



Conflicting loyalties and lost dreams often make the holidays a difficult time for children in foster care. Just as studies show that holidays are stressful times for most of us, these reactions are compounded for children and youth placed in your home. Here are some suggestions for managing the holidays.

### **How can my family make it easier for the children in foster care while they are in our home?**

- Talk about the season ahead of time. Talk about how your family celebrates the holidays. Tell children which of the traditional holidays your house recognizes. Is it Thanksgiving? St. Nick's Day? Kwanzaa? Hanukah? Christmas? New Year? Or all of the above? Talking about the holidays gives children time to anticipate the upcoming activities and ask questions.
- Help children in foster care imagine what to expect in your home. Much of what we assume to be commonplace can be new to the children you foster.
- Share the religious meanings the holidays may have for your family. Talk about your family's specific customs and activities.
- Use this time of sharing to learn especially about the religious beliefs, customs, and activities of the children you foster.
- Try to incorporate at least some of their traditions into your traditions.
- Some parents try to keep the holidays low key in order to help minimize some of the stress.

### **How can we work with birth families during the holidays?**

- Again, ask children about their experiences and try to incorporate some of their traditions. The children placed in your home may miss some activities that they experienced with their family or in a previous placement.
- If possible, ask your child's family members about their holiday traditions and customs. Ask about their beliefs and observances. Although you may feel stretched at the holidays, try to coordinate schedules with the birth families. This gives the children a chance to share what is familiar while experiencing new traditions.
- This is a good time for the youth in your home to make small gifts and send cards to their birth families or old neighbors and friends.
- This is a time when many children feel conflicted feelings about their birth families and worry about them. It is a good time to let the young person know that it is okay for them to be safe and cared for even if their family struggles. Reassure them if you can, about the safety and care of their birth family.

### **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, DHS, 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. If you haven't already done so, consider talking with your social worker about how religion affects your role as a resource caregiver.*

*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.*

*Ask for help when you need it!*

**What are some of the ways I can help the children who I foster get through the holidays?  
What are some signs of grief or sadness that I can look for?**

- 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
- 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.

**What are some things we can do to make family get-togethers easier?**

- Talk about upcoming events and the people who will be there. If you cannot get together before the big event, introduce your children to family and friends who will be at the celebration by going through pictures.
- Prepare them for the "characters" in your family and also tell them about other children who might be there.
- Tell them if your celebrations are quiet or loud, sacred or silly, big or small.
- Describe the home or place where the event will be held, and tell how it usually proceeds.
- Be realistic about it—do not make your celebrations seem perfect, but do not stress the challenges that are part of all family events.
- Give your children a camera so that they can record the celebration, and also give them one for holiday visits with their birth families.

**What can I do to help my children learn what is expected of them at family celebrations?**

- This is an opportunity to teach the behaviors and manners that you would like the youth you foster to learn. Go over basic manners such as "please" and "thank you."
- Explain the expectations of children prior to family get-togethers, and practice those behaviors ahead of time.
- Use role playing at home so that they can practice.
- Make sure you and your family/friends are on the same page regarding gifts from and to your children. Perhaps try to have your child bring a small hostess gift to the get together: baked goods, nuts, candles, ornament, etc.
- Tell family and friends about your children, and try to introduce them before the holidays. It's a good time to remind others about the confidentiality you honor concerning the children you foster, and it might be a good time to practice some polite but firm answers to some questions.
- Remember especially to ask your children what they would like to have shared about themselves.