

What Causes Foster Care Disruptions? Common Types and Triggers

Picture the scene: The day comes for a child in care to move into their new foster home. They unpack their belongings and settle into their new room. They begin to learn about their new household, including other children and pets. They may explore their new yard and neighborhood, taking in the sights and smells of their unfamiliar surroundings.

With each new placement comes potential excitement, anxiety, and stress. A new environment can be overwhelming to a child who has experienced trauma and instability. It may be challenging for them to adjust to new household rules and expectations. They might also have difficulty forming bonds with new family members.

Now imagine if, within only a few days of the big move, the foster parents inform the child's social worker that the living arrangement isn't working out and they need to be placed in a different home. Think about how that child would feel as they are uprooted so quickly from their new family and environment.

A foster care disruption occurs when a placement breaks down, causing the child to be moved from one foster home to another before permanency is achieved. Children's Home Society of North Carolina (CHS) is committed to helping foster families prevent disruptions and minimize their negative effects. In this article, the first in a four-part blog series, CHS experts explore the most common types of foster care disruptions and the underlying causes of these unplanned events.

Disruption Means Trauma

"The truth is that every foster care disruption is a trauma in itself," explains Shannon Enoch, Executive Director of Foster Care Permanency Programs at CHS. "Children who are moved multiple times often feel a deep sense of abandonment, and each transition can retraumatize them, leading to further emotional and behavioral issues."

Children in care, especially those who are older or have been in the system for a long time, often experience multiple disruptions. A child who has experienced one or more moves might begin to believe that they are unworthy of love or stability.

"Of course, most foster parents have good intentions and don't mean to retraumatize children," Enoch says. "But disruptions often have long-term emotional consequences. These can interfere with the child's ability to trust caregivers or form stable relationships in the future."

Types of Disruptions

Foster care disruptions may happen in the following ways:

- **Foster parent-initiated disruption.** Foster parents may feel they can no longer meet the child's physical or emotional needs. Changes in family dynamics that impact foster parents often result from personal and professional shifts, such as unexpected pregnancies, illness, divorce or separation, relocation, and career transitions.
- **Agency-initiated disruption.** Sometimes, a social worker, guardian ad litem, or court official may decide the current placement is no longer in the child's best interest.
- **Child-initiated disruption.** A child may request to move if they don't feel comfortable in the home or if the home doesn't meet their needs.
- **Birth parent-requested disruption.** Birth parents may request the child's removal from a foster home if they feel it's not a good fit.

Common Causes of Disruptions

While every case is unique, here are some common reasons for foster care disruptions:

- **Misaligned expectations.** Many first-time foster parents face challenges when they realize the true demands of caregiving. The reality of fostering can be overwhelming – especially when it comes to daily tasks such as cooking, coordinating school drop-offs, managing multiple appointments (e.g., medical, school, and visitation), and navigating sleep schedules. Personal issues, including relationship stress or job changes, can make it challenging for foster parents to meet the child's ongoing needs.
- **Trauma and behavioral challenges.** Children in care, particularly those with trauma histories, may not immediately bond or reciprocate affection. As they start to feel safe in their new home, they may exhibit behaviors that reflect past trauma. This can include aggression, withdrawal, or difficulty with attachment – challenges that can be overwhelming for foster parents. In some cases, foster parents may be surprised to learn that the child prefers the familiarity of their biological family, even if it's a harmful environment.

"We often have hopes and dreams of what foster parenting will look like, but the reality is that children in care come with their own experiences and trauma," notes Donna Henderson, Executive Director of Permanency Support and Education at CHS. "They've learned ways to protect themselves throughout their lives, and when these behaviors surface, they don't always adapt easily to a new family dynamic."

- **Therapeutic needs.** Foster parents may determine that the child needs a higher level of foster care to meet their physical or emotional health needs.
- **Safety issues.** Though rare, disruptions can happen if safety concerns pose a risk to the child in care or other members of the household.

Surprising Insights About Disruptions

You may be surprised to learn that most disruptions have little to do with a child's behavior or trauma directly. Instead, they often stem from misunderstandings about what fostering entails. Many foster parents enter the role with high hopes of making an immediate difference but find themselves overwhelmed by the everyday realities of parenting.

A lack of gratitude on the child's part can also cause frustration for foster parents.

"At times, a child in care may not show appreciation for what you're doing for them," says Henderson. "It's difficult when you're giving them what they need, yet they don't show the gratitude you hope for. But remember, past trauma can make it challenging for children to display these emotions in light of the pain they've endured."

Additionally, foster care disruptions are more likely to occur within the first few days or weeks of placement when the child is still adjusting. This means that foster parents may not realize the full impact of their decision until the child has had time to begin bonding.

Support and Stability

Whether you're a foster parent or thinking about becoming one, remember that you don't have to do it alone.

"It's essential to surround yourself with a strong support system and be honest about your limitations," Enoch says. "You're not expected to be perfect or have all the answers. The goal is to create a stable, loving environment for children who desperately need it, even if building that bond takes time."

Enoch reminds foster parents that parenting is a journey, not a destination.

"You may not experience immediate gratification, but the rewards will come – sometimes as small victories," Enoch explains. "Even when things are tough, it's important to remember you're making a real difference in a child's life."

"Kids need foster families who will commit to them and provide opportunities they deserve," adds Henderson. "It's an honor to be part of a child's life, playing a role in their journey to permanency. It's hard, but it's so worth it."

Visit the CHS website to learn more about [foster care](#) and how CHS supports the success of foster families. Stay tuned for the next article on strategies for preventing foster care disruptions.

Social media summary:

Foster care disruptions can deeply affect children, making it harder for them to trust or form stable relationships. In the first part of a new blog series, Children's Home Society of North Carolina explores the common causes of foster care disruptions, such as misaligned expectations, trauma, and safety concerns. Learn more about how foster families can prevent these disruptions and support children on their journey toward permanency.