

Celebrating the Holidays with Foster Youth: Do's and Don'ts

The end-of-year holiday season, which usually stretches from around Thanksgiving in late November to Christmas and New Year's Day, is typically associated with cheer, family, food and joy. And while the holiday season is positive for most of us, that's not always the case for current or former foster youth.

The holidays are commonly associated with family and togetherness, and bring up – and out – a lot of conflicting feelings and emotions for those not being cared for by their biological parents. In one recent informal poll of foster youth, over 80 percent of them said they miss their families during the holiday season, while another 8 percent said that the time of year can be hard when it seems like everyone else has their families around.

“The meaning behind the Holidays is more than stuffing your face with grandma's homemade pecan pie or getting the year's hottest toy or even enjoying the music. What it's all about is coming together as a family and enjoying and treasuring each other's company. As a foster kid I used to hate the Holidays because I wasn't with my family,” Daniel Knapp, a former foster youth, has written.

So what can foster parents (now called Resource Parents) and others do to make foster youth feel more comfortable around the holidays? Consider heeding these do's and don'ts this season.

Do: Talk to Foster Youth Before the Holidays Kick Off

Before anything kicks off, it can be incredibly beneficial to let them know what is about to happen and who they will meet. As a Resource Parent, while you may be used to the hustle and bustle of a relative's house or the behavior of a loved one, such a situation will all be new and overwhelming for a foster youth. Beforehand, let them precisely what to expect and what will likely happen, so they are not caught off guard.

Similarly, be sure others you're celebrating the holidays with know about the foster youth and are not surprised by their presence. Recruit those you're spending the holidays with to do what they can to welcome and include foster youth as much as possible in the festivities.

Don't: Ignore Their Feelings or Mental Health

As we've already established, the holiday season can be a conflicting and emotionally draining time for some foster youth. It may bring out new feelings or behaviors, or exacerbate existing ones. Understand that foster youth often have a lot to process during the holidays – and year-round. Respect their mental health, know that their feelings about the holidays can be complex, and provide help is asked for or required.

Do: Incorporate Their Traditions and Customs

No two families celebrate the holidays in the exact same way. While certain traditions are certainly more common than others, everyone has their own unique and satisfying spin to the holidays – and the families foster youth come from are no different.

When possible, incorporate as many of their traditions and customs into your celebrations. Even adding in little things can make foster youth feel more comfortable and accepted in your holidays. Also respect that foster youth may celebrate holidays you don't, and vice versa.

Don't: Make Them Feel Unequal or Unwelcome

During the holiday season, many foster youth feel like outsiders or a burden. For example, Daniel Knapp noted that although his foster family was warm and welcoming, he recalls feeling like a burden and dwelling on minute differences – like how other family members received more presents than he did some years.

“We remember what it used to be like and know how it is now. For most kids all they want it to go home and the holidays is a painful reminder that going home is not an option. It's especially hard when everyone else is shopping for their moms, dads and siblings and you can't because you are not allowed to see them,” notes Krista, a former foster youth.

For Resource Parents, try to take steps big and small to ensure foster youth are completely and totally welcome as an equal part of the family, while always being sure to respect their emotions no matter what.

Do: Include Their Wider Community

For many, the holidays don't stop and end at family. Often, a wider community will be on hand in festivities and in making the holiday what it is.

Resource Parents should aim to include this wider community whenever possible within holiday celebrations. In addition, when permissible, allow foster youth to spend time with relatives and close friends.

“There are just some things in life we can't control. I can't control my foster care history and I can't control other people's behavior but I can control how I react to life's circumstances. During the Holiday Seasons past I missed out on so much because I was so focused on issues that were really out of my control. I had every right to feel those feelings but it caused me to miss out on what the Holidays are really about. I still struggle with some of those feelings today that I felt when I was younger and still in foster care, but I don't let them rob me from enjoying the Holiday Seasons,” Daniel says.

The Holidays: When Things Get Rough

Filed under:

Editorial

This story is taken from a blog post by Lupe, a FosterClub All-Star.

The Holidays: When Things Get Rough

I don't know about you guys out there, but, the holidays make me get this feeling.... I really don't know what it is, but, it is almost like I am missing something.

So this time of year is always hard for me. I want to do more for others than I can (usually because I do not make enough \$\$, to do all that I want). I want to be surrounded by positive people who love the underlining meaning of this time of year-togetherness, reflection, appreciation and happiness!

I love all these qualities and spread them as much as I can, but, it is hard...sometimes...to just keep on when at the end of the night, I still have this little feeling of emptiness (just a little, don't worry). But, it just comes out this time of year. When I listen to the holiday music, see the movies, and actually think about it all.

You know what though, when I can actually live up to all these visions of my future with my family and the holiday seasons for them and I will be amazing!

So what I have decided to do, is not plan for the holidays... Wherever I am supposed to be on the holidays, I will be! Where I will be, I will make the best of it around the people who I am around! SO please do the same, and have a wonderful time!

Why do holidays seem to be so hard for kids in foster care? Here's what the members of FosterClub had to say:

82% Missing their family

8% Memories of the past

8% Everyone else has family around

0% Nowhere to go

2% All of the above

Here's more of what foster youth from across the country have to say about the holidays:

I think that the holidays are hard because you see all of the families around you, and because for your entire childhood, you have been searching for that, it pains you to see that some people who don't even want it seem to have it. It is hard to have no one to go home to...especially in college. You hear everyone talking about how they cannot wait to see their mom, dad, aunt, grandparent, and it makes you sad because you know that you don't have that...and chances are you won't. The holidays are a time of great joy when there are others to share them with, but when you are alone, they are a time of turmoil.

Sharde, age 20, Indiana

Well, being that this has been my first "Holiday Season" in care, I don't really find it to be hard, I just sometimes feel kind of awkward and not quite sure of what to expect. I know that I am accepted as part of the family, but sometimes it just seems so different than the holidays before coming into care.

Krista, age 18, Georgia

We remember what it use to be like and know how it is now. For most kids all they want it to go home and the holidays is a painful reminder that going home is not an option. It's especially hard when everyone else is shopping for their moms , dads and siblings and you can't because you are not allowed to see them.

mistake2452, age 17, Michigan

I just got kicked out of my grandparents home and now I am couch surfing. It sucks and what makes it worse is that I don't have a single place to go for the holidays. I don't know what to do.... so for those with the same problems I definitely know where you are coming from and I hope that you have a good Christmas!!!!

madmax, age 18, Iowa

It's everything...I don't have family around but everybody else does. It just makes you remember what it was like to spend a holiday with family and then there not there you really do feel like crap. I feel like this every year. the worst part is that it doesn't go away...It is really hard even though some of the kids don't show it, deep inside they are very sad.

pink-lola, age 18, California

I'm lucky in a way because I live with my grandparents but I miss my little brother and 2 sisters a lot. this Christmas is the first Christmas I've been in foster care and its kind or heartbreaking because my little brother Danny won't be able to wake me up by jumping up and down on my bed screaming "Santa came!"

punkin, age 14

A big reason why the holidays are so hard is that a lot of foster kids don't experience the holiday in the same home 2 years in a row. I know for me I have been in a different home every Christmas, and I'm in a different one this year again. hang in their they will get better once you find a place you can call home.

naynay, age 20, Indiana

This was my first holiday of not being "home". For me it was just a painful reminder of how things used to be and that nothing will feel like "home". I made it through the holiday, but not without some tears.

littlechris, age 19, Illinois

I think that the holidays are so hard for foster kids is that you see everyone else talking about how crazy their family gets or how much their families spend on Christmas, and you know that you don't have the "normal" family. You also see people who don't really seem to appreciate what they have in life and they don't know what some kids would give to have that kind of family.

Keli, age 18, Oregon

The holidays are hard for me because my mother couldn't afford anything for Christmas so i was often presentless. And to be with a family that gives me things makes me very sad but also grateful.

Fall is such a fun filled time of year, yet many children in foster care cannot always partake in all of the autumn themed festivities. Court Appointed Special (CASAs) are in a position to change this.

When CASAs make their monthly visits to see the children on their cases, there are many activities they can do together to get excited for the season, give them the opportunity to escape the daily reality of foster care, and just feel like a kid. Here are a few ideas that can help you make the most of this time of year and of time together with your CASA child!

1. Make DIY Halloween Costumes with your CASA Child

This is a great way to spend time together, while also creating a costume that he or she will love. There are endless possibilities when it comes to making your own costume without spending a dime. Some of the easiest costumes include fruit. All you need is a t-shirt in the desired fruit color and some fabric markers or permanent markers to decorate with. You can draw the seeds for fruits like strawberries and watermelons, circles to represent grapes, or lines for a pumpkin.

They can use old clothes they already have at home to make a costume, or come to CASA to pick up supplies. Do they have a jersey from their favorite team laying around? Just add sneakers and eye black to make the perfect Derek Jeter, Tom Brady, or Hope Solo costume. Other clothes such as an old sweater, white tube socks, and slippers can be paired with a cane and dusting of baby powder in their hair to turn you CASA child into a cute old lady or man.

For those kids who are class clowns, there are a number of DIY pun costumes that are guaranteed to be a hit. A black shirt with color copies of postage stamps pasted all over will make your CASA child “blackmail.” Glue candy Smarties to an old pair of jeans to be a “smarty pants.” If you have a basketball jersey, all you need to do is tape a cardboard doughnut (that you and your child decorated) onto the jersey to become “Dunkin Donuts.” With a little creativity your CASA child can be anything they want to this Halloween.

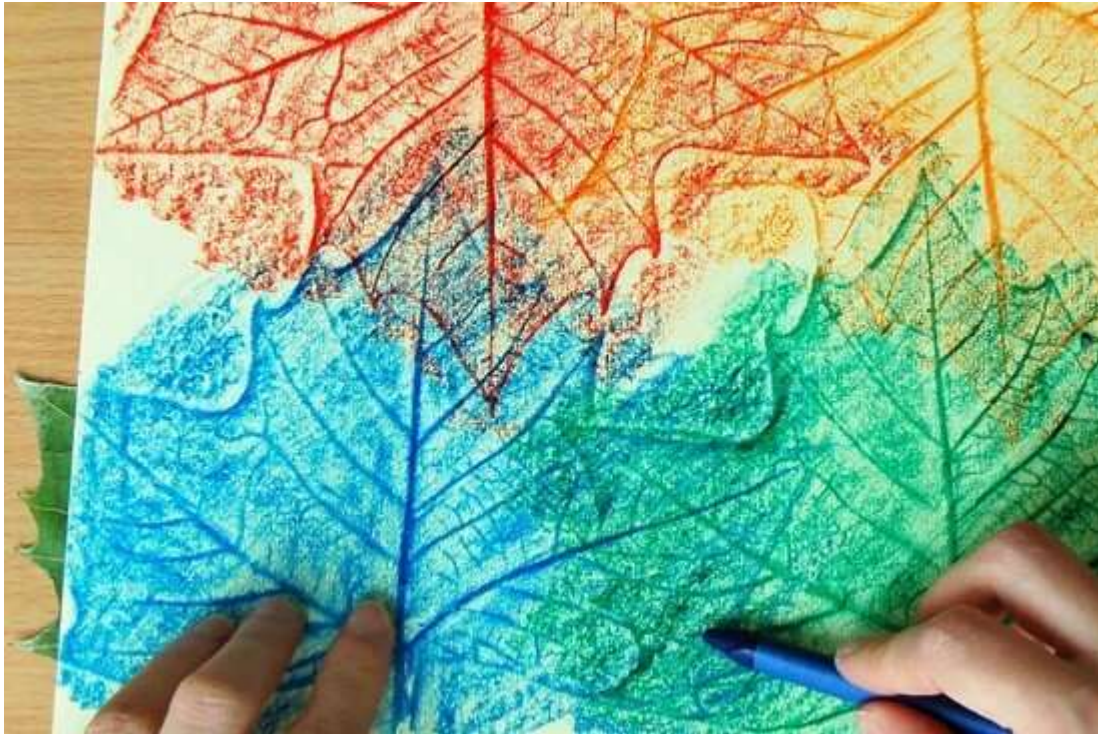
2. Decorate a Paper Pumpkin

It doesn't feel like fall has arrived until children decorate their own pumpkin. For a free option, stop by the CASA office and get some orange construction paper, markers, and/or paint. Children can cut out and decorate a pumpkin of their very own, making it scary, silly, or just plain fun.

3. Discuss Favorite Halloween-themed Movies and Music

If your CASA child is a movie fan, ask them about their favorite scary (but not too scary) movies. *Coco*, *Hotel Transylvania 3*, *Coraline*, and *Goosebumps* are just a few they may like. Older children and youth may have seen *The Addams Family*, *The Nightmare*

Before Christmas or Hocus Pocus. Do they know the words to oldie-but-goodie hits like Monster Mash, Thriller, or Witchy Woman?



Leaf coloring, courtesy of First Palette

4. Color with Leaves

Kids who love to color, draw, paint, or be artistic will love this activity. All you need to do is collect some leaves outside with your CASA child and place them under a piece of paper. Then, using crayons, color over it and the pattern of the leaves will be revealed on the paper. You can use all different types of leaves and colors to create beautiful works of art that are perfect for fall. It is one of the most simple, yet entertaining things you can do with your CASA child this fall.

Every kid deserves to have fun during special holidays. As a CASA, you have the power to give your child a fantastic fall and create memories with them that will last a lifetime.