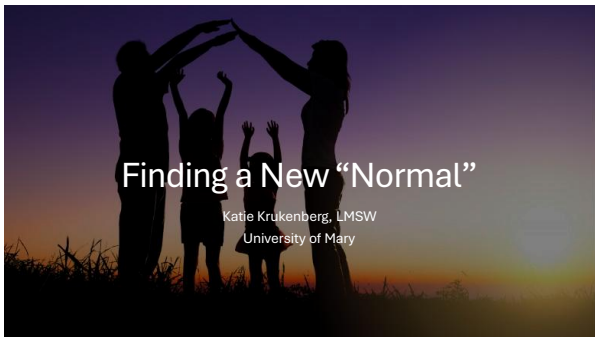

1

Objectives

- Coping with grief and loss as a member of the child and family team
- Strategies for helping youth acclimate and feel welcome in a new environment
- Navigating holidays, family gatherings, and anniversary dates
- Challenges experienced by biological children in the home

2

Consider...

What have been some of the biggest adjustments for you and your family as you’ve become providers?

What do you think are some of the biggest adjustments for youth coming into care?

3





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Challenges

- Adjustment of adding new people to a household
- When reunification is successful
- When it isn't
- Navigating birth family relationships
- Loyalty conflicts
- Giving up some parenting autonomy
- Impact of trauma on behavior
- Disruption to home and routine
- Displaced anger toward caregiver
- Meeting many needs of youth



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Coping with grief and loss as a member of the child and family team

- Grief is the most shared experience for the child and each person who is a part of their care in the child welfare system



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What do I believe about supporting family relationships?

- Important to gain some self awareness on this topic so that we can be an effective member of the child's team



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Ways to support children following visits

- Tell the child when the next visit will be
- Have a clear ending to the visit that is not drawn out
- Don't ask child questions while transporting from the visit
- Make a statement that allows the child to know that they are free to express feelings
- Be prepared to pick up on child's cues

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Reunification

- When a foster child returns to their biological family, it can be a deeply emotional experience for foster families. The transition can bring feelings of grief, loss, and even uncertainty.
- Grief after a child leaves is a sign of deep love and care. It's okay to grieve, but also to take comfort in knowing you played a meaningful role in that child's journey.

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1. Acknowledge and Validate Feelings

- Recognize that feelings of sadness, grief, and even anger are natural.
- Allow all family members, including biological children, to express their emotions.
- Talk openly about the experience and validate each other's feelings without judgment.

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2. Create a Healthy Goodbye

- Plan a meaningful farewell, such as a special dinner, a scrapbook, or a letter to the child.
- Remind the child that they will always be loved and supported.
- If possible, maintain a connection through letters, visits, or phone calls, if appropriate.

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3. Seek Support

- Join a foster parent support group where you can share experiences and feelings with others who understand.
- Seek professional counseling if grief becomes overwhelming.
- Lean on friends, family, or faith-based communities for emotional support.

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4. Focus on the Positive Impact

- Reflect on the positive influence you had on the child's life, no matter how short the time.
- Celebrate the progress and growth the child experienced while in your care.
- Remind yourself that reunification, when safe, is a success and part of the foster care mission.

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5. Engage in Self-Care

- Take time for personal healing through activities that bring you peace, such as journaling, exercise, or meditation.
- Spend time with loved ones and participate in activities that bring joy.
- Acknowledge the need for rest and emotional processing.

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6. Support the Biological Family

- If appropriate, offer words of encouragement and support to the biological family.
- Understand that their reunification journey is complex, and they may also have fears or challenges.
- Maintain a mindset of compassion and advocacy for the child's well-being.

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7. Prepare for Future Placements

- Allow time to heal before taking in another child.
- Reflect on what you learned from the experience and how it can guide future foster care relationships.
- Keep an open heart for new children in need while honoring the impact of past placements.

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Defining Success

- NEED TO REMEMBER TO CELEBRATE SMALL SUCCESSES AS WELL AS THE BIG ONES
- NOT ALL SUCCESSES ARE IMMEDIATE
- IMPOSSIBLE TO MEASURE THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF LIVING IN A HOME WHERE NEEDS ARE CONSISTENTLY MET BY A LOVING CAREGIVER

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Strategies for Helping Youth Acclimate and Feel Welcome in a New Environment



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Considerations for New Placement

- Imagine suddenly having to move into a new home, with a new family tonight. What things would you be worried about? What would help you to feel better?
- What have you found helpful in helping youth to acclimate to a new place?



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Considerations for New Placements

- Inviting and comfortable bedroom
- Bathroom necessities
  - Toilet paper, plunger, feminine hygiene products, toiletries, towels
- Night lights in bedroom, hallways, bathrooms
- Giving permission to wake adults up during the night, and knowing where to find them
- Food preferences, availability of snacks
- Household routines
  - Bath/showers, morning routines, meals
  - Formal and informal

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Managing Differences

- Think about established routines and patterns that already exist in your family, and the differences that foster children might experience in your home vs. their biological family's home
- Routines:
  - Mealtime
  - Watching TV/using electronics
- Family Patterns:
  - Discipline
  - Expressing feelings



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Establishing Rapport With Birth Families

- Ask for input on parenting issues
- Compliment their child
- Compliment their child and relate it to a parenting skill
- Share their parenting concerns
- Express empathy
- Express hope
- Convey your respect and understanding for their role as the parent

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Foster parents can help children manage loyalty conflicts by:

- Accepting child's feelings about family
- Not discouraging them to talk about their family
- Encouraging them to have pictures of loved ones
- Keeping photo albums so children can share with their parents
- Involving parents in decision making
- Encouraging open lines of communication
- Inviting parents to participate in a family activity when appropriate
- Having post-placement contact with the child/foster family if supported by team

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And a big one:

- Recognize that to criticize the child's family is to criticize the child

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Skill Deficit or Performance Deficit?

- Need to teach desired skills – can't assume that kids have them just because they "should"
- Routines are important for establishing expectations
- Useful to pre-teach expectations, coach in the moment, and give feedback afterward to reinforce

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Clear Expectations and Consequences

- This ensures that kids won't end up with consequences for a skill deficit
- Also eliminates the "gotcha" effect
- Builds a sense of responsibility when kids know what is expected of them, but also know when they have not behaved as expected

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Additional Factors To Consider

- Youth may need to be taught about healthy boundaries
- Teaching about tricky adults, accurate names for body parts, "swimsuit zone"
- Teaching about privacy (bathroom, changing clothes, showering, etc…)

- It is developmentally appropriate for kids to start asserting their power, testing limits, and learning what their boundaries are

- This is also when kids will be learning academically and socially, learning from mistakes, and learning what their areas of strength are

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"Normal" Activities for Ages 12-18

- Cell phone
- Dances
- Riding with friends
- Extracurricular activities
- Jobs
- Increased responsibility
- Beginning to make some decisions on their own
- Relationships with others, friendships and boyfriend/girlfriend

- Challenges?

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Barriers

- Limited trust
- Unknown peer group
- Liability issues
- Susceptibility to peer pressure
- Ability to manage responsibilities
- Lack of opportunities leading up to these – less skill development to manage

- How do we handle these things to provide for "normalcy"?

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Additional Factors to Consider

- Youth need to be taught what a healthy relationship is
- Still need to understand boundaries
- Need help developing healthy technology habits and understanding online safety
- Need supports they can talk with about their body and reproductive health

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The Magic Age: 18

- How ready were you to be completely independent when you were 18?
  - How ready are our youth?
- This has been identified as a time when youth in foster care may be most at risk as they are at time of collision between what "the system" identifies as adulthood and where they are at developmentally
- Need for relationships and connection to others can lead to dangerous associations and activities for youth who don't have healthy connections

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What skills do they need?

- Finding a job
- Managing money
- Pursuing higher education
- Housing
- Household management skills
- Accessing medical services
- Social, interpersonal, and communication skills

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Navigating holidays, family gatherings, and anniversary dates

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Navigating Big Events

- Holidays, family gatherings, and anniversary dates can be challenging for foster youth, as these events may trigger memories of loss, past trauma, or feelings of exclusion.
- By providing **understanding, flexibility, and reassurance**, foster parents can help youth navigate these emotionally complex times while creating a sense of belonging and stability.

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1. Prepare in Advance

- **Have a conversation**: Ask how they feel about upcoming events and if they have concerns.
- **Explain what to expect**: Share details about traditions, guests, and expectations.
- **Give them a role**: Let them help with planning, decorating, or choosing an activity to foster a sense of belonging.

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2. Respect Their Feelings and Triggers

- **Acknowledge their emotions**: Holidays and anniversaries may bring grief or sadness. Validate their feelings.
- **Offer an "out"**: Let them know it's okay to step away or take breaks if they feel overwhelmed.
- **Be mindful of sensory sensitivities**: Large gatherings can be overstimulating; create a quiet space if needed.

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3. Honor Their Past and Traditions

- **Incorporate their cultural or family traditions**: Ask about their favorite holiday customs and try to include them.
- **Make space for their biological family**: If appropriate, encourage safe contact, such as calls, visits, or sending a card.
- **Create new, low-pressure traditions**: Introduce fun, stress-free activities that feel inclusive, like movie nights or small celebrations.

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4. Help Them Manage Anniversary Dates

- **Recognize significant dates**: These may include birthdays, the date they entered care, or the loss of a loved one.
- **Ask how they want to spend the day**: Some may want to acknowledge it, while others prefer distractions.
- **Encourage healthy coping strategies**: Journaling, art, or a special outing can help process emotions.

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5. Prepare Extended Family and Friends

- **Educate family members**: Let them know about any sensitivities, triggers, or behaviors to be mindful of.
- **Avoid personal questions**: Help family understand that asking about their past can be uncomfortable.
- **Ensure they feel included**: Introduce them as part of the family rather than as "our foster child."

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6. Offer Comfort and Flexibility

- **Give them choices**: Let them decide if they want to participate fully, partially, or not at all.
- **Provide emotional support**: Reassure them that it's okay to have mixed feelings or be sad during these times.
- **Be patient**: They may warm up to traditions over time, so don't force participation.

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7. Create New Positive Memories

- **Find ways to make holidays special**: Even small traditions like baking cookies or a game night can bring joy.
- **Encourage connection**: If they have siblings in care, try to arrange visits or calls if appropriate.
- **Celebrate their progress**: Acknowledge their resilience and personal milestones.

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Challenges experienced by biological children in the home

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Supporting Biological Children in Provider Homes

- Biological children in a foster home play a unique role in the fostering journey. While fostering can be rewarding, it also presents challenges that may impact them emotionally and socially.

- Feelings of Jealousy or Displacement
- Difficulty Sharing Personal Space, Belongings, Parent Attention
- Emotional Challenges and Grief
- Increased Family Stress and Disruptions
- Exposure to Trauma or Difficult Topics
- Pressure to Be a "Perfect" Role Model

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Strategies to Support Biological Children

1. Give them a safe space to express feelings
2. Set clear boundaries and expectations
3. Acknowledge their role and feelings
4. Prepare them for their foster care experience
5. Maintain special one-on-one time
6. Encourage support systems
7. Allow them to have a say

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Questions/Comments/Discussion

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