

# Harms of Removal Across Stages of Child Development

## Middle Childhood (6-8 years old)

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*The information provided below is intended to assist Washington State courts in identifying potential harms to children resulting from involuntary separation from their family of origin through the child welfare court system. This purpose is in alignment with current shelter care statute which acknowledges that removal from a parent is itself a traumatic event that can cause lasting harm (i.e., “harm of removal”), and requires courts to weigh that against the threat of the alleged abuse/neglect.<sup>i</sup>*

*Courts should use this material as general background to inform their understanding of the potential developmental impacts of family separation. It is essential, however, that this information be applied only in the context of each child’s unique circumstances and not as a substitute for fact-specific analysis. This guidance should not be used to assess an individual child’s developmental functioning, make assumptions about parental capacity or the safety of the child in a parent’s care, or justify delays in reunification or continued out-of-home placement absent case-specific evidence supporting such decisions.*

### Developmental Milestones<sup>ii</sup>

Middle childhood brings many changes in a child’s life. By this time, children can dress themselves, catch a ball more easily using only their hands, and tie their shoes. Having independence from family becomes more important now. Events such as starting school bring children this age into regular contact with the larger world. Friendships become more and more important. Physical, social, and mental skills develop quickly at this time. This is a critical time for children to develop confidence in all areas of life, such as through friends, schoolwork, and sports.

Center for Disease Control (2021). *Positive Parenting Tips: Middle Childhood (6-8 years of age)*

<https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/middle-childhood-6-8-years.html>



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<sup>i</sup> RCW 13.34.065(5)(a)(ii)(B)(III)

<sup>ii</sup> Developmental milestones are things most children can do by a certain age. Children reach milestones in how they play, learn, speak, behave, and move (like crawling, walking, or jumping). Developmental milestones are things most children (75% or more) can do by a certain age. [National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/earlychildhood/developmental-milestones.html)

# Harms of Removal

## Physical Development

Children in middle childhood experience significant physical development, including improved coordination, balance, and motor skills. Their muscles strengthen, allowing for greater control over activities like running, jumping, and climbing. Fine motor skills also advance, enabling them to write more clearly, cut with scissors, and manipulate small objects with greater precision. Growth in height and weight is steady but varies among children. Increased stamina and energy levels support their ability to engage in more complex physical activities, such as playing sports, riding bikes, and participating in structured games that require agility and endurance. Specific harms of removal to physical development that children in middle childhood may experience include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Toxic Stress:** Chronic exposure to stress hormones during any period of child development has an impact on brain structures involved in cognition and mental health.<sup>1</sup> When a child is separated from their parents under chaotic circumstances, a flood of stress hormones enter the body. These hormones are important for navigating stress in the short-term, but in high doses over time, these chemicals increase the risk of lasting, destructive complications like heart disease, diabetes, and even some forms of cancer.<sup>2</sup> This constant state of high stress is called "toxic stress" and can have profound and lasting effects throughout the human lifespan.

It should be noted that children involved with dependency courts have already experienced some kind of maltreatment that prompted their entry into the child welfare system. Growing up in a home where there is abuse or neglect can also result in toxic stress. **Unfortunately, the court system often recognizes the effects of abuse and neglect while underestimating the serious, cumulative impact of the toxic stress caused by parental loss and continued family separation.** Courts have historically been asked to only focus on the maltreatment experienced by the child, which has made it easy to wrongly assume a child's distress will be eliminated when they are removed from the home.<sup>3</sup> It is the responsibility of the entire dependency system to respond in developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed ways that maintain and support the relationships in the child's life that help buffer against the negative impacts of toxic stress (e.g., consistent, frequent family time visitation), regardless of the causes of the toxic stress.

A recent example of the impacts of toxic stress on the development of children in out-of-home care comes from a federal lawsuit that spanned almost a decade against the Department which found they had wrongly removed a boy (J.L.) with autism from his immigrant parents' home. The lawsuit prominently noted that all the health care providers who worked with the child, before and after removal, noted the child's developmental skills "substantially regressed" after removal and that the child suffered "substantial emotional dysregulation".<sup>4</sup>

Below are some potential harmful effects of toxic stress on the developing brain and nervous system for court systems to consider:

- Weakens the structure of the developing brain, which can lead to **lifelong physical and behavioral problems** like obesity, heart disease, COPD, diabetes, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and behavior issues.<sup>5,6</sup> These impacts can be seen more acutely in early childhood but can also be observed during middle childhood.
- Affects the child's **thinking, learning, and memory**, leading to behaviors perceived as negative and difficulty controlling emotions.<sup>7</sup>
- Increases sensitivity and reactivity to surroundings. These issues are sometimes wrongly blamed on the parents or misdiagnosed as psychiatric conditions. If not addressed, the child may show more psychological stress, leading to more disruptions in their placements and additional problems.<sup>8</sup>

**Food & Eating Habits:** The disruption of familiar routines and caregiving can have significant impacts on children's eating habits and nutritional intake. Children in middle childhood are often accustomed to specific foods, feeding routines, and the presence of familiar adults who know their preferences and dietary needs. **When they are placed in a new environment, such as foster care, they may encounter unfamiliar foods, different meal schedules and new eating utensils**, which can lead to a loss of appetite, picky eating, or even refusal to eat. Further, when the relationship with culturally specific foods is disrupted, it can lead to a dislike of those tastes/textures simply because they're not as familiar with them as they grow. The emotional stress of separation can further affect their eating behavior, with some children eating less due to anxiety or confusion. Ensuring continuity and sensitivity around the children's diet is crucial to their physical and emotional well-being during this difficult transition.

**Baby Teeth:** Children typically start losing their baby teeth during this developmental stage. Family traditions around losing baby teeth provide children with a sense of comfort, excitement, and continuity during a milestone that can sometimes feel unsettling. Rituals like the Tooth Fairy or special keepsake boxes help normalize the experience in a positive way and strengthen family bonds. Additionally, they offer an **opportunity to pass down cultural beliefs and values**, making a seemingly small event a meaningful part of a child's development and sense of belonging. For example, Native American Chippewa parents use charcoal to blacken the tooth and then throw it to the west while asking the child's grandma to help the permanent tooth to grow in strong, whereas children in Guatemala put their tooth under their pillow and wait for a mouse to take their tooth away and leave them some money.<sup>9</sup>

Removal by the child welfare system can create significant stress and emotional upheaval, which may impact how a 6- to 8-year-old experiences losing their baby teeth. This period is already a major developmental milestone, often tied to feelings of excitement, curiosity, and sometimes fear. However, for a child undergoing removal, the stress and uncertainty of their new environment may overshadow or alter this experience.



**Medical & Dental Care:** Removal by the child welfare system can significantly disrupt a 6- to 8-year-old's access to consistent medical and dental care. Transitions between foster placements or temporary care settings may lead to gaps in healthcare due to lost medical records, changes in insurance coverage, or delays in establishing care with new providers. Children in foster care often experience higher rates of unmet medical and dental needs due to instability, lack of coordination between caregivers and agencies, and the emotional distress of separation.<sup>10,11</sup> Additionally, inconsistent living situations may result in missed appointments, irregular preventive care and vaccinations, and delayed treatment for existing conditions, potentially leading to long-term health issues. **Professionals should also remain aware that some physical health issues may worsen during times of distress for children.** For example, children with asthma may experience more frequent flare-ups during times of transition or when there is increased stress and unpredictability.<sup>12</sup>

**Mental Health Diagnoses:** Removal by the child welfare system can significantly increase the likelihood of children being diagnosed with a mental health condition. In some cases, this may be related to the maltreatment that occurred prior to removal, but it can also be triggered or made worse by multiple placements and the feelings of loss.<sup>13</sup> The trauma of separation, combined with uncertainty about their future, can lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and emotional distress. These experiences can contribute to conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and drug dependence.<sup>14,15</sup>



Frequent transitions between caregivers, schools, and therapists can result in inconsistent assessments and incomplete medical histories, increasing the risk of misdiagnosis. Misdiagnosis sets children up for unnecessary treatments that could potentially harm them and/or keep them from the treatment they really need. Without appropriate support and intervention, these early challenges can have long-term impacts on well-being, especially for children with special needs. For example, a

6-year-old who has withdrawn and anxious after being removed from her parents is misdiagnosed with autism by a clinician unfamiliar with the family's history. This inaccurate diagnosis led to years of inappropriate services, leaving her trauma unaddressed and impacting her development into adulthood.

**Maltreatment in Foster Care:** Foster care is meant to provide a safe and caring environment for children who have been taken from their biological families because of abuse or neglect. However, it's important to recognize that abuse can and does still happen within the foster care system. This kind of abuse is especially harmful because it happens to children who are already vulnerable and in need of protection. While our understanding of the abuse and neglect that occurs in foster care is relatively limited, one prominent study of foster children in Oregon and Washington State found that nearly **one third reported experiencing maltreatment** by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that this reporting included both reported and substantiated reports of abuse and/or neglect. Abuse in foster care can lead to

compounded, long-term problems, affecting a child's behavior, emotional well-being, and the ability to form healthy relationships.

## Emotional Development

Children aged 6 to 8 experience significant emotional development as they become more aware of their own feelings and those of others. They start to develop greater self-regulation, allowing them to manage emotions like frustration and disappointment more effectively. Their sense of empathy deepens, leading to stronger friendships and a better understanding of social dynamics. At this stage, they also begin to seek validation from peers and adults, which influences their self-esteem. While they may still struggle with impulsivity at times, they are increasingly able to express emotions through words rather than actions. Specific harms to emotional development that children in middle childhood may experience as a result of removal include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Grief & Loss:** Children aged 6 to 8 who experience separation by the child welfare system often grieve in ways that reflect their developmental stage, combining emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. At this age, **they understand the concept of loss but may struggle to process its permanence, sometimes believing they can reunite with their family if they behave in a certain way.** Feelings of sadness, confusion, anger, guilt, and fear are common, as they may blame themselves for the separation or worry about their family's well-being. Grief can also manifest in behavioral changes such as withdrawal, aggression, difficulty concentrating, or regression (e.g., bedwetting or clinginess).<sup>17</sup> Since their ability to verbalize emotions is still developing, they may express grief through play, storytelling, or physical symptoms like stomachaches and headaches. Without proper support, unresolved grief can impact their emotional security, self-esteem, and ability to form trusting relationships. Stability, open communication, and trauma-informed care are essential in helping them process and heal from their loss.

During times of grief, children require extra support and reassurance from caregivers and trusted adults.<sup>18</sup> Living with strangers (i.e., foster care) is a barrier to a child feeling safe enough to open up. Removing consistent access to families and communities of origin, especially in regards to the way different cultures grieve and their grief rituals, can greatly hinder their ability to grieve in a healthy way that feels natural to them. Consistent love, patience, and open communication can help them navigate their feelings and foster a sense of security amid the upheaval. Understanding these experiences is crucial for caregivers and professionals working with children in these situations, as it enables them to provide appropriate support and create a nurturing environment for healing.

**Loss of Perceived Safety:** Children in middle childhood rely on familiar people, environments, and routines to help them regulate their emotions. **Sudden changes in environment and routine can make young children feel unsafe, even if they are actually safe.** When removed from their parents, children rely on their main source of comfort (i.e., their parents) to feel safe, **even in situations of abuse and neglect.** When children don't feel safe, their ability to use the higher functions of their brains, like learning, self-control, and abstract thinking, can be greatly affected. The uncertainty and



instability of moving to new environments, such as foster homes or institutional care, can also disrupt their sense of safety and trust. This may regress their ability to regulate emotions, resulting in more frequent emotional outbursts, difficulty expressing feelings, or becoming overly dependent on new caregivers.

Professionals should always keep in mind that, for the child, the maltreating parents are the only parents they have, and that any separation, particularly if long and abrupt, will evoke strong and painful emotional reactions.<sup>19</sup>



If a child needs to be removed, providing safe opportunities for frequent, meaningful family time visitation in the least-restrictive, most family-like setting possible is a major way that court systems can help support the emotional regulation of children in middle childhood, along with encouraging and supporting consistent contact with other non-caregiving adults in the child's life. However, even the highest quality family time possible does NOT completely mitigate the harms of removal.<sup>20,21</sup> The trauma of family separation is still likely to impact the ability of children to feel safe when visiting parents and the anticipation of another separation (i.e., end of the visit) may cause significant distress.

**Ambiguity in Roles and Relationships:** At this stage, children are developing an understanding of how they fit into their family and community. Being removed from their home disrupts this process and development of their sense of self. **It can also make it hard for them to understand "stranger danger" and appropriate boundaries**, which can result in them being at high risk of abuse or neglect and can often create challenges when they move between different households with different rules, expectations, communication styles, and relationship structures.

If a child needs to be removed, clear, consistent, developmentally appropriate language should be used to communicate and clarify roles and relationships with children on a repeated basis throughout the life of the case, especially during times of transitions (e.g., removal; family time visits; trial return home).

## Social Development

Between the ages of 6 and 8, children experience significant social development as they become more independent and engage in deeper relationships. They begin to understand social rules, cooperation, and empathy, allowing them to form stronger friendships. They enjoy group activities, games, and team sports, which help them develop teamwork and conflict-resolution skills. Their sense of fairness and concern for others grows, though they may still struggle with managing emotions and disagreements. Additionally, they start to seek approval from peers and adults, influencing their self-esteem and social confidence. Specific harms to social development that children in middle childhood may experience as a result of removal include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Disruption of Foundational Relationships:** Children in middle childhood often seek comfort from their family when they are upset, scared, or anxious. Instability and frequent transitions between caregivers can also disrupt the development of key social

skills like sharing, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Foundational relationships are critical for a child's future development, health, and well-being.<sup>22</sup> **Every child has an inherent need for the caregiving environment provided by their biological parent(s). When the environment is determined to be unsafe it is the system's responsibility to offer resources and supports to ensure the safety of the caregiving environment.**

Sudden, unexpected changes in caregiving environment can confuse children's understanding of social norms, and they may struggle to navigate new social environments. These disruptions can have long-term effects on their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships in the future, potentially leading to behavioral issues or social difficulties as they grow older. The sudden absence of these foundational relationships can significantly impact children's social development and learning in the following ways:

- **Parents:** The parent-child relationship plays a crucial role in child development, shaping socio-emotional growth, identity, sense of self, and opportunities for social interaction.<sup>23</sup>
- **Siblings:** Removal from home due to abuse or neglect not only separates children from their parents but can also disrupt or end their relationships with their siblings, including doing long-term, irreparable damage to the sibling relationship. Siblings play an important role in helping children understand others' emotions, thoughts, intentions, and beliefs.
- **Secondary Relational Connections:** These are strong emotional bonds that children form with caregivers beyond their primary relationships. This includes extended family, teachers, school staff, neighbors, pets, medical or dental providers, and other trusted adults. These secondary connections are vital for nurturing a child's sense of security and emotional stability in social interactions.

**Peer Friendships:** Peer friendships in children in middle childhood are an important aspect of their social and emotional development.<sup>24</sup> Children in this age group have more opportunities to interact with their peers than younger age groups. This occurs primarily through school, but also after-school activities and community events.

Removal and placement into out-of-home care can negatively impact a child in middle childhood's ability to form peer friendships due to the sudden change in their living



environment and caregivers. When they are moved between multiple foster homes, **their ability to understand and navigate social interactions can be disrupted.** This instability can create anxiety and insecurity, making it harder for them to feel safe and open up to others. Additionally, out-of-home placement may **limit a child in middle childhood's opportunities to interact regularly with peers in their community of origin**, further hindering the development of lasting friendships.

Around this age is typically when kids are learning more and are curious about their bodies. Many start engaging in age-appropriate behaviors like holding hands, hugging, and having "boyfriends" and "girlfriends". When children in out-of-home care display

these types of behavior it is sometimes misinterpreted as a response to abuse that was occurring in the home. When this happens, it results in kids in out-of-home care being stigmatized, shamed, and even pathologized for what is developmentally appropriate behavior. Those who are abused, witness abuse of another child in the home, or are inaccurately accused of inappropriate behavior can have their understanding of healthy relational development negatively impacted.

**Cultural & Community Fragmentation:** Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in binding communities together and shaping a child's sense of identity and belonging, which are key to their social development. **When children are taken away from their homes, they often leave behind their cultural roots**, entering new environments with unfamiliar values and traditions. This disruption can harm community unity by limiting children's chances for meaningful social interactions, involvement, and education within their own cultural community.

## Cognitive Development

Cognitive development in 6- to 8-year-olds is marked by significant growth in logical thinking, problem-solving, and memory. Children in this stage become more adept at understanding cause-and-effect relationships, categorizing objects, and grasping basic mathematical concepts. Their attention span increases, allowing them to follow multi-step instructions and engage in more complex conversations. They also develop a stronger sense of perspective, recognizing that others may have different thoughts and feelings. Reading and writing skills improve, and they begin to apply critical thinking to everyday situations, laying the foundation for more advanced reasoning abilities. The harms of removal to the cognitive development of children in middle childhood may include, but are not limited to, the following:



**Educational Stability:** Children are typically starting elementary school during this developmental stage. Removal by the child welfare system can have significant negative impacts on a 6-8-year-old child's educational stability due to the disruption and trauma associated with the process, including:

- **School Changes:** Despite existing structures and systems, children in out-of-home care often experience a change in schools— whether it is when they first enter care, when they move from one living arrangement to another, or when they return home.<sup>25,26</sup> This disruption can interfere with learning, relationships with teachers and peers, and familiarity with the environment and curriculum standards. **Research shows that every time a child changes schools they lose 4 to 6 months of academic progress,**<sup>27</sup> which helps explain why children in foster care are much more likely to experience academic challenges and fall behind in school.
- **Enrollment Delays:** Enrollment delays can negatively impact continuity of learning, attendance, and lead to other adverse consequences for students in



out-of-home care, such as being **enrolled in inappropriate classes or not receiving necessary academic services**.<sup>28</sup>

- ***Emotional and Behavioral Challenges:*** The trauma and disruption of removal can lead to behavioral issues, **making it difficult for the child to focus, regulate emotions, and engage in learning**.<sup>29</sup> Teachers may misinterpret these behaviors as defiance rather than signs of distress.
- ***Exclusionary Discipline:*** Children who are removed and placed into out-of-home care are more likely to have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as compared to their peers.<sup>30</sup> Higher ACE scores are associated with **greater use of exclusionary discipline by schools, such as expulsion or suspension**.<sup>31</sup> In addition, students who are considered “highly mobile – like those in out-of-home care – are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary school discipline policies.”<sup>32</sup>
- ***Inconsistent Access to Special Education Services:*** Many children in foster care have special education needs. In fact, studies have found that children in foster care are 2.5 to 3.5 times more likely to receive special education services.<sup>33,34</sup> If the child has an **Individualized Education Program (IEP) or other special education needs**, moving between schools can delay or interrupt services, leaving the child without necessary academic and emotional support. Court systems should remain aware that specialized staff roles exist within individual school districts and the Department that are designed to help mitigate this particular type of harm.
- ***Disruptions in Peer Relationships and Social Development:*** Changing schools and homes can **disrupt friendships and social development**, leading to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and difficulty forming new relationships.

**Understanding of “Foster Care”:** Children aged 6 to 8 are beginning to develop a more complex understanding of family structures and social relationships, but their comprehension of foster care may still be limited by their developmental stage. At this age, they can grasp that some children live with families who are not their biological parents, but they **may not fully understand the legal and emotional aspects of the foster system**. Children in middle childhood have great concern with what is fair or equal, and can become verbally or physically aggressive when they feel this is violated.<sup>35</sup> They might see foster care as a temporary home for children whose parents cannot take care of them, but the reasons behind it—such as neglect, abuse, or family challenges—may be difficult for them to process.

**Clothing Choice:** For children in this developmental stage, getting to pick out their own clothes and dress themselves is an important part of developing independence, confidence, and self-expression. When a child is removed by the child welfare system and placed into out-of-home care, this experience can be significantly disrupted. Depending on the circumstances of the removal, children may have limited access to their own clothing, be placed in unfamiliar environments where choices are restricted, or feel a loss of control over daily routines. If they are given donated or unfamiliar clothes, they might **struggle with a sense of identity and belonging**.

**Gender Identity:** Self-recognition of gender identity develops over time, much the same way a child's physical body does. Most children's asserted gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth. However, for some children, the match between their assigned sex and gender identity is not so clear (gender-diverse identity). At this age, children are actively forming their understanding of gender through social interactions, family dynamics, and cultural influences. By six, most children spend the majority of their playtime with members of the same sex and may also gravitate towards sports and other activities that are typically associated with their gender.<sup>36</sup>

Removal by the child welfare system can disrupt a 6- to 8-year-old's development of gender identity by introducing instability, stress, and potential shifts in caregiving environments that may not support exploration of their identity. If placed in a setting that enforces rigid gender roles or lacks affirming support, they may struggle to express or explore their gender identity freely. Frequent moves between homes and schools can also expose them to conflicting messages about gender, leading to confusion or internalized distress. Supportive, stable, and affirming caregiving is crucial to ensuring healthy identity formation during this critical stage.

**Racial Identity Formation:** The formation of racial identity in children is a multifaceted journey shaped by several factors. When kids start school, their circle of exposure to people of different races typically widens. Children in this stage of development are aware of physical differences like skin color and may include or exclude peers based on race. By age 7, about 30% of children understand that stereotypes can lead to discrimination. By age 10, this figure rises to 90%.<sup>37</sup>

When children are placed with caregivers from a different racial or ethnic background, it **disrupts their environment and complicates their understanding of social categories like race**. Since children in middle childhood learn through modeling and will imitate the behaviors of the household they are living in, removal can result in the loss or abandonment of cultural heritage and traditions, and ultimately identity. This is especially impactful for children who have been in foster care for long periods of time, which is why it is crucial to support positive racial identity development and address internalized racism throughout the entire life of a case.



- **Genetic mirroring** is a newly recognized concept that refers to the experience of seeing one's own physical and personality traits reflected in those around them, typically their biological family. **For children in middle childhood placed in foster families of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, the lack of genetic mirroring can complicate their understanding and acceptance of their own racial identity.** Children look to their family members to understand who they are and provide a sense of continuity and stability - which further compounds the trauma of removal and continued separation. Seeing similar traits and behaviors helps children in middle childhood develop a sense of identity and feel a sense of belonging.

- ***Hair Care Routines:*** When a child in middle childhood enters out-of-home care, their hair care routines can be disrupted if caregivers are unfamiliar with the specific needs of their hair type. This can become especially important to children as they enter elementary school and engage more with peers. Proper care of textured or curly hair often involves specialized products and techniques. If these needs are not met, it can lead to physical issues like dryness, breakage, or discomfort. Beyond physical effects, hair care is often tied to cultural identity and self-esteem.<sup>38</sup> **For a child of color, neglecting or mishandling their hair can impact their sense of belonging and pride in their heritage**, contributing to confusion or insecurity about their self-identity as they grow. If a child of color needs to be removed, providing appropriate hair care in foster placements is crucial for supporting a child's emotional and cultural development.

## Language Development

Between the ages of 6 and 8, children's language skills become more advanced and sophisticated. They expand their vocabulary rapidly, understand more complex sentence structures, and improve their ability to express thoughts clearly. Reading and writing skills develop significantly, allowing them to recognize spelling patterns, use proper grammar, and comprehend longer texts. Their conversational abilities also improve, as they learn to take turns, stay on topic, and adjust their speech based on the listener. Additionally, they begin to grasp figurative language, jokes, and sarcasm, reflecting a deeper understanding of language nuances. The harms of removal to the language development of children in middle childhood may include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Acquisition of Native Language:** Children in middle childhood acquire their native language primarily through exposure and interaction with trusted adults, making parent-child interactions crucial for language development. It is important for professionals within the child dependency system to acknowledge the historical context of the impacts that child separation policies have had on inter-generational Native language acquisition. One of the starkest examples of these policies is the U.S. government's purposeful separation of families to forcibly acculturate Native American children in state- or church-run boarding schools, which ultimately led to the disappearance of many Native American language groups and to radical changes in the groups that survived.

**When a child is placed in an out-of-home setting with caregivers who speak a different language, it significantly limits their chances to learn and develop proficiency in their native language.** Inconsistent interactions and limited opportunities for rich native language experiences, such as reading, storytelling, and everyday conversation, can impede a child's linguistic growth. The loss of familiar linguistic interactions can hinder their ability to expand vocabulary, grasp grammar, and develop communication skills.

**Family separation is a traumatic experience that is best communicated with someone who understands the nuances of their native language.** When these children return home to their families of origin, they may not sound the same (i.e., accent, vernacular, discussion norms, etc.) or speak the same language as those in

their cultural community, which can lead to social isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging in one's own community.

**Asking Questions:** Children in middle childhood are naturally curious and seek stability, so when they are placed into foster care, it is common for them to frequently and repeatedly ask when they will return to their biological family. These questions typically stem from feelings of confusion, anxiety, and a desire for reassurance and security, as they may not fully understand why they were removed or the duration of their stay in foster care. Their understanding is often shaped by how adults explain it to them, using simple, reassuring language that emphasizes safety, care, and support. **They may have questions about whether children in foster care will return to their families or what happens if they don't, and they might relate it to their own experiences with separation and belonging.**



Child dependency courts typically discourage parents from talking with their children about the open case which prevents parents from being able to respond to their child's questions. While well-intentioned, this practice fails to acknowledge **that parental reassurance during times of family separation is a primary pathway for mitigating the negative impacts of the intense grief and loss that children in middle childhood experience when removed from their parents.** Children may also hear different, often conflicting messages about their family of origin from their out-of-home caregivers.

Regardless of accuracy, these stories can be internalized and shape self-identity, self-esteem, and the child's view of their family and community of origin. Rather than restricting access to information, parents, caregivers, and professionals can respond with simple, consistent, honest, and age-appropriate answers that offer comfort while maintaining clarity about the uncertainty of their situation.

Reassuring children in middle childhood on a consistent basis that their family is alive and cares about them can provide great comfort to children in these situations. Helping children in middle childhood navigate the difficult questions around foster care with patience and empathy is key to fostering a sense of safety and stability in their new environment. Books like *You Weren't with Me* by Chandra Ghosh Ippen provide stories for families that use age-appropriate language and depictions to help young children understand their feelings around difficult family separations.

**Language Skills:** The trauma and stress associated with removal can lead to emotional distress, which may reduce a child's willingness to engage in conversation or express themselves verbally.<sup>39,40</sup> This emotional impact can **hinder their ability to practice language skills**, resulting in delays in vocabulary development, sentence structure, and overall communication abilities.



**Narrative Skills and Storytelling:** A key aspect of language learning in middle childhood is the development of narrative and storytelling skills. Children in middle childhood are getting better at using language to describe events, express thoughts, and build simple stories, often drawing from their daily experiences and interactions with their family. When a child is removed from their home, the disruption to their environment and the emotional distress that follows can greatly **hinder their ability to engage in this kind of imaginative language use.**

Furthermore, elementary schools often include parents in school activities and frequently have activities that ask questions around families. Being removed means less access to family history and stories which help inform the child, and therefore others, about themselves. **Children in out-of-home care will be acutely aware if their parents are absent from school functions and may be unsure how to answer questions about their family,** leading to feelings of confusion, shame, and a lack of belonging. In the absence of information, children will fill in the gaps using information from other sources, such as from their out-of-home caregivers, which may vary widely in accuracy.



*This guide was created through the cross-system work of the [Family Well-Being Community Collaborative's \(FWCC\)](#) Harm of Removal Workgroup.*

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lupien, S. J., McEwen, B. S., Gunnar, M. R., & Heim, C. (2009). Effects of stress throughout the lifespan on the brain, behaviour and cognition. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 10(6), 434-445.
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