

Helping Young People in Foster Care Through the Holidays



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An open letter to youth in foster care: a young alumni's perspective

by DANIEL J. KNAPP, FosterClub

I absolutely love the Holiday Season! I start listening to Christmas music a few weeks before young trick-or-treaters scout their neighborhoods, dressed in the Halloween garb, looking for a favorite piece of candy. Some say I am crazy for listening to Christmas music so early, but I just don't think a month is long enough to thoroughly enjoy those great Holiday tunes.

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.

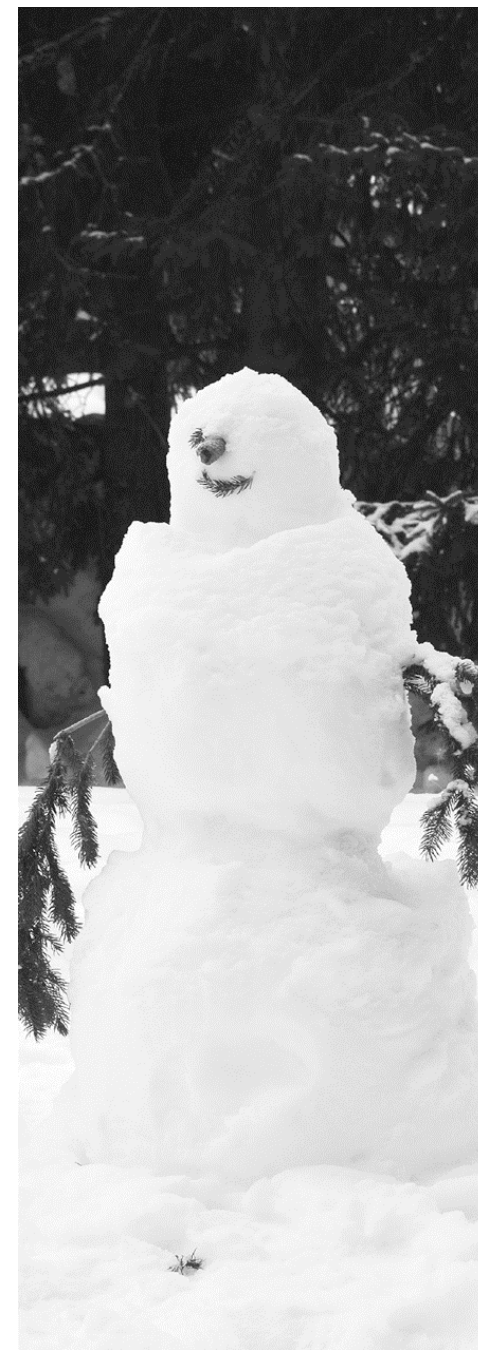
As a foster kid I used to hate the Holidays because I wasn't with my family. After my father died the Holidays seemed never the same. While in foster care I was able to go home, but only on Thanksgiving day and Christmas day, I found that being with loved ones the whole season is what makes the Holidays so special. Going home on just two days or even for the weekend wasn't enough.

In those days, I often felt like an outsider because I was just a foster kid, especially during the Holidays. I struggled emotionally when my foster family celebrated the Holidays because I wanted to feel what I thought they were feeling. Even though I was included in all of the Holiday celebrations I often felt left out because to me I was just "borrowing" their family and ultimately their joy.

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"Holy cow. Holidays are hard. I mean, I spent Christmas bawling in my bed. I've been so used to having all my brothers and sisters to make the holidays for, and I just feel broken. I feel purposeless. I feel alone, and lonely. The holidays are truly hard."

— FosterClub member steenee89, age 17, from California in foster care for 6 months



"Holidays to this day is very hard! I will sit back and remember they way it used to be when the whole family was together, and I would shed a tear. I have my own family traditions now and I love it, but it's still hard to remember the way it was. It makes me miss my brothers, sisters, and my other family members (miss them more than anything)."

— FosterClub member katedid, age 21, from Florida, in foster care more than 3 years



The holidays never felt special. Worse than that, for me they were a time of regret and confusion. At Christmas time I felt so guilty when my foster mom bought me gifts because I knew she didn't have to and sometimes I felt like she bought them because she was obligated to. If she bought gifts for me I felt guilty and if I didn't receive gifts I would have felt unloved. It was really a "no win" situation.

In my town we have something called "Artic League" that provides a bag of toys for needy kids to make sure they had something to open on Christmas morning. It's a wonderful organization and even though the presents weren't wrapped and came in a clear plastic bag I really enjoyed getting my bag of toys. Since the donor of the toys were anonymous, I felt I didn't owe anybody. Receiving the plastic gift bag was a clear indicator that I was needy, but I'd rather feel needy than obligated to someone.

My foster family was my temporary family and I was just temporarily in their home until my mom could get her life straightened out. My foster family was good to me and I appreciate all that they did, but my birth mom never did get her life straightened out and eventually I was put up for adoption. My foster family became my family when they adopted me a few years later. I was so excited to be in a permanent loving family!

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"I have never had a real family to spend the holidays with, ever since I went into foster care I have been in a different home every Christmas. This one factor ruins Christmas for me every year."

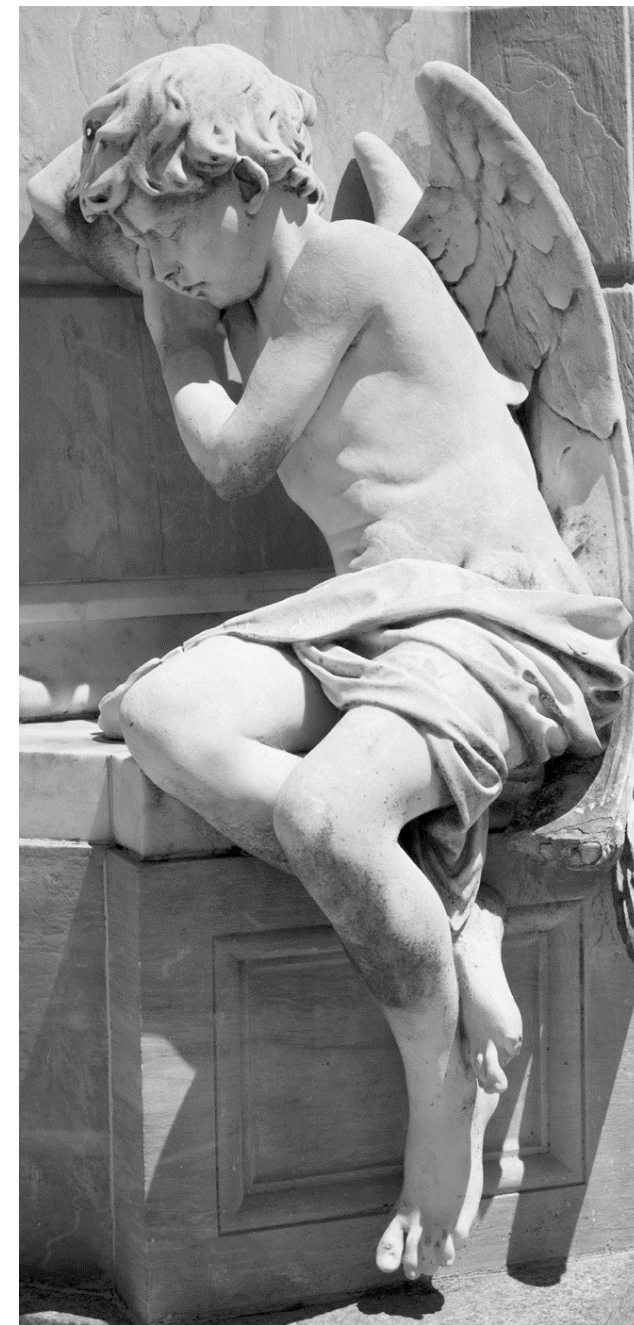
— FosterClub member `babycakes01`, age 17,
from Washington, in foster care 16 years

I was adopted right before the holiday season and I couldn't wait until that season arrived. This was going to be the best Thanksgiving and Christmas ever! I couldn't wait to establish myself as permanent member of the family. I desperately wanted to lose the foster kid identity that I had carried for the past 5 years. I thought that the Holiday Season was the perfect time to accomplish this.

To my surprise it didn't happen. I didn't feel established as a permanent member of the family that first year. Sometimes I wonder if it ever happened. I think the Holiday Season made me feel worse because I began to search out in my mind all of the little things that I felt would change now that I was "officially" part of the family. Those changes I sought after were subtle and I began to wonder why my cousins got more gifts than me. The amount of gifts never really mattered, I was thankful for every gift, but I just wanted to be equal.

Being equal to meant I was part of the family. Being equal meant I wasn't a foster kid anymore. I began to push away, hoping that someone would care enough to push back. No one ever did and my behavior was misunderstood and contributed to me being considered ungrateful or not wanting to be a part of the family. That was 10 years ago and this is something I still struggle with today. Last year, I decided not to go to Thanksgiving Dinner with family and spent the day alone. I just wanted to avoid those old bad feelings.

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I am sure my story is probably different than yours, but I do know what its like to be a foster kid during the Holidays. I do know what its like to miss bio-family and the confusing feelings that go along with the Holiday Season when you experience them with a “temporary” family. These feelings are normal and I am sure a lot of you are experiencing them right now. It is okay to feel awkward observing the Holidays with someone who has different customs and spiritual beliefs than you do. These feelings are normal and instinctively they cause us to push away from those who care for us.

Foster parents are put in a tough position during the Holidays because they have taken another child into their home and provide them with a “safe” home during this season. They do their best and sometimes they don’t understand the feelings that their foster kids go through because they have never been in a similar situation themselves.

I know my adoptive mother did her best and I know she would have done better if she had understood the complexity of my feelings. I am grateful for her huge heart and her willingness to open up her home and her heart to me.

I know it is really hard spending the Holiday Season away from the ones you love but I encourage you to not push away from the ones who are caring for you, even though it might be temporary. They might not say the right things all the time but you need to trust that they do their best.

I still haven’t mentioned why I love Christmas so much. For years I allowed life’s circumstances rob me of my joy. During my freshman year of high school my grandfather was real sick, close to death, and he ended up loosing a limb to diabetes. As his life was in the balance he never lost his joy. His faith kept him strong when life was at his worse. This was my grandfather’s character. As his health deteriorated in his old age his spirit never did. He never let life’s circumstances get him down. He couldn’t control what was happening to him but he could control his attitude. He had every right to be miserable and to complain, but he rarely did.

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“It’s hard on me because my siblings are adopted out and I float around every year to different people’s homes. Yet, I still feel like an outsider. I don’t get gifts and only give to people I know or have become acquainted with since I moved here 1 1/2 yrs ago. It’s hard on me. I miss my father who raised me and gave us everything we wanted for Christmas when he was alive. I know how it is around the holidays when everyone else is happy yet I am remembering old times and I’m not making any good new ones because I don’t know how by myself yet..”

— FosterClub member dreamcatcher, age 20, from Georgia, in foster care more than 3 years

"It is a very hard times for us around the holidays, it hurts like HELL. I have been there so many times not having any family to go to for the holidays. However it will get better because you can make your own family and do the things you wish you could have done as a child. THINGS WILL BE BETTER."

— FosterClub member Nori, age 21, from California,
in foster care more than 3 years

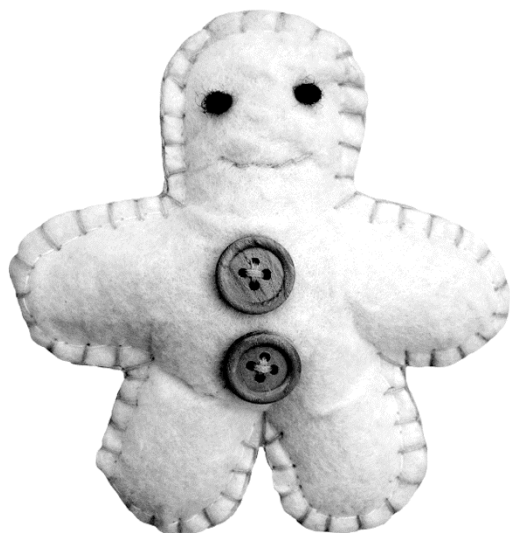


This was a valuable lesson to me because I began to realize that I couldn't control life but I was letting it control me. There are just some things in life we can't control. I can't control my foster care history and I can't control other people's behavior but I can control how I react to life's circumstances. 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.

I wish you joy and peace this Holiday Season,
Dan

Daniel J. Knapp, age 24, lives in Elmira, New York. He currently serves as Program Director for FosterClub. Dan was 9 years old when placed into the system and was adopted at the age of 14 by his first and only foster mother. He is thankful to his family for their lifelong guidance. Dan is a graduate of SUNY at Buffalo and plans on attending graduate school next year.





"Holidays are hard even when u have found "new family" because u still feel awkward and ur mom and dad are not there so though it is easier it sill makes u sad because u are reminded of what u don't have."

— FosterClub member Divine, age 21, from Wisconsin, in foster care more than 3 years

12 ideas for supportive adults to help their young person through the holidays

1. Prepare the foster youth in your care for the holidays in your home

Have a discussion with the young person about your family's holiday customs. Do you celebrate over multiple days, or is there one "main" celebration? Are there religious customs? Will gifts be exchanged? What should they wear? Who will they meet? What preparations need to be done in advance? Will there be visitors to the home? Will they be taken on visits to the homes of other family or friends? And in all of these events, will your youth be expected to participate? Knowing what to expect will help to decrease anxiety around the holidays. Avoid surprises and you will decrease seasonal tensions.

2. Prepare friends and family before you visit

Let people know in advance about new family members in your home. Surprising a host or hostess at the door with a "new" foster youth may set up an awkward situation — such as a scramble to set an extra place at the table — making the young person feel like an imposition right from the start of the visit. Your preparation of friends should help cut down on awkward, but reasonable questions such as "who are you?" or "where did you come from?"

3. Remember confidentiality

You may receive well intended but prying questions from those you visit with over the holidays. If your young person is new to your home, it is natural that family members ask questions about your youth's background. Understand that questions are generally not meant to be insensitive or rude, but simply come from a place of not knowing much about foster care. Think in advance about how to answer these questions while maintaining your youth's confidentiality. Use the opportunity to educate interested family and friends. Discuss with your young person how they would like to be introduced and what is appropriate to share about their history with your family and friends. (Remember, they have no obligation to reveal their past.)

4. Arrange meeting your family in advance, if possible

The hustle and bustle of the holidays can make it particularly chaotic for your young person to participate in your family traditions. Anxiety may run high for young people already, and the stress of meeting your relatives may be a lot to deal with. If possible, you can arrange a casual "meeting" in advance of "main events." If it is not possible or practical to meet beforehand, make a list of names of some of the people they'll meet and their connection to you. You can also encourage a quick call from relatives you plan to visit to deliver a personal message of "we are excited to met you" so that your youth knows they will be welcome.

"Up until this Christmas I had been in the system during holidays and birthdays. And it was harder being at home for holidays rather than being in the system. At least there, people actually celebrate it and show love."

— FosterClub member beccah07, age 19,
from Indiana, in foster care more than 3 years

5. Have extra presents ready to help offset differences

It should not be expected that all relatives purchase presents for your youth. Be prepared with other small gifts and for those family members that express concern over not having brought a gift, offer one of your "backups" for them to place under the tree. Extra presents may be addressed "from Santa", even for older youth, to help offset a larger number of gifts other children may receive at the same time. Children often keep count of the number of gifts received (right or wrong) and use it to compare with other kids, so sometimes quantity is important.

6. Facilitate visits with loved ones

The holidays can be a busy time for everyone including foster parents and caseworkers. But it is especially important during this time of year to help your young person arrange for visits with loved ones. Don't allow busy schedules to mean the postponement of these important visits. Try to get permission for your youth to make phone calls to relatives (if long distance charges are an issue, ask if calls can be placed from the foster care agency or provide a local business or individual to "donate" by allowing the use of their phone). A youth may wish to extend holiday wishes to relatives and friends from an old neighborhood, but may need your help getting phone numbers together. Use the opportunity to help the youth develop their own address book.

7. Help them make sure their loved ones are okay

Young people may worry that their family members are struggling through the holidays. If homelessness has been a regular issue, the winter season may bring cold weather and extreme hardship. Your youth may experience guilt if they feel a loved one is struggling while they, the youth, are living in comfort. Knowing that a biological parent or sibling has shelter from the cold or has their other basic needs met may ease a young person's mind through the always emotional holidays.

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8. Extend an invitation

If it is safe and allowed by your foster care agency, consider extending an invitation to siblings or bio-parents through the holidays. It need not be an invitation to your “main” holiday event, consider a “special” dinner for your youth to celebrate with their loved ones. If this not a possibility to do within your home, consider arranging a visit at a local restaurant (ask the caseworker is it would be appropriate for the visit to be unsupervised or if your supervision would suffice). Extending an invitation to their loved ones need not signal to a young person that you support their bio-family’s lifestyle or choices — rather it tells a young person that you respect their wish to stay connected to family. You will also send a message to the youth that that aren’t being put in a position to “choose” your family over their bio-family and that it is possible to have a relationship with all the people they care about.

9. Understand and encourage your youth’s own traditions and beliefs

Encourage discussion about the holiday traditions your young person experienced prior to being in foster care, or even celebrations they liked while living with other foster families. Incorporate the traditions the youth cherishes into your own family celebration, if possible. Use the opportunity to investigate the youth’s culture and research customary traditions. If the young person holds a religious belief different from yours, or if their family did, check into the traditions customarily surrounding those beliefs.

10. Assist in purchasing or making holiday gifts or in sending cards to their family and friends

Allow young people to purchase small gifts for their relatives, or help them craft homemade gifts. Help send holiday cards to those that they want to stay connected with. The list of people that your youth wishes to send cards and gifts to should be left completely to the youth, although precautions may be taken to ensure safety (for example, a return address may be left off the package, or use the address of the foster care agency) and compliance with any court orders.

“We all get a little depressed around the holidays usually more than any other time... I know that at times I cant help but cry when I think of my family and what they are up to and if they even think of me at times like this but there really is isn’t anything I can do but pull myself together and pray that they are safe and for God to give me strength to be a good person and know that one day this will all be over and I one day will have a choice in the matter....”

— FosterClub member
ashman, age 17, from Texas in
foster care over a year

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11. Understand if they pull away

Despite your best efforts, a young person may simply withdraw during the holidays. Understand that this detachment most likely is not intended to be an insult or a reflection of how they feel about you, but rather is their own coping mechanism. Allow for “downtime” during the holidays that will allow the youth some time to themselves if they need it (although some youth would prefer to stay busy to keep their mind off other things — you will need to make a decision based on your knowledge of the young person). Be sure to fit in one-on-one time, personal time for your youth and you to talk through what they are feeling during this emotional and often confusing time of year.

12. Call youth who formerly lived with you

The holidays can be a particularly tough time for youth who have recently aged out of foster care. They may not have people to visit or a place to go for the holidays. In addition, young people commonly struggle financially when they first leave foster care. A single phone call may lift their spirits and signal that you continue to care for them and treasure their friendship. Be sure to include these youth on your own holiday card list. A small token gift or gift basket of homemade holiday goodies may be especially appreciated.

“The holidays for me are very sad. I miss my family, My mom, and my three sisters. My father? I could care less what happens to him. I haven't seen my mom and my sisters for about 6 yrs. now. and I had to tolerate my father for about 4 years. I take 2 years out because he was never around. I smile a lot even when I'm not happy and on the holidays. People who know me think I'm crazy and people who don't think I'm shy. Mostly they think I'm weird because I wear a lot of black and wear neat(weird) hairdos.”

— FosterClub member LolitaSasuke, age 15,
from Tennessee, in foster care less than 6 months

10 Tips for Youth in Foster Care for Getting Through the Holidays



1. Stay connected to family and friends

Purchase or make cards to send out to family and friends during the holidays. It's a great time to create or update your address book. Be respectful of a foster family's privacy and check with them to see if you should place the return address of their house on the envelope or if you should use an alternative, like the address of the foster care agency (some people may have concerns about the safety of the home if too many people have the address). Make phone calls to friends from an old neighborhood or to previous foster families. (Get your family's OK first).



5. Write on

If you like to write, keep a daily journal for the holiday season. Use your writing as a way to vent feelings, work through anxiety and worries, and to reflect on the true meaning of the holidays. Some find it helpful to write "letters", even if they will never be sent, to loved ones you are missing or who have passed away. If you are inclined, you can send your stories to info@fosterclub.com.



8. You'll make it

Everyone appreciates a homemade gift. Consider making holiday ornaments, knitting scarves, or crafting bookmarks. Search the internet for ideas and instructions about making inexpensive holiday crafts. Most everyone loves homemade cookies or candies wrapped in pretty boxes. And in case you can't think of anyone in the whole world who would love your delicious and yummy homemade cookies, FosterClub's address is 753 First Avenue, Seaside, OR 97138. =)



2. Speak up for visits

Let your foster parents and caseworker know how important visits are to you during the holidays. Do what you can to help arrange the visits, by being flexible with your schedule or helping to make the arrangements with those you wish to visit. Understand that the holidays can be a busy time for everyone, so you may need to "remind" foster parents frequently to do what it takes to get a visit arranged. If they need a little help in understanding where you're coming from, give them a copy of this publication to back you up!



6. Be Yourself

Chances are you'll naturally be meeting and running into lots of people during the holiday season. The simplest things can connect you to someone, and one of the easiest places to get started is by being yourself and showing kindness. Compliments always make people feel special and recognized. Start by noticing something unusual or unique about the person. Admire a piece of their jewelry, or shoes they're wearing, or their impressive vocabulary. By pointing out something remarkable and singular, you can easily start up a conversation or make a new friend.

9. Visit others who may feel alone

Older people in a retirement or nursing home may be away from loved ones during the holidays. Check with the home or a local hospital to find out if there are people who would enjoy having company during the holidays. Consider bringing a favorite holiday story to read aloud or load your iPod with a favorite Christmas song (you may have to explain how you got the song in there!).



10. Connect at FosterClub.com

Be sure to visit the FosterClub message boards at www.fosterclub.com and connect with your peers who may be feeling the winter blues or struggling with the holidays. Post your feedback to an article written by a FosterClub AllStar at www.fosterclub.com/topics/kidsLikeMe.cfm. Let us know how you spend the holidays and give your own ideas about how to find your own peace during the season.



3. Let 'em wag

If you're feeling a little lonesome and if you're a dog lover, you're in a category with lots of other people who adore pets. Throughout the holidays, your Humane Society may need help in adopting out animals. During this rewarding work you can walk and bathe dogs, teach them new tricks, and help them find good homes. Some shelters hold photos sessions as fundraisers so pet owners can have their dog or cat pose with Santa. Check with your local shelter or pet store to see if they might be hosting a fundraiser of this kind and how you can assist them.

4. Connect at church

If you belong to a church, check into all the holiday activities that might be going on and join in! Activities around the holidays might include social gatherings, caroling (singing around the neighborhood), volunteer efforts, and extra services. If you do not belong to a church but have been thinking about joining one, the holidays can be a fun time to get acquainted with a church or churches in your community.

7. Lend a hand

Volunteering can unite people with similar values. Offer to help the Salvation Army with their Christmas dinner for needy people. Hold reading sessions for kids at your local library or bookstore where you can read their favorite holiday stories to them. If you're uncertain where to start, ask your foster parent, caseworker or a neighbor to help you research the possibilities (who knows — they may even join you!).



visit us online: www.fosterclub.com | the national network for young people in foster care

"For many years after I entered into foster care holidays and birthdays have been really tough on me. There have been times that I cried even if it was one of the best days of my life. To overcome this feeling of isolation and rejection I tried to stay focused on the positive things that were taking place in my life especially focusing on the people who displayed real love and affection toward me."

— FosterClub member Marjory, age 18, from Ohio, in foster care more than 3 years



Best Ways to Give

We've listed FosterClub's top suggestions for ways you can give to benefit foster children this holiday season.

Toy Drives and Gift Trees

Check with your local foster care agency to find out about toy drives in the area that will benefit local children in foster care. If you have trouble finding a local place to donate gifts or wish to purchase gifts online, you can donate to benefit Teens in foster care through FosterClub. Visit www.fosterclub.org.

Give a Gift that Gives Twice

Make a donation that honors the support you receive from a family member or friend. FosterClub will send an eCard announcing your gift, or download, print and mail one of our four holiday cards (or place the colorful card under the tree or as a stocking stuffer). Your family and friends will appreciate the thoughtfulness of making a donation in their name to benefit a child who does not have much. And it makes a great last-minute, done-in-5-minutes gift! www.fosterclub.org.

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"The reason I get sad on holidays is because I have no one to share it with and I have never had anyone to share it with since I was 2 months old, some people may not realize it but its hard to have never have had a family. But what I have to say to all foster kids is we're all SURVIVORS."

— FosterClub member
tahuahua, age 15, from California,
in foster care more 15 years

...More Ways to Give

Scholarship Fund

The Orphan Foundation of America makes it possible for hundreds of young people in foster care to attend college annually. Consider starting a family holiday tradition of pooling resources to sponsor a Family Scholarship for a young person struggling to make it on their own without family support. Or challenge your co-workers to develop a Corporate Scholarship. Individuals and companies may fund scholarships for \$1000 a year or more.

www.orphan.org/sponsored_scholarships.html

Give Magazine Subscriptions

Looking for a great last-minute idea for gift-giving? Consider a magazine subscription! FosterClub has partnered with Readers Digest to bring you a large selection of magazines — find something for everyone on your list. And best of all, a large percentage of your purchase price will benefit the kids of FosterClub. Visit www.fosterclub.com

Red Scarf Project

Love to knit or crochet, or know someone who does? Send warmth and encouragement to America's college-bound foster youth. The Orphan Foundation of America needs thousands of handmade scarves to put in our Valentine Care Packages to these parentless youth attending college on their own. Your handiwork will truly be the personal touch in these packages and bring students the encouragement they need to move forward and graduate to a brighter future. www.orphan.org/red_scarf_project.xhtml

Give Year-Round

Make a commitment to give to benefit foster children year-round. Your contribution will support FosterClub's peer support network for young people in foster care. Through FosterClub, you can arrange an automatic monthly gift of \$20 (or any amount you choose) to be automatically paid from your bank account. www.fosterclub.org

One other way to give...

Forward this packet to others you know who work with youth in foster care, foster parent, or are concerned about the welfare of children. Make copies of the Youth Tips in this packet and mail it out to youth in care or provide copies to the waiting area of your local foster care agency.

"Well I am new to FosterClub and I would like to talk to other teens about being in foster care and how I feel and I have been in foster care for about a year now and I have been in four foster homes since May and I think no one understand me and maybe talking to other teens in foster care will help. I wish things could go back when I was a little kid and things could start all over but with out the abuse and neglect and things like that."

— FosterClub member teeah, age 18, from Michigan, in foster care for a year

About FosterClub

FosterClub is the national network for young people in foster care.

Every 2 minutes, a child's life changes as they enter the foster care system. For more than 518,000 young people living in foster care across the country, childhood has been interrupted by abuse, neglect or abandonment. At FosterClub, we reach out to these children and youth. FosterClub is their club — a place to turn for advice, information, and hope. Our peer support network gives kids in foster care a new spin on life.

At FosterClub's **WEB SITES**, kids are asking questions and getting answers: www.fosterclub.com is for young people and www.fyi3.com is designed for youth transitioning from care. FosterClub's gateway for adults who support young people in foster care is www.fosterclub.org. Our **PUBLICATIONS** supply youth with tools for success and also provide inspiration and perspective from their peers who have successfully emerged from foster care. FosterClub's **TRAINING & EVENTS** are held across the country and feature a dynamic group of young foster care alumni called the FosterClub All-Stars. **OUTREACH TOOLS** designed to improve communication with young people in care and engage them in achieving their own personal success.

The members of FosterClub are resilient young people determined to build a better future for themselves and for other kids coming up through the system behind them. Their success depends on the generosity of concerned individuals and collaborations with partner organizations. If you would like to learn more about FosterClub or how you can support young people in foster care, visit www.fosterclub.org or call 503-717-1552.

FosterClub is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. EIN 93-1287234.

