

# TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE WHO ARE GRIEVING



**If you know a youth who has experienced being separated from their family and placed into foster care, you might be wondering, “How can I help?” Here are 12 tips to consider:**

- 1. Communication:** Youth who are grieving need supportive and available adults who can compassionately communicate at their level of understanding. Adults can be supportive to youth in foster care who are grieving by inviting youth to talk about any people, places, or things they are missing, being patient with how they choose to express grief, and letting them know they are available if youth want to talk.
- 2. Assurances:** Recognizing and acknowledging how challenging it can be to be separated from family, friends, communities, traditions, etc. is essential to demonstrating to youth in foster care that their losses and grief are valid and significant. Because there are many ways to process and express grief, it is important to assure youth who are grieving that all their thoughts and feelings are okay. Allowing them to grieve in their own way reinforces that there are many ways to respond, and that it is okay to find what works best for them, as long as their behavior does not hurt others or themselves.
- 3. Choices:** Many youth do not feel a sense of agency while in foster care due to a lack of choice and decision-making around being in foster care. A sense of hopelessness and powerlessness can be intensified when a youth is experiencing loss and grief. Youth who are grieving can experience personal empowerment when they have options presented to them and when their choices are

honored and respected.

It's important to give youth the chance to have input on decisions about whether they talk about the losses they have experienced, whether they will, or will not, attend funerals/ memorials, what to do with their personal belongings, and even things as simple as what to eat for breakfast or what shirt to wear to school. Youth should be able to make choices for themselves, when possible. When a youth in foster care is given choices, it demonstrates that adults value their thoughts, opinions, and that their needs matter.



- 4. Honesty:** Youth who are grieving appreciate honest information related to the losses they have experienced and any other potential changes in their lives. Youth in foster care deserve to know the truth when it comes to a loss in their life. They need adults who are willing and able to communicate openly and honestly, even if they are afraid of how youth might respond to the information. Youth in foster care have a right to know about the separation, the person and/or people from whom they've been separated, and the circumstances surrounding the loss. Being open and honest during interactions with a youth who is grieving can make a tremendous difference in how they address challenging times in their lives.

**5. Listeners:** Private grieving becomes public mourning when youth find an accepting and nonjudgmental listener to confide in. When a youth is grieving, adults can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, and make judgments. By doing this, it can distract from listening to what youth are trying to convey. Being a supportive adult involves listening without judging, interpreting, or evaluating what they are saying and providing undivided attention. Actively listening and communicating that you understand what they have shared can help youth know what it's like to be truly heard. Once youth trust that an adult will listen and understand, they'll be more likely to return to that adult when they are feeling overwhelmed or need additional support.

**6. Stability:** Because youth in foster care often experience multiple changes and placement moves, it's essential for adults to promote stability in a youth's life. Stability is directly related to the well-being of youth in foster care, especially when they have suffered from loss or traumatic past experiences. Youth need a stable presence of support from family, friends, and trusted adults. When stability is interrupted, it can create further harm and lead to long-term negative consequences.

**7. Models:** Youth look to the adults in their lives to provide examples of how to grieve and express their emotions. It is important that adults in their lives understand healthy ways to cope with losses, especially from their own personal and professional experiences. When

a youth has a role model to look up to, it can have a positive impact on their healing, learning, self-worth, and daily life.



**8. Privacy:** Much of the grieving process is private. When a youth is grieving, adults tend to want to find ways to comfort them right away. It can be tricky balancing the right amount of support, while also giving time and space. Honor the privacy youth need while grieving and know that youth who are grieving often find themselves intentionally self-isolating. The choice in doing this can be made for a variety of reasons such as the fear of breaking down in front of people, the fear of seeing something that reminds them of their loss, the fear of people not understanding the level of grief they are experiencing, or not wanting people to know they are suffering from a loss or losses.

**9. Boundaries:** Reasonable and consistent boundaries provide safety and support to youth who are grieving during a time of disorienting change. When a youth in foster care sets boundaries, they need to know that their level of comfort will be respected by the adults in their lives. There are different types of boundaries youth can create for themselves when grieving a death or non-death loss, including but not limited to, personal boundaries related to if and when they want to talk about their experiences of loss, how they want to healthily express their grief, and which relationships and memories they do and don't want to discuss.

**10. Food, water, and sleep:** Grieving takes a lot of energy, so it is important for youth to have nutritious food, hydrating drinks, and enough sleep. Adults can best support a youth who is grieving by understanding that their psychological, physical, emotional, and spiritual health can be affected during this time. As a foster parent or caregiver, it's critical to understand and support a youth who is struggling with eating and sleeping. Being aware of and supporting a youth during these challenges can demonstrate the compassion adults have for them while encouraging the youth to take care of themselves.

**11. Interests:** Youth who are grieving need “breaks” and chances to play, laugh, and be active. Youth need reassurances that it’s okay to feel happy and sad at the same time. It may be helpful to invite youth to talk about the things they used to do before entering foster care that brought them happiness, laughter, and joy. Even though the grief does not “go away,” youth need guidance in knowing they can take time for themselves to do things they enjoy. These interests might include: spending time with friends, watching movies, playing video games, taking walks, or doing something artistic.

**12. Routines:** Routines create consistency so youth do not have to constantly worry about what will happen next. Remember to be flexible about your expectations! Routines help with structure and

can make life more predictable, especially when an unexpected or sudden loss happens. Know that grief comes in waves, but when a routine is in place, youth can look forward to something consistent in their lives even when a shift in energy or emotions happens.

These are just a few tips for how to support a youth in foster care who is grieving. Grief is unique to each youth so please adapt these suggestions as needed.



**The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families**

#### **Our Mission**

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

#### **L.Y.G.H.T.**

L.Y.G.H.T. is an evidence-based peer grief support intervention that specifically addresses youth’s death and non-death losses in foster care. At the core of the L.Y.G.H.T. program, we aim to raise awareness about how youth in foster care who are grieving experience marginalization on various levels, to create ways to provide trauma-informed peer support to youth in foster care, and to promote the importance of moving the child welfare community toward a grief-informed holistic model of care. L.Y.G.H.T. is a program of Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children & Families. For more information, visit [dougy.org/lyght](https://dougy.org/lyght) or email [lyght@dougy.org](mailto:lyght@dougy.org).

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