

## **HEALTHY CHILDREN : HEALTHY ADULTS**

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Many states have no procedure in place for transitioning foster children from stable foster homes to permanent homes. Although while most attachment research finds that moving children too quickly and in a traumatic way can harm the development of the healthy mind, some may argue that children are resilient and will adapt to most situations.

It should be the belief of most that if the latter is true, then, at what cost. Some also say how wonderful it is that the State now has therapy and counseling for children traumatized in such a way. Then too, one must agree that putting a band aid on a hurt does not prevent the hurt from existing, but prevention should be sought to eliminate the reason the 'hurt' is there in the first place.

One might also think thousands to millions of tax dollars spent on fixing the 'broken child' after the fact might have been better spent on a proper transition so that thousands of tax dollars in counseling and therapy may not have been needed in the end. The following is a simple guide and not a policy or procedure used in any department.

It is simply "common sense".

Transition can be defined as "the movement of people from one stage of life to another or from one context to another". Change is a normal fact of life for everyone, but it is seldom easy and can be most difficult for children. The way a person leaves a situation affects the way he or she enters the next. Unfinished business often hinders the ability to start a new situation. In other words, troubles are not left behind; they are exported to a new and different environment. \*

Effects from a sudden trauma such as a move for a child will eventually come out later on in life. This will most likely have a negative impact on her or his childhood and behavior. Many people think that children are resilient and will "get over it" but many do not and most can be spared from having to go through the unpleasant and traumatic experience of loss and grief if guidelines and procedures are put into place and followed. Moreover, the closer a person is to leaving, the less likely he or she is to deal with conflicts. This is true for adults as well as children. In studies on transition, bringing a period of one's life to a satisfactory conclusion is described as making "good closures". In the business of packing up and getting ready to go, the need to set things right is squeezed out by the shortage of time and procedures and the pressures of imminent departure.\*

With closure acquired by a proper transition, the child will feel secure in his or her new surroundings which will give him the ability to more successfully make decisions and operate freely and with confidence; unlike the uncertainty of a quick unregulated move that turns his visible world upside down or in most foster children's cases, invisible.

These guidelines for transitioning children out of foster homes and into permanent homes were created by comprising education material from successful transitions from other states and literature, from professionals in the attachment disorder fields and from experience in fostering successful transitions, and lack of, with foster children from foster homes.

Seasoned foster parent, "I have had many different types of transitions with my foster children, from no transition at all to some a bit too lengthy. Although the lengthy ones were time consuming and demanded much travel and time, they were the ones that caused the children to have the best results in the end with the new family having the most well adjusted child in the process. In my opinion, it is worth the time involved and caseworkers, foster parents, the courts and adoptive parents that shun from the process have not been doing so in the best interest of the child. Nothing comes fast and easy and a child's mental state should always be dealt with carefully and without haste. Out of state moves are more difficult due to the cost of travel but still should be carefully planned in the best interest of the child and not cost, nor in the best of ease of the caretakers and caseworkers. We must see that the cost of this important part of the foster child's life may save them from despair later on even far into adulthood.

## **STEP ONE: PREPARATION - Start on notification of an impending move**

When preparing a child for a new placement or home, it is good to start weeks before the move. Infants two to 6 or 8 months old should sufficiently establish a comfort zone with touch, smell and sight with 4 to 6 visits of 1 to 2 hours each. 8 months to 15 months should have twice that many visits to get to know their new caretakers and not get the stranger anxiety from a move to someone they do not know. They should be held no more than one to two days apart. However, nearing 2 years and older, children can usually grasp that a change is about to occur. Explaining to the child that he is about to have a new home is important in preparing to accept that a move is about to occur. Positive enforcements by talking up the new family and all the new possibilities that may arise is a way to paint a picture of the new placement that will help the child feel good about what's about to take place.

Attachments form at a young age. One to five year olds should take approximately 3 to 6 weeks. The idea is for the child to avoid attachment disorders due to feelings of abandonment and rejection or fear of such. He should be as comfortable with you as he was with his foster home. Forcing a quick move will not force the child into bonding with you, but could cause him/her not to bond at all.

If the child is used to calling you, as the foster parent, 'Mom', it is good to start incorporating your name when addressing, as in 'mama Sandy' or 'NANA' or Auntie, or something else so the child will not be totally confused when the adoptive couple takes over the Mama or mom roll.

## **STEP TWO: FIRST MEETING, 2 to 3 hours with the foster parent, adoptive family and child/children preferably in the foster home**

The adoptive couple is to meet at a familiar place of the child's (the foster home is usually the best place to start.) The child will be comfortable if he knows that it is ok to have this stranger in his own territory. The foster and adoptive parents should interact together with the child to make him comfortable. The foster parents should allow the adoptive parents' time to speak and interact with the child. (See his bedroom; ask about his favorite toys or games. Talk about what he or she likes to eat and play with.) If more visits at the foster parent's home are available, it is in the best interest to have at least 2 more.

## **STEP THREE: 2 or 3 three to four hour visits outside the foster home within 1 to 3 days of each other**

Plan a meeting at a fast food restaurant or park to meet the child and spend time with him/her. 2 to 3 hours will be sufficient to introduce the adoptive parent in another setting.

## **STEP FOUR: Visiting the new home: A minimum of three day visits at the new home for a period of 4 to 6 hours each within a one week period with the first of these introduced by the foster parent**

The foster parent should bring the child to their new home for them to stay from 4 to 6 hours. The foster parent should stay no more than 15 minutes unless the child is in distress. Make sure that you discuss with the foster child that the home he is about to visit will eventually become his new home. This allows the child to feel that he/she has permission from their foster parents to be comfortable in someone else's home.

Remember that the child doesn't really know the concept of 'foster parent' or 'temporary parent' until much older as in 5 or 6 yrs. Repeat the day visits at least twice more but let the adoptive couple pick the child up from the foster home after the first visit at the new home. This will get the child used to going with the new parents and still be assured that he will be back home and with whom he has been for so long. It will relieve tension about the uncertainty of leaving foster mom and foster dad if he/she has lived there for a time.

If the new family only sees the child once or twice per week, it will take him/her longer to get to know you. Multiple visits in a shorter time is better than the same number of visits spread over a longer period; for example, 4 visits each week for two weeks is better than 4 visits over a four week period.

## **STEP FIVE: 4 to 6 overnights in a period of two weeks**

After the child has had at least 2 to 3 day visits with the new family, plan an overnight on a day when the adoptive parents will be home the next day to spend time with the child. Continue overnight visits until there have been at least 4 to 6 overnights in the new home alternating with overnights at the foster home. Eventually, the child will spend all of the nights at the new home and only days at the old home. The amount of time will depend on the comfort of the child. At this time, depending on the child's comfort, a three to four day stay is recommended.

As the visits progress, the time spent at the foster home will decrease until the child is more at the new home than the old. There may be a time when the child will probably not want to go with the new parents and want to stay at the foster home. This is normal; because the child has an attachment to the foster home and senses some loss and is not yet as comfortable in his new setting

### **REACTIONS: Abnormal is normal**

Each child reacts differently to stress, loss and grief. Some children keep their fears of loss inside and there are no visible signs that the child is grieving his loved one. They will eventually come out, even if it is years later so transition is important to help this be a positive reaction. Others show anger and lash out at anyone they become acquainted with. The small child may also act as if he or she is angry at the foster parent and hits or displays anger toward them. This is often due to the child feeling that he/she is being rejected and forced to go with someone they consider strangers and that the foster parent is abandoning him/her. This is a normal reaction in the child's behavior when changes in their normal routine occur. Familiarity is what a small child and infant needs and a move disturbs this.

### **POSITIVE RE-ENFORCEMENT**

Throughout this process, it is very important that the foster family remains smiling and cheerful even though it may be bittersweet. It doesn't mean that you have to make the child think you are happy they are leaving but you should keep a positive tone about the impending change and move. A child that sees the foster parents apprehensive and distressed will be apprehensive of going on the visits and undue stress will be caused. Do not let them see you unhappy about the new family regardless of your feelings. Talk to the child about how excited you are about his new family and how happy you are about the situation. Never speak in a negative tone to the child about the new family. That will raise doubts in the child's mind and make it more difficult for him to make the adjustment to the new home. Even if you don't like the new parents, do not let the child sense your feelings. A healthy minded child is your goal and the best interest of the child is not necessarily in his being with you. The child may have been with you for some time and you have become attached. That is a good thing for the child. Attachments are a developmental milestone that many foster children do not develop due to traumatic movements that are quick and abrupt. If you care about the child in your home, you too will have become attached. Remember that a positive attachment is something that this child would not have had in a group home or shelter. Feel confident that the love you gave this child will help him continue to develop at a healthy rate with his new family.

### **IS MY LIFE UPSIDE DOWN?**

You and your new child will be feeling a mixture of emotions. The transition requires both patience and time with traveling to and from pick ups. You will probably want to quit about half way through thinking that the child is adjusting well and he's going to have to get used to it anyway. Don't let the feeling that you want to go on with your new life deter you from finishing a proper transition.

### **NAME CHANGE?**

This takes a bit of serious thinking. You may not like the name that was chosen for the child entering your home for adoption. An infant of 2 to 3 months already can identify someone calling them by a particular name. It is in the best interest of the child that if you decide, and you do have that right, to change the baby's name that you first incorporate it into the familiar name. For example, Hannah, should not be immediately changed to Keyonna.

You should start by calling her Hannah-Keyonna so she can identify her old name and find an association to the new one. Eventually, as she gets used to having Keyonna as part of her name, you can drop the Hannah and she will be fine with the other since she's gotten used to it. That can happen rather quickly with an infant up to one or 18 months.

As a child gets older such as 2 and older, it may take a bit longer. If the child is 4 or older, she or he has his identity in his or her name. Make sure that you discuss this with the child and give the child some input in what name he may be choosing to be called. Her makeup is in her name such as yours is in yours and you need to be careful not to give the impression that you are in a hurry to erase her past. It is part of her and her name may need to remain the same for her sake.

## **WHERE DO I BELONG?**

Make sure that the child ages 4 and up are incorporated into the family as a "family member" and not as a guest. They should be given their place at the table, if there is such, from the first visit and given chores that are appropriate to his age likewise to the other children in the house, if any exist. Make him feel a part of the family with decision making but do not give him the final decision. He needs to understand that your word is the final say so that he knows where the boundaries lie. Everything has its purpose and patience in the transition process will, in the long run, make your child a happier and better adjusted child. It will also help the child bond successfully and since the goal is for permanency and success, worth the time involved.

If the child is grieving for the foster parents and seems distressed, it may be that the transition time was ended too quickly and could have lifelong effects on the child. Many times, the new parents think it is too confusing for a child to go between two homes and cut the transition short but this is harmful for the child in the long run. You may want to re-instate some visits, maybe once per week, so that the child gets to feel more secure and not feel abandoned. If a child does not have proper closure, it could affect the rest of his life in personal relationships with you and others.

Your child has most likely experienced a traumatic separation when he was taken from his biological family and put into foster care. He may have fears that it could continue to happen in the future with this placement and be afraid to get too close to anyone. Always speak positively about the fostering experience no matter what your opinion is. Remember that this child has been in that home longer than you have known the child and it could be the only place the child remembers that cared about him or his needs. He may not want to be with you simply because you think your home will be wonderful and you will love him. He doesn't know that and bonding takes time.

## **AFTER THE MOVE:**

Ideally, the best would be that you and the adoptive family stay in touch for some time but many do not care to commit to such.

Adoptive parents should be very careful to keep the child's belongings and toys that he has had in the foster home. These can help them bond more successfully. Too often the new parents want the child to forget the past family and only love them, discarding anything containing memories about who the child was before they came to live with them. They must keep in mind that the past is part of the child's makeup and trying to erase it can cause damage to the child emotionally. Be careful to include pictures of the child's biological or foster family or both if possible and discuss these with the child in a positive manner so the child can understand that he was chosen by you and not have a feeling of guilt or confusion about where he came from or if he was thrown away. We want healthy adults and these important steps can help that occur with you being responsible to do your part.

## **TO END OR TO CONTINUE**

A healthy relationship may form with the foster and the new family and could be a lifetime friendship. Be realistic that this may not occur and the child may go on with his new life.

This last visit or "End visit", if ending the relationship with the foster family is what has been decided, tells the child that no one vanished from his life, but that he is still loved. If the adoptive parent wants to keep in touch but you don't necessarily agree, please do so on a light base so not to confuse the child.

## **OUT-OF-STATE MOVES**

Out of state moves are more difficult due to the cost of travel. However, they should be carefully planned in the best interest of the child and not in the best of ease of the caretakers and caseworkers. Plan on getting videos of the new family ahead of the move to show the child and get the child familiarized with a new face or family of faces. Pictures and phone calls are important and easy in this day of technology and should be utilized frequently with all ages. At least 4 to 8 visits either to or from the permanent family should be attempted, if not mandatory. Even out-of-country adoptions such as Russia and China require a month long stay from the adoptive family to get to know the child before they relinquish it into their care. All of these steps will aid in lessening the attachment problems that could arise after the placement.

## **FOSTER PARENTS**

Go on with your new foster children and remember that a good foster parent gets attached because that is what the children need. Don't be afraid of it, and don't let anyone tell you that you shouldn't get too close, even though it can be emotionally stressful, as in "better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all". The children in your care will benefit because of your love for the rest of his/her life.

Finally, congratulate yourself on a job well done and be proud of what you did to help an abused and neglected child have a better chance at a successful life.

## **CASEWORKERS**

This child's success will reflect the many long hours of hard work and dedication on your part. Without a competent case manager behind the scenes, many of the children will end up with unpleasant circumstances such as disruptions and/or rejection. Working as a team with the foster parents means allowing them to do their job. Good caseworkers and supervisor of adoptions insist on a proper transition. It will not only help a child become more emotionally stable but also in making sure that in the future, disruption of the placement does not happen and attachment dysfunction does not occur. All good things take effort. You have the power to guide this child into a successful and confident adult.

## **Adoptive Parent**

The journey that this child had taken before entering your life, including this transition, will come with him.