



Letting a child go can be hard for some carers



Not seeing a child again can be like grief

Suffering from separation

The pain of being separated from a loved one is difficult in all situations. How do YOU deal with it?

By Ceressa Bateman

So you're a foster carer. You've gone through all the processes, in fact all the training you went through seems like a lifetime ago now - you're fully-fledged. You've had a foster child in your care for as long as you can remember and now, suddenly, it's all about to change.

Many foster carers find it hard to say goodbye when the child they have cared for moves back to be with their 'real' family. If you're one of them, you're not alone.

Julia Robertson, Operating Manager in Sunderland for Fostering Solutions, says: "Each case is different for the individual. Some foster carers care on a longer-term basis where the child stays with them

and is supported by them after they turn 18. For others, they may be helping move the child onto adoption and it can be quite a bereavement process."

It might seem a bit extreme to be talking about grief and bereavement, after all the child hasn't died, they've just moved home. But this sudden departure can have similar effects to death so understanding Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's **five stages** of grief can help us deal with these emotions when they come.

The Fostering Information Line encourages foster carers to discuss their feelings about the young person returning home with their support worker.

"You wouldn't be the kind of foster carers the organisation wanted if you didn't feel a considerable loss when any child placed with you returns home.

"This 'heartache' is very much a part of the fostering task and it doesn't get any easier the more it happens."

Julia says: "Carers have ongoing support from their social worker who can give them advice. There is training for foster carers on short-term placements, called 'Caring and Letting Go'. It is available to all short-term and emergency foster

carers and meets individual needs."

Julia says that it can be especially hard for those that care for babies to let go of them. Babies have a dependency on the carer much stronger than an older child does, so it may feel

even more of a loss. The Fostering Information

Line reminds carers that the "primary purpose of fostering is always to work towards the return of the young person to their family as soon as possible". This is often a good sign that

"It can be quite a bereavement process"

"When you get attached it's not easy to let go"

"Each case is different for the individual"

"You just fall in love with some"

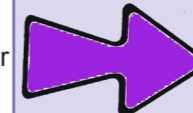
The five stages of grief...

Stage One: Denial and Shock

This natural defence mechanism makes everything seem unreal. It is hard to believe the child you love is no longer with you, you keep expecting them to burst through the door and throw their school bag down on the table. It is alright to be upset. It is ok to reminisce. If someone is going through this, you don't have to say anything clever, just be there for them.

Stage Two: Anger

Anger can be shown in different forms. Anger at yourself, anger at someone else, especially those close to you. You do not need to feel guilty about your anger. If you are getting the brunt of your partner or child's anger, try to remember they are not angry at you and do not take it personally.



Stage Four: Depression

This is often when you realise that they're not coming back and things will not be the same. It may be an acceptance with emotional attachment. There may be feelings of sadness, fear and uncertainty. These are all normal and you should try and share your feelings with someone you can trust and don't be afraid to cry.

Stage Three: Bargaining

In these circumstances bargaining may include trying to see the child on a regular basis, or not moving anything in the child's room in the hopes that they will come back. But bargaining rarely works. The Fostering Information Line says: "It will be a matter for the child and others if their foster carers will have any contact with them in the future. There are many who argue that a successful return home will be assisted by follow up contact with foster carers over a relatively short period. "Contact over a long period of time after the child has returned home is quite difficult to justify in most cases."



Stage Five: Acceptance

This is usually acceptance with emotional detachment and objectivity. You are finally able to let go and remember the child with a smile rather than with an aching pain. This takes time and some people reach it faster than others, but as with all the stages, each person experiences each one in their own way.

(Based on the Grief Cycle model first published in On Death & Dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, 1969, and the interpretation by Alan Chapman, 2006.)

their family circumstances have changed and living with them is now in their best interest.

A staff worker for Fostering Network, who is an experienced foster carer, says: "I think support workers need to allow carers to express the painful emotions that arise and absorb, not dismiss, it.

"Support from other carers experienced at moving children on is, in my experience, invaluable. I always try to link carers who have gone through this with those dealing with it now.

The number of times that you have moved a child on does not really help as you just fall in love with some, an emotion that cannot really be directed."

What can I do now?

If you are struggling with the emptiness of a child having been moved on, Julia suggests you speak to your support worker who can offer help and advice through this painful time.