


# WHEN THEIR WORLD IS ALREADY UPSIDE DOWN

## Supporting Grieving Children and Teens in Foster Care During the COVID-19 Global Health Crisis

While children and teens reside in the foster care system, away from their original families, most are faced with not knowing if or when they will return home. We have learned from years of research and through the L.Y.G.H.T. program, this uncertainty results in youth experiencing loss, grief, and ambiguity.

Fortunately, many children and teens in the foster care system are surrounded by a team of adults who are dedicated to ensuring their safety, health, and well-being. This important network of support may include adults such as: foster caregivers, children's home staff, case managers, original parents, siblings, grandparents and other extended family, attorneys, guardians ad litem, therapists, coaches, teachers, and neighbors. Each adult in this network serves a fundamental role in supporting and meeting the needs of children and teens in foster care.



However, the increased forced isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic means these children and teens are experiencing even more heartbreaking losses and disconnection. They

are in even greater need of support and help from the adults in their lives.

Before the global health crisis, children and teens in our L.Y.G.H.T. grief support groups were saying things like:

- *When we were separated from our families, our whole lives were turned upside down.*
- *People just don't understand. They think we should be grateful to be in foster care and to just adapt to it, but we miss our family.*
- *Being part of the L.Y.G.H.T. program is so helpful – being with others who understand makes such a difference.*

Being separated from their families already created significant challenges and uncertainty for these children and teens. Now, amid major loss and life changes, children and teens in foster care are faced with even more disruption to their lives. In-person visits are what many children and teens in foster care rely on for connection and hope, and currently these visitations are being put on hold for everyone's physical health and safety. Even for the many children and teens who are cared for by loving foster caregivers, these relationships are often temporary, and it can be extremely challenging for children and teens to experience this crisis without physical access to the people they may be missing the most.

We fervently hope that ultimately some good will emerge out of this tragedy, but right now, grieving children and teens in foster care are at greater risk of social isolation, including their grief being minimized or forgotten in the face of this global health crisis. Here are some comments we're hearing from grieving children and teens in foster care about how the COVID-19 crisis is further affecting them:

- *I thought things could not possibly get any worse after I came into foster care and now this...*
- *We barely get a chance to have space to talk about people we are missing and now it feels like our grief has to take a back seat to the other issues thrown in our faces.*
- *Am I ever going to see my family again? Are they okay? What's going on?*

The question now is, How do we help children and teens in foster care stay healthy and connected with all of the changes and worries added to what they were already dealing with? Here are some ideas to consider:

### **Be honest with children and teens about what you know and don't know**

Children and teens in foster care tend to feel out of the loop when it comes to receiving information about decisions made by adults that have a direct impact on their lives. Adults can be helpful by sharing information that helps children and teens better understand the severity of COVID-19, the decisions being made to keep them safe and healthy, and how the adults in their lives are making efforts to acknowledge and attend to the concerns they're experiencing during this pandemic.

Encourage children and teens to ask questions. Because some children and teens may not

feel comfortable or secure talking with their peers about what is happening, create opportunities for one-to-one interactions with the adults in their lives. There are going

to be questions you have the answers to and ones that you don't. It's okay if the answer is, "I don't know." Reassure children and teens that as soon as you know more, you will tell them. Children and teens who have access to technology are likely to look up information and share with their friends. It can help to have a conversation about identifying reliable sources to decrease misinformation.

### **Provide opportunities for connection with family and friends**

While practicing physical distancing is needed for the health of everyone, we can still acknowledge that this is all really hard, especially for children and teens in foster care. We are using the term "physical distancing" rather than "social distancing" because while these youth are physically apart from people who are important to them, there are still ways to be socially connected. There are so many changes to their daily lives, including being out of school (and still wanting to play and hang out with friends), the inability to have family visitations during this time, fears about spreading or getting the virus, and disruptions in daily routines, supports, and in-person services. These just add to what children and teens in foster care were already grappling with in their grief.





Under the best of circumstances grief can feel isolating, so during this time it's especially important to cultivate connections. Thanks to our digital world, there are many ways for

children and teens to stay connected even with physical distancing. Here are some ways you can help children and teens stay connected with friends and court-approved family members (including original parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins, and other people) who they are physically separated from:

- Schedule daily/weekly video chats or phone calls with the people they are missing. Work with original family members, case managers, guardians ad litem, attorneys, friends' caregivers, and other adults who can assist with organizing and scheduling these important conversations for children and teens.
- Encourage them to write letters or postcards to the people they are missing, even if they might not be delivered to the person right away or at all. While some children and teens will want to give these letters to their person or people, others might prefer to write and keep these letters for themselves. If you're not sure what children and teens want to do with their letters, just ask. Be sure to talk with children and teens about whether and when letters can be delivered. Questions to consider include: Does the person have a mailing address? Do you or they have the person's mailing address? Are you able to mail the letters? Can the person receive letters?

- Offer opportunities to create artwork or crafts for the people they are missing. Similar to letters and postcards, talk with children and teens about if and when what they create can be given to their person or people. If children or teens have access to a cell phone and the phone number or email address for the person or people they are missing, encourage them to record messages that they can send via text or email. Some children and teens will feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings when it's not a back and forth conversation.
- If children and teens have access to online music services, they can create playlists to share with family and friends. Many services enable more than one person to add to the playlist so it can become a shared experience.

### **Make time for grief & talking about the people who children and teens are missing**

With so much happening, children and teens might worry there's no time or space for the losses and grief they are experiencing. Consider setting aside time to talk either as a household or one-on-one with children and teens about what's coming up for them when thinking about the people they are missing and are separated from. Potential discussion starters include:

- "How is being separated from \_\_\_\_\_ affecting you today?"
- "What do you miss the most about them today?"
- "What's a funny/favorite memory you can think of?"
- "What do you think they would be doing/saying during this time?"



- “How would things be different if you were with them during this time?”
- “What is the hardest part about being separated from the people you are missing most?”
- “What’s helping you the most?”
- “What would be helpful to you right now?”

As heartbreaking as it is to imagine, some of the children and teens you are caring for will experience the death of someone important to them while the restrictions on physical distancing are in place. If someone in their life dies and they are unable to attend the funeral or gathering to honor the person due to government restrictions, you can ask the child or teen if they would like to create a space in your household where they can honor and pay their respects to the person who has died. You can also ask them what they imagine they would say or do if they were able to attend the funeral or gathering. And, if they want, you can create a service of remembrance together for the person who has died. For more tips on helping children and teens cope with being physically distanced from someone who is dying or has died, [see this Tip Sheet](#).

### **Establish routines and allow for choice**

Consider including children and teens in decision-making around establishing new daily routines and rituals. This could include setting a schedule and small goals for each day. Routine and consistency can help establish a sense of control in a situation that feels very out of control. Examples of mini goals might include writing a book, organizing or rearranging a room/drawer/closet, reaching out to one friend or family member a day, doing an art project, writing in a journal, or taking a daily walk.



Here’s an idea for making a schedule together. Use a big sheet of paper or white/chalk board that everyone can write on. Block out times specifically for individual and household self-care activities for the body, brain, and heart (see below, *Encourage and practice self-care*). Include things that happen at regular times (meals, taking a walk outside, bedtimes) so there is a foundation of structure built into each day. In creating a schedule and focusing on routines, remember to also be flexible. When we are stressed, our ability to focus can be compromised, so if children and teens need extra unstructured time, make space for that too. It’s important for children and teens to have choice, so providing them with options and ideas for how they can spend their time and then letting them decide which option they would like to choose, is a great way to encourage a sense of empowerment.

### **Encourage and practice self-care**


Encouraging and practicing self-care means attending to the physical, mental, and emotional health of children and teens in foster care in whatever ways are accessible to them. It also means working to attend to your own self-care. Whether you’re a care provider, case manager, attorney, or other caring adult, children and teens are tuned into the adults in their lives and are watching for cues and leadership about how to respond. Grieving children and teens may have concerns about their own health and safety and the wellbeing of those they care about. With the COVID-19 global crisis, these fears are likely to grow stronger. Helping children and teens establish effective self-care practices is a good way to support them in coping with these worries.

The self-care suggestions listed below are great options for children and teens to try on their own or with the members of their household.

**Think: body, brain, heart**

**Body:** What can you do to move your body each day, even if you're staying at home? Stretching, jumping jacks, chair dancing, and push-up challenges are some options. Remember to drink water, eat nourishing food, and get enough sleep.

**Brain:** Consider limiting media consumption and implementing practices to support your nervous system such as taking a few deep breaths, meditation, and simple exercises to get grounded in your senses.

 Here's one self-care exercise that can be practiced alone or with others: Take a moment to notice your surroundings and find 5 things you see, 4 things you hear, 3 things you feel, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you can taste.

**Heart:** Make room for whatever emotions and thoughts come up. No matter what children and teens share, consider responding with something like: "It's okay that you're feeling this way/thinking those thoughts. I'm so glad you shared them with me. What do you think would be most helpful in this moment?" This is a good self-practice for you to try as it helps build awareness of the thoughts and feelings you're bringing into your household. Remember to cultivate compassion and tell yourself, "I'm doing the best I can in this moment."



Here are some resources for self, family, and community care during this time:

[Movement Activities for Grief Tip Sheet](#)

[Self-Care Planning Tip Sheet](#)

[Grief Out Loud Episode 106 Grief & Anxiety - Claire Bidwell Smith, LCPC](#)

**Embrace compassion and flexibility**

Being compassionate, flexible, and gentle with yourself and one another is especially important right now. Remind children and teens in foster care that it's okay to feel whatever they are feeling and to take breaks – both from grief and concerns about the global health crisis. As an adult who is part of a child or teen's support network, you can help support them by engaging in the various conversations, activities, and self-care practices suggested in this Tip Sheet.

With these suggestions in mind, it's important to note that many factors go into whether these tips will be accessible for people, including physical mobility, financial resources, work constraints, and emotional and physical vulnerabilities. Please adapt these as needed for the children and teens you are caring for.

**Nurture partnerships and share resources**

Children and teens in foster care deserve a network of adults who are dedicated to communicating with them and one another, sharing resources, and offering and asking for help, when it is needed. By communicating regularly, practicing understanding, offering your expertise when it can be helpful, and asking others for assistance in areas that are outside of your skill set, you can be the protective factor that these children and teens need the most. We are in this together...Thank you for all that you do to support children and teens in foster care!

## Resources

### Online resources for parents/caregivers

[National Foster Parent Association](#)

[National Parent Helpline](#)

### Podcasts & online communities

[Grief Out Loud Episode 136: L.Y.G.H.T. - Supporting Grieving Youth in The Foster Care System](#)

[Grief Out Loud Episode 137: Grief & The Foster Care System - A Personal Story](#)

### Online resources for children & teens

[Sesame Street Communities – Foster Care \(Children\)](#)

[FosterClub \(Teens\)](#)

[Every Kid Needs a Family: Advice to My Younger Self \(Teens\)](#)

[SLAP'D](#)

### About COVID-19

[Talking to children about COVID-19](#)

[Coping with stress during infectious disease outbreaks](#)

[National Association for Council of Children: COVID-19 Resource Hub](#)

### For judges, attorneys, and guardians ad litem

[American Bar Association - Children's Rights Rethinking Foster Care](#)

[The National CASA/GAL Association for Children](#)

[Family Justice Initiative](#)

### Additional resources

[Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma](#)

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)



## The Dougy Center

*The National Center for Grieving Children & Families*

### Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences. Our *Pathways* program provides support for families living with an advanced serious illness.

### The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 45,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](http://dougy.org) or [tdcbookstore.org](http://tdcbookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.

### About the L.Y.G.H.T. Program

Listening and Led by Youth in Foster Care: Grief, Hope, and Transitions (L.Y.G.H.T.) is a trauma-informed peer grief support program for youth in foster care, based on The Dougy Center Model and scientifically driven research. The L.Y.G.H.T. program is offered by trained adult facilitators who create and provide a safe space for youth in foster care to listen, talk, and receive support from one another. For more information, visit [dougy.org/lyght](http://dougy.org/lyght) or email us at [lyght@dougy.org](mailto:lyght@dougy.org)