



## **The Child Welfare System**

### ***Helping Your Child Through Transitions in Placement***

Many high-risk and vulnerable children in the child welfare system often do not receive the attention and care that support optimal developmental outcomes. This is especially true for children that come from a family affected by substance abuse and violence. For these youngsters, child placement decisions often are made unexpectedly, and changes occur unpredictably. Many children travel through multiple foster placements or are removed and then placed back with their biological families many times over. This level of disruption and change often creates significant and long-term difficulty for the child.

It is always in the best interest of the child to provide her with preparation for upcoming placement changes or decisions, as moving from one place to another can be a very frightening experience for a young child. However, your reassurance and support can make a great difference in how the child experiences placement changes within the foster care system. Here are just a few tips for helping prepare a child when he is leaving a placement or entering a new home:

#### **When a child leaves a home...**

- Keep the child informed about placement decisions. Be sure to provide information to her in developmentally appropriate language. In your discussions, try to balance between allowing her enough information to understand the changes, while protecting her from information that may be inappropriate for her to know regarding the reasoning and rationale for the placement decision.
- Be aware that many children may not be able to comprehend periods of time or distinguish between permanent or temporary placements. Carefully explain issues of time and permanency in a vocabulary that makes sense to the child given her age. Ongoing communication with the child's case manager or therapist may help you design the best ways to talk with your child about changes in placement.
- Anticipate the emotional impact of saying goodbye. When a child leaves a home under any circumstances, he experiences a significant emotional response to the event. Many children do not understand the reasons for their departure or blame themselves for the upcoming move. Others fear what they may encounter in their new home. For some children, another move is the next in a long list of transitions, changes, and unexpected events in their lives. The child may likely have strong feelings of loss and grief upon leaving your home and care. Often, a child may express his feelings around such transitions through his behavior, and you may notice him becoming increasingly aggressive or withdrawn. He may act in perplexing ways, yet many of these behaviors may be reflective of his efforts to process the impending change and prepare for his departure. Provide support and encourage the child to discuss his reactions, as saying goodbye is likely very difficult. As a caretaker, your efforts and engagement in this difficult life



transition can have a tremendous impact on the amount of safety and security the child experiences.

- Provide reassurance and consistency for the child. The transition to a new home can be highly stressful to a child, as it is often filled with great uncertainty and fear. Offer her as much supportive information as possible about the new placement. You may be able to tell her the names of the new foster parent(s), the number and ages of other children in the home, or the expected date of departure from your home. Try to structure the child's schedule to provide consistency and predictability, as the transition is highly disorganizing for the child.
- Offer the child something to take with him and/or something to leave behind. Children, especially those who are very young, may better manage the transition from one place to another if they have a concrete item to take with them, reminding them of their previous home. This may be an art project that you complete with the child prior to his leaving, a picture of your family, or an item from the home. It may also be helpful for the child to create something to leave with the foster family. This can help to address difficulties children staying in the home may experience upon another child's departure.

#### **When a child enters a home...**

- ***Prepare other children living in your home.*** Prior to a new foster child coming into your home, prepare the family for the child's arrival, such as providing the child's name, age, and other information you have beforehand. Be prepared for children living in your home to have a reaction to the entrance of a new sibling. You may expect to see changes in their behavior as they try to process feelings about gaining a new brother or sister. Consider the additional demands on your time this child will present, as you may need to enlist the support of family or friends to help you juggle new responsibilities. Encourage communication within the family about the child's arrival before the child comes to your home, so that everyone may better anticipate the likely changes within the home.
- ***Gently welcome the child into your home.*** Remaining aware of how overwhelming this experience may be for the child is important. Provide information at a rate that seems most acceptable for the child, as presenting too much at once may be very difficult for the child to manage. She will likely require a lot of support and encouragement. Show the child where she will sleep at night and help her store her belongings in the appropriate place. When you introduce the child to others living in the home, provide her name, age, and something that may help the child connect to them, such as an interest or hobby or whether or not she will be attending the same school as the other children. If there are certain rules in the home, be sure to provide them to the child, along with an explanation of what happens when those are broken. Explain any responsibilities or chores that the child may have. Be certain to provide these details and explanations at an appropriate pace, as there is a lot for the child to learn when they first come to your home.
- ***Expect emotional reactions to the arrival.*** The child who enters your home will likely have tremendous emotional reactions to the changes he is enduring. Many of these reactions may be



expressed through his behavior. A child who is extremely angry or upset about the move may display out of control behavioral outbursts, indicating what a difficult time he is having managing this new change. Others become very resistant to your efforts to engage them or encourage them to participate in activities with other children. Some children become very withdrawn and sad, initiating very few interactions with others in the home. Be aware that many of these children have already endured great amounts of change and disruption, which can make it very difficult to trust others and feel safe or protected by caregivers. Entrance into the foster care system often has important implications for a child's capacity to engage in supportive, caring attachment relationships. This frequently presents many challenges to the caregiver-child relationship, as these children often respond to caregiving efforts with mistrust, fear, or even retaliation. Seemingly awkward or baffling behaviors may be understood as the child's efforts to ensure safety, security, and predictability. Often, however, these efforts often jeopardize the child's opportunities to experience the nurturing support they need the most.

- **Keep communication lines open.** Be sure to give updates to mental health professionals and case managers for the child to update them with information about how the child handles this change. Also, these individuals may offer you helpful strategies to help support your relationship with the child.

## Adoption

Adoption is an evolving process between parent and child. It can lead to both great joy and tremendous pain. For this reason, both your child's as well as your feelings around the adoption is important. Adopted children frequently struggle with issues of loss, rejection, grief, as well as feelings of guilt and shame. They may have difficulty negotiating their identity or their role in relationships. Adopted children may further struggle with issues of control, as they attempt to make sense of the world around them. This may be particularly true if they were adopted following multiple placements.

No matter how loving or nurturing an adoptive home may be, that adopted children will struggle with these issues is important. Although children gain a wonderful home and family, they still feel the loss and rejection associated with being given up by their birth parents. These emotions may arise throughout the course of development in a variety of ways. A child may even feel as though he or she was a last resort option, that his or her adoptive parents wanted a child of their own instead of him. This awareness of loss and rejection frequently leads to the expression of grief. In order to move forward, allowing a child the opportunity to speak to these issues, and for the parents to openly listen and provide the child with comfort, hope, and plenty of love is necessary.

It is extremely important to be open and talk with your child about his or her birth parents and pre-adoption history. Frequently, adoptive parents feel uneasy broaching this topic with their children, yet it is a necessary step toward providing a child with a positive sense of self. Often children pick up on subtle cues as to whether a subject is taboo; therefore, if they feel that you do not want to talk about their history, they may avoid it as well, increasing their feelings of shame. So remember, just because your child does not ask questions, it does not mean that they do not have any.





Therefore, talk with your child about his or her history at a developmentally appropriate level; be completely honest and truthful, no matter how hard that may be. Tell your child what you would have done for them if they had been your child from the start. Let them know how much you cherish them, yet make sure you also openly discuss your child's history. When talking with your child, stick to the facts – do not make up pieces of history you do not know. It is also important to comment on what it must have been like to be a small child with this history; speak to your child's feelings and empathize with your child.

Your conversations with your child should begin early, using age-appropriate language. They should be done gradually and gently, as the content is laden with emotions. The story you begin with can be used as a foundation on which you can build in the future as your child's understanding and comprehension increases. When talking to your child, it may be helpful to use other children's books and stories to highlight important aspects of the adoption. Many children's books exist on the topic of adoption, often speaking from the child's point of view, which allows a child the opportunity to ask questions about his or her birth history and adoption. Utilizing stories frequently paves the way into these types of conversations.

It is important to note, however, that as you talk about these issues, your child may not respond in the manner you hope for. He may seem to reject you and your affection, move around the room, pretend he is not listening, or even hide in another part of the room. During these periods, continue the conversation rather than stop because your child is listening whether he appears to be or not.

Frequently children become overwhelmed by their feelings, particularly when hearing about their past. It can be extremely difficult to hear what you would have done had you been her parents from birth, as she knows that her "real" parents gave her up. For this reason, processing her feelings following the conversation is essential. Let your child know that having conflicting emotions is alright and that you will love her no matter what she may be feeling. Furthermore, taking the time to process your emotions as well is important. Discussing adoption can be an extremely draining and overwhelming experience for all involved.

Opening yourself up to these kinds of conversations lets your child know how much you care for him. It further builds a solid foundation for all types of conversations in the future, by indicating that you are open to discussing issues, no matter how difficult they may be. Furthermore, fine tuning your communication skills is a wonderful way to teach your children how to understand and express their feelings. As you open yourself up to these conversations, you model feelings. It is important to let your child know that everyone has both pleasant and unpleasant feelings, yet the way we *express* these feelings is what matters.

### **Adaptation to a new environment**

No matter the age of your child when you adopt, understanding that his adaptation to your home and family is a process is important. You are attempting to convince a scared, confused child that he is at home and that you love him. You must be prepared to earn your child's love and trust. Focus on maximizing consistency and continuity during this time. You may need to provide your child with a transitional object, such as a picture, a blanket, or a stuffed animal, to give him a sense of familiarity.





You may need to stay home so that you and your child can begin the attachment process, while helping him transition to your home, your rules, and your world.

While your child adjusts to her new environment, limiting stimulation may be necessary. This may include limiting the number of visitors you have in your home for the first few weeks, as too many people may be confusing and overwhelming for your child. It also is important to maximize touch and to play with your child. Show your child how much you love her by focusing on her, yet make sure to follow her cues during these periods. Be sure to remain attuned to your child and what she can handle. You should always say good-bye before you leave, as will help prepare your child for transitions. Furthermore, you may have to reassure your child that you will return, particularly if she has a history of multiple placements.

Make sure to continue to support your child's developmental needs. Frequently, children who have traumatic histories or multiple placements are emotionally younger than their chronological age. Therefore, play with your child at his or her developmental level, even if this may seem somewhat regressive. It is not unusual for a six-year-old child in this situation to still love to play, "peek-a-boo" or "this little piggy." By being attuned to your child's needs, she can begin to mature emotionally as she begins to feel more secure.

Additionally, remain aware of potential issues that emerge in children already living in your home. Such children may have strong feelings upon the adopted child's arrival, making your negotiation of their play and interactions important. It also is important to be aware of cultural or ethnic differences that may exist between the children; these differences may be generalized to larger barriers that interfere with the formation of a secure sibling relationship. Furthermore, you should stick to the rules already established in your home. Bending rules for your adopted child creates chaos in the home and may foster resentment between siblings. Keeping the rules and punishments constant in your home provides your children with the consistency and structure they need.