Remember: In this you are not alone and it is important to soften any blame

as much as you can.

1.2 Placement Disruptions

There are many ways of labelling and describing an unexpected foster placement ending, such as breakdown, disruption, removal, crisis or unplanned ending. Placement disruptions can be defined as ‘a situation in which any of the parties involved initiates a premature termination of care’⁸ or a ‘placement ending that was not indicated in the social work plan’.⁹ A placement disruption indicates that the placement has not worked out for either the child or the foster family and it is necessary for the child to move to a new placement.¹⁰

Though there are numerous studies of placement disruptions, they often focus on its frequency, risk factors, causes or consequences to children specifically. Few of these studies have focused on foster families; and when they have, the focus has been on foster carers’ view of children’s problems and not on their own experiences of a placement breakdown.¹¹

1.3 Loss & Grief

Following a placement ending or disruption, foster carers can experience a great sense of loss. As mentioned previously, there is often less emphasis placed on the impact of this on foster carers and their families, and sometimes their loss can be overlooked.¹² Foster carers can become ‘emotionally invested’ in their foster children and there can be a ‘desire that they would become full family members’ during their placement with them. There is often a sense of pride felt by foster families when observing and supporting the progression and development of a child in their care.¹³ This sense of achievement can further cement the foster carers relationship with the child. Therefore, the unexpected departure of a child from the foster family can be likened to bereavement, as there may be unresolved feelings of hurt, grief and a great sense of loss.¹⁴

Research indicates that there are three main types of loss or grief experienced when it comes to placements that end:

- **Ambiguous loss** *'defies resolution, creates long-term confusion about who is in or out of a particular couple or family, and freezes the process of grieving. With death, there is official certification of loss, proof of the transformation from life to death, and support for mourners through community rituals and gatherings. With ambiguous loss, none of these markers exist'*¹⁵
- **Disenfranchised grief** is the grief *'that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned'*¹⁶
- **Anticipatory grief** is grief *that is experienced before an actual loss occurs.*

Within the fostering experience, there is an inherent paradox. Foster carers are encouraged to form a caring and supportive relationship with those in their care, yet little attention is given to the grief that they may experience once this child leaves their care. This can leave one feeling very misunderstood; as a foster carer, you may be asked to remain emotionally detached whilst concerned that your struggle to do so, may be perceived as a sign of an 'inability to cope' by professionals. Lynes & Stioe (2019) quote one foster carer who, on reflection of her experiences of disenfranchised grief, felt her grief was; *'exacerbated by health and social care professionals viewing the loss of a child as part of the job.'*¹⁷

The intensity of these feelings may surprise you, however as the research cited above states, these feelings can mirror those of birth parents. With disrupted placements, 'relationships can come to an abrupt end, often with little new information. Queries such as 'how are they getting on? can often remain unanswered'¹⁸ with no hope perhaps of any answers emerging in the future. The uncertainty of how the child is doing can produce feelings of ambiguity, 'of all the losses experienced in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is the most devastating because it remains unclear, indeterminate'.¹⁹

The emotions that follow from a placement ending, is not merely limited to grief, anger, frustration etc. One of the challenges, between what might be termed 'normal grief' and the grief that flows from placement disruptions,

is that in the former 'people are more empathetic and understanding, as the loss is more tangible'.²⁰ It is helpful to identify those emotions²¹ that are more challenging and the ones that you struggle most with. Sometimes feelings may leave you feeling 'stuck.' It is more complex

than a simple list, as it is inevitable that there will be many feelings that may emerge and that some of these can be unwelcome, judged and even shocking in their intensity. It is not uncommon for feelings of guilt and regret to be present and perhaps a sense sometimes of having left the child or young person down – undoubtedly a sharp contrast to your ambitions for each child that enters your care. There is often a sense of isolation and being left to look after yourselves. It is also not unusual for strong themes of blame and recrimination to occur.

'Whilst foster carers often feel marginalised when a placement disrupts, what is striking... is that carers seem to actively cut themselves off from support, either due to the fear of being judged or based on a belief that children's services are ineffective'.²²

The Irish Foster Care Association also recognises the need for foster carers to avail of appropriate time and space to process the ensuing emotions and feelings following a disrupted placement or placement ending. In January 2016, Tusla and the Irish Foster Care Association initiated a process of consultation between two stakeholder groups – foster carers and social workers – in order to proactively identify service gaps from a national perspective. As highlighted in the subsequent 2017 report, there was a need to "develop policies, processes, and practice guidelines for addressing post-placement fostering breaks for foster carers and recognition of need for breaks".²³



At its simplest, we all value the opportunity to talk about our feelings and have them acknowledged, so it is important to continue to do this with people you trust.

1.4 Resilience

Resilience is seen as a key resource for those experiencing challenging situations and the associated emotions that come with it. Resilience refers to how well a person can adapt to adverse circumstances in their lives. We can of course develop our own resilience. In fact, with regards to ambiguous loss, Pauline Boss – an educator and researcher widely recognised for her research in the theory of ambiguous loss – has developed the following guidelines to promote resilience:

- Finding Meaning: *‘What does this situation mean to you?’*
- Tempering mastery: *‘How do I let go of what I cannot control?’*
Recognising that the world is not always fair can help individuals and families decrease guilt and self-blame.
- Normalising ambivalence: *‘What do I do with my conflicted feelings?’*
- Revising attachment: *‘How do I both let go and still remember?’*
‘Ambiguous loss assumes attachment. The pain of loss comes from the loss of that close relationship.
- Reconstructing identity: *‘Who I am now that my loved one is ambiguously lost?’*
- Discovering hope: *‘How do I find hope in an ongoing loss that has no closure?’*

Remember to:

- Acknowledge your love for that person was true and significant and your loss is no less valid
- Remind yourself that you are worthy of the time and space to grieve
- Remind yourself that you are not alone
- Look at your support system
- Seek personal ways

to explore grief and
express your emotions

- Be a support to others
experiencing
disenfranchised grief
- Create your own ritual.

1.5 Self Care

*'Findings indicate that foster parents engage
in moderate amounts of self-care'*²⁴

It is not unsurprising that as a foster carer you may struggle to identify self-care as a priority and there is much in the research literature that attests to this. Self-care is generally understood 'as engaging in behaviours that sustain a person's health and well-being and prevent burnout and illness'.²⁵ It is essential that you begin to develop habits and resources of self-care. The following two questions may be helpful in orientating you towards a self-care practice:

Self-Care Questions

- What beliefs do I have in relation to my needs (including self-care)?
- What nourishes me?

It is important to maintain a discipline of self-care habits. Habits become routine, however in times of stress, we may fall away from these healthy habits.

To develop genuine compassion towards others, first he or she must have a basis upon which to cultivate compassion, and that basis is the ability to connect to one's own feelings and to care for one's own welfare. Remember, caring for others requires caring for oneself.²⁶

While of course the work of a foster carer is challenging and can move us towards difficult places in ourselves, it is essential that we come to know what supports us.²⁷ When we are able to consistently take in nourishment



(which is possible even in difficult times), then we have a deep resource well to draw from.

Self-Compassion as a Self-Care Practice

The components of self-compassion are; self-kindness instead of self-judgment and criticism; common humanity instead of isolation; and mindfulness instead of over-identification with painful thoughts and emotions.²⁸

The Practice: Think of a situation in your life that is difficult, that is causing you stress. Call the situation to mind and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.

Now, say to yourself:

1. This is a moment of suffering

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- This hurts
- This is uncomfortable
- This is stress.

2. Suffering is a part of life

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- Other people feel this way
- I'm not alone
- We all struggle in our lives.

3. May I be kind to myself

You can also ask yourself, "what do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?" Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- May I give myself the compassion that I need
- May I learn to accept myself as I am
- May I forgive myself
- May I be strong
- May I be patient.

The above is a practice that you can continue to use and lean into as well as identifying other resources for yourself. Remember, no matter how resilient we are, we all need to feel the 'encouragement of light' to find our own personal breathing space.



1.6 Ritual

'It's experiential. A profoundly personal act even when shared, ritual reconditions our perspective. It is the practice of reminding ourselves of the value and the power of living... ritual is a tool of harmony'.²⁹

The creation of a ritual to mark this most difficult ending can be an important part of the healing process.

'Mourning rites and rituals can be extremely important component of grief work'.³⁰ As mentioned previously, part of what occurs in disrupted placements is that there is no ritual or symbolic act that marks the end of the placement. 'Ritual' has been demonstrated to be effective in symbolising this transition from one stage to another, whilst also supporting you psychologically and emotionally throughout this experience.³¹ The choice of 'ritual' can be unique to you; you may choose to use poetry, light a candle or even invite others to witness and share this space with you, as you honour your loss.

Remember: This is a personal and creative act which you alone decide how it takes shape. Choose a time to begin and end. Perhaps there are words you may choose to write that you want to have heard by others. Give yourself permission to do so. This is an area where you have autonomy and control, one which can support your own empowerment as both a foster carer and human being.

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- ² Wildon, Sinclair & Gibbs, 2000
- ³ Minty, 1999
- ⁴ Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, & Churchman, 2011
- ⁵ Wayman, 2015
- ⁶ Minty, 1999 & Wildon, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000
- ⁷ Brown & Calder, 1999 & Nutt, 2006
- ⁸ Sallnas, 2004
- ⁹ Berridge & Clever, 1987
- ¹⁰ Irish Foster Care Association, 1993
- ¹¹ Brown & Bednar, 2006
- ¹² Edelstein, Burge & Waterman, 2001 & Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008
- ¹³ Butler & Charles, 1999
- ¹⁴ Edelstein, Burge & Waterman, 2001 & Butler & Charles, 1999
- ¹⁵ Boss, 2019
- ¹⁶ Kenneth, 1989
- ¹⁷ Lynes & Siteo, 2019
- ¹⁸ Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012
- ¹⁹ Herbert, Kulkin & McLean, 2013
- ²⁰ Wayman, 2015
- ²¹ Siegel, 2012
- ²² Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005
- ²³ Irish Foster Care Association; Tusla; Atlantic Philanthropies, 2015 – 2016
- ²⁴ J. Jay Millera, Morgan, 2019
- ²⁵ Arianne E. Miller, 2019
- ²⁶ Dalai Lama, 2003
- ²⁷ Allan Schore, 2001
- ²⁸ Jill R. Nelson, Brenda S. Hall, Jamie L. Anderson, Cailen Birtles, and Lynae Hemming, 2018
- ²⁹ Emma Restall Orr, 2004
- ³⁰ Edith Egar, 2017
- ³¹ Nicholas M. Hobson, Juliana Schroeder, Jane L. Risen, Dimitris Xygalatas, and Michael Inzlicht, 2018

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