APAC
Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections
a Program of Children's Aid Society of Alabama

Understanding Grief & Loss in Foster and Adoptive Children

The grief children feel in foster care, kinship care and adoption is real. Recognizing it, and walking through it with them is an essential part of supporting them holistically.





Grief Comes in Many Forms



Familial Separation Carries a Heavy Weight

Most adults have experienced some form of loss. We are at the very least, familiar with the idea of grief through the lens of losing a loved one to death. For some youth in foster care, this is how they entered the system. But for most, this is not the case. Most youth in Alabama enter foster care due to neglect, some form of abuse or family crisis. There was a disruption to their family structure, everything they grew up knowing was shaken. A child's entire world is their family. When they are separated from all they knew...how profound is that loss?

Every child who has experienced foster care or adoption has experiences loss of connection to birth family, of routine, of the life they expected. Even those who find permanency through kinship care feel the impacts of the shift in their family dynamic. All this loss can coexist with genuine joy and real love in their new family. But, like the impact of grief that comes with the loss of someone who has passed away...it doesn't disappear. It shapes how they view the world, how they build connections with other people, it pops up in moments we may not expect. This brief guide provides a **shared language** for parents and professionals to **recognize**, **name**, and **respond** to grief with compassion.

How much loss can a child really experience?



- Birth parents and often siblings, it's traumatic even when separation was necessary for safety
- Community, culture, language, or racial and ethnic identity
- Previous placements, schools, and friendships (having often endured multiple moves)
- Pets, belongings, and familiar routines (sometimes even favorite foods)
- A sense of safety and permanency
- The future they once imagined for themselves (some have shared that the overwhelming feeling of uncertainty and loneliness while in foster care made it difficult to imagine a positive future)

Grief doesn't *look* the same for every child.

Grief doesn't always look like our traditional idea of sadness. It could present as:



- **Anger, defiance, or big meltdowns**



- **Withdrawal, silence**



- **Regression to earlier developmental behaviors**



- **Hypervigilance or difficulty trusting new caregivers**



- **Being a "people pleaser" or over-compliance as a coping strategy**



- **Intensified emotions around anniversaries, holidays, or birthdays**

These behaviors are not tools of manipulation; it's an accessible form of communication for a child in distress. Looking at your child through a trauma-informed lens means keeping ***"what happened to you?"*** at the forefront instead of thinking ***"what's wrong with you?"***

Supporting a Grieving Child - *Parents*

- **Name the feeling for them**. Young children especially may not have the words for feeling **grief**; you can offer them: *"It sounds like you miss..."*
- **Hold both truths in your mind and heart.** A child can love their new family and grieve their birth family at the same time.
- **Keep routines steady.** Predictability is grounding, especially around anniversaries of removal, placement changes, or finalization.
- **Invite conversation** — ***don't require it***. Follow the child's lead on when and how much to talk about their birth family.
- **Expect grief to resurface.** Developmental milestones (graduations, weddings, having their own children) can reopen feelings of loss...even years later and into adlthood.

Supporting a Grieving Child - *Professionals*

- **Screen for grief symptoms.** Grief can mimic ODD, ADHD, or anxiety presentations — screen for it distinctly from behavioral or diagnostic concerns.
- **Watch your language.** Use ***trauma-informed, strengths-based language*** in case notes and conversations with families.
- **Partner with caregivers.** Position caregivers as partners, not as the ones who need to "fix" a child's behavior. Help them with naming feelings and behaviors. Robyn Gobbel's training to ***teach kids about their "Owl, 'Possum and Watchdog" brain*** is an excellent resource.
- **Help Parents plan ahead for emotional catalysts.** Build anticipatory support around known causes that may dysregulate the child — court dates, adoption anniversaries, family celebrations.
- **Know when to refer.** When a child's grief significantly disrupts daily functioning:
  - *Withdrawal or sadness that persists beyond a few weeks*
  - *Self-harm or expressions of hopelessness*
  - *A significant decline in school functioning*
  - *Ongoing refusal to engage with caregivers*
  - *Grief responses that intensify, rather than ease, over time*

  refer the child to specific grief-informed or adoption-competent counseling. All ***APAC counselors are certified adoption-competent*** professionals and their services are available in-office (Birmingham, Huntsville, Montgomery and Mobile) ***at no cost***, to Alabama's families who've adopted through Alabama DHR, in-home and telehealth options are also available on a case by case basis. There is a growing list of adoption competent professionals in **Alabama** and **across the nation**, who have completed the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E) **Training for Adoption Competency (TAC)** course. Master level professionals in Alabama can receive this specialized year-long training through APAC. Fill out the ***TAC Application form*** to be on APAC's list when the next cohort begins.

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APAC is standing by to help adoptive families navigate every step of the adoption journey. Services are available free of charge to adoptive families of children with experience in Alabama's foster care. This guide was a primer to a complex issue and we invite you to explore this topic more deeply.

Dig Deeper

Free Trainings Available on APAC's Training Site:

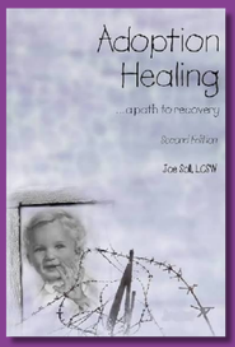
These on-demand trainings offer in-depth insights and actionable tools that parents, caregivers and professionals can use.

- **Grief & Loss in Foster and Adopted Children**
- **Adolescent & Childhood Grief (Part 1): Understanding the Impact**
- **Adolescent & Childhood Grief (Part 2): The Role of Caregivers & Supportive Aid**

APAC's Free Adoption Focused Library:

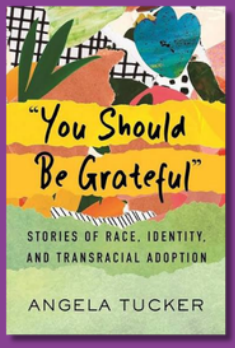
We have several resources in the ***APAC Library*** available to families and professionals across the state. Our resources are free and can be checked out in person at our Birmingham, AL office; or online and **shipped for free** anywhere in Alabama.

Two stand-out titles about grief and adoption (from an adoptee perspective) that are currently in the APAC library are highly recommended by our APAC librarian.



Adoption Healing**: **A Path to Recovery by Joe Soll.

Written by an adult adoptee and therapist. It's more therapeutic than memoir, but it's specifically about working through the grief, anger, abandonment feelings, identity issues, and other emotional consequences of adoption. It's recommended by adoptee-focused organizations.



You Should Be Grateful: Stories of Race, Identity, and Transracial Adoption by Angela Tucker.

Angela is a Black transracial adoptee. This is especially useful for informing readers that adoptee grief can intersect with race, identity, belonging, and the experience of being told you should simply, "be grateful."

Book reviews shared by APAC Librarian, **JoBeth Paradise**.

Children's Aid Society of Alabama (CAS) has served Alabama families since 1912. Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections (APAC), is a collaborative effort between CAS and Alabama DHR. APAC provides free support to individuals and families who have adopted Alabama's waiting children from foster care — including counseling, support groups, and training — at no cost.