

Children and Young People with Histories of Instability Living in Foster Care



Navigating, Growing and Thriving Through COVID-19 Uncertainty

Through the uncertainty associated with COVID-19, children and young people living in foster care require supporting adults (foster parents, case managers, placement support workers) to bring ongoing focus or intent to the building blocks of **'stability'**, **'connections in community'** and **'mindset of growth'** through their caregiving and supporting adult roles. This factsheet articulates 'how' this can be actioned through key scripts and strategies.

WHAT? What's Happening?

- Many children and young people living in foster care have a history of instability which is associated with a loss of control and feelings of insecurity.
- These experiences can often manifest in higher background anxiety and uncertainty that can easily overwhelm children whose thinking and coping skills are underdeveloped.
- Uncertainty attached to COVID-19 has the potential to re-trigger historical experiences and lead to increased levels of insecurity 'under the surface'. Behaviours expressed (or magnified) at this time may include clinginess, avoidance, aggression, withdrawal and physical symptoms (e.g., sleep disturbances). This can place stress on caregiving relationships.
- Foster families and care team members who bring ongoing focus and intent to building: (1) stability, (2) connections in community and (3) a mindset of growth are in the best position to support children to navigate, grow and build resilience through this period. Significant opportunities for growth and historical healing are possible at this time.

WHAT?

Building Blocks
of Growth Intent

HOW? scripts and strategies

Stability

In times of uncertainty, it is important that foster families, case managers and care team members bring an intent to foster **'stability'** in and around the children and young people they are supporting. In action this includes:

- **Routine** - Support the implementation of a predictable daily routine, that includes structure and purpose, healthy eating and sleep patterns, showering and dressing, and balancing screen time and movement time, inside and outside time, and connection versus solo time. Work side-by-side with the child to document routine.
- **Rituals For Normality** - Implement rituals that bring a sense of 'normality' (e.g., Friday take-away, virtual church link-ups). Maintain consistent caregiving responses through a 'parenting plan'. Do not make big changes to your caregiving or parenting strategy.
- **Consistent Messages** - Work with the care team to develop a communication plan for your child that brings focus to messages around COVID-19, changes in family contact (and why it is occurring) and future care planning. Keep reinforcing same messages.
- **Circle of Concern** - Engage the child in the development of daily routine, and provide the child opportunities and activities that provide them 'choice' or a level of control within the day. Seek out the child's voice. Engage in play that is led by the child.
- **Grounding Points** - Encourage and name healthy activities and experiences that 'ground' all family members. Have a shared and common language of being 'grounded' (e.g., 'being in zone', 'focused', 'present', 'in control'), and role model and implement grounding strategies side-by-side with the child (time-in or co-regulation). Have identified 'safe spaces' where all family members can go (or be supported) to ground self. Provide space and permission for all family members to have some alone time.
- **Intentional Media Engagement** - Supervise, implement boundaries and monitor media engagement, and provide coaching and support for children to critically assess the messages they are receiving. Role model healthy and intentional media use.
- **Self-Care** - Develop a family 'Self-Care' or 'Keeping Us Strong' plan side-by-side with all family members. Regularly talk out-loud about the ways you are keeping everyone safe and caring for them during this period. Explore the word 'care' through curious conversations. Seek out professional input for children presenting with significant psychological or behavioural instability.

Connections in Community

In times of uncertainty, it is important that foster families, case managers and care team members bring an intent to foster **'connections in community'** for children and young people. In action this includes:

- **Keeping Connected Plan** - Work side-by-side with the child to map and identify their key connections, friends and supports. Develop a plan to develop safe and meaningful connections with these members. Remember that 'connection' can be both physical (phone) and psychological ('in our thoughts', positive reflection).
- **New Rituals** - Explore and taste test new rituals that foster fun and unconditional connection points between all family members (e.g., Try It Tuesdays, Fun Friday, Monopoly Mondays, weekend inside camping).
- **Negotiated Connection Points** - Be available in your support, and negotiating a routine for ongoing connection or communication points that you will enact consistently (e.g., special parent or carer time each night, doing a shared gym routine, scheduled case manager text messaging). Create playful exchanges around COVID-19 (child 'dobbing in' parents who have not washed their hands).
- **Balanced Conversations** - Make yourself available for 'COVID-19 conversations' that focus on fact and explanations, and ensuring these are balanced and integrated within other 'life conversations' that bring focus to play, fun and future.
- **Suite of Connection Tools** - Work to provide access to a suite of connection tools, (phone, social media and online - as matched to developmental age). Implement up-front boundaries, coach its safe and healthy use, and schedule regular reviews.
- **Respond Rather Than React** - Bring ongoing focus to remaining grounded and present in your support - where you respond rather than react - and focus on 'connection before correction' as the foundational pillars. Ensure you don't unintentionally reject nor abandon a child in your care at this time. Develop your own self-care plan, bring focus to your grounding points and conduct proactive debriefs with the care team.

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Mindset of Growth

In times of uncertainty, it is important that foster families, case managers and care team members bring an intent to foster a **'mindset of growth'** for children and young people. In action this includes:

- **Side-By-Side Support With Shared Hope** - Create space and time away from caregiving tasks to validate or acknowledge that anxiety, ups and downs, and uncertainty are normal during times of significant change (e.g., 'time-in' together to reflect and process the experience). Invite curious reflections about how the child is experiencing their world ('I wonder how you feeling about the changes around you'). Focus on a dialogue of shared hope: 'we are in this together - we will get through this together'.
- **Forward Intentions** - Invite conversations about everyone's hopes and dreams for the future, including identifying a meaningful shared activity that will be undertaken together at the end of the transition (e.g., camp, going to a coffee shop). Implement a 'family project' that can be done over a period of time and will provide a positive legacy for future (e.g., vegetable garden). Support and encourage children to master new skills (e.g., riding their bike, musical instrument, reading).
- **Realistic Expectations** - Support the child to set realistic expectations or goals for each day – and allowing some grace when things don't go to plan, and rewarding small achievements. Monitor and manage your own expectations.
- **Balanced Thinking** - Model balanced thinking, where negative and positive thinking are seen side-by-side, including bringing visibility to the 'good news stories' and gently challenging doom and gloom, catastrophising or worse case scenario thinking. Explore 'what is balanced thinking'.
- **Growth Opportunities** - Communicate that everyone thinks differently or constructs different meanings or stories about challenging or uncertain times. Role model and talk out loud about how you look for growth opportunities, or look for the life learnings, to try to make sense of things outside of your control.
- **Connecting to Nature** - encourage and provide opportunities to connect with nature (e.g., watering plants, growing seedlings, nature walk) that include reflections on how everything is adapting and growing to changing circumstances.

Who is LBI Foundation?

Life Buoyancy Institute Foundation is a Public Benevolent Institution dedicated to building the mental health and wellbeing of Australians in need by empowering and growing local community capacity.

We support individuals, teams and communities integrate the science of wellbeing, resilience, trauma-informed practice and growth with their local wisdom and knowledge to make a difference within their community.

We offer a suite of services that draws upon the IMPACT Program and the What-What-How® method to enable parents, teachers, schools, agencies, programs, supporting adults and practitioners to implement intentional, personalised and practical responses that:

- Respond (rather than react) to the unique growth needs of individual and community
- Build individual and collective capacity for whole-of-life outcomes

We have a growing network of IMPACT Coaches. These are community members who are trained, accredited and supported to build the capacity of their communities across education (primary, secondary, alternative and adult), foster care, child protection, residential care, mental health, disability, homelessness, family preservation and other community service settings.



IMPACT



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The content on this factsheet was reviewed in consultation with members of LBI Foundation's 'Science to Practice' Group (see www.lbi.org.au/science-to-practice-group).

These are IMPACT Coaches and key community representatives who are embedded within local schools and agencies who support the translation of best-practice science to local context. The content of this factsheet is mapped to an explainer video on LBI Foundation's online training and resource platform:

www.lblearninghub.org/navigating-uncertainty.

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