



Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child



For foster families who choose to adopt the child or children in their care,¹ there are a number of ways to help these children make the emotional transition from being “a ward of the State or the Court” to being “a son or daughter” of specific parents.

¹ For information on deciding to adopt from foster care, read the Information Gateway factsheet *Foster Parents Considering Adoption: A Factsheet for Families*, available at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fospar.cfm.

What's Inside:

- Talking with children about the changes
- Helping children understand their own history
- Helping children adjust to losses
- Helping children transfer attachments



While parents may appreciate the difference in the child's role within their family, children may not clearly comprehend the difference between being a foster child versus being an adopted child when they continue to live in the same family. There are specific things families can say and do to help children understand these differences.

Talking with Children About the Changes

In preparing to talk to children about the changes that occur with adoption, parents and other caring adults in children's lives should remember to engage the child in the process and listen carefully to the words the child uses and to the questions the child asks. Questions about the birth family and their status may need to be addressed. It is important to always tell the truth—even if it is painful—and to validate the child's experience and feelings. While these talks may bring up painful feelings for children, and for parents who love them, helping children to grieve can also help them to move on to a feeling of permanency in their foster/adoptive family.

Talks between parents and children about the differences in status within the foster family and the adoptive family will probably need to be repeated several times and in a variety of ways, so children can fully understand at their own level. It is best if these conversations take place when the parent and child are engaged in activities together. Adoption professional H. Craig-Oldsen (1988) offers the following suggestions for making these talks beneficial for the child:

- **Plan the discussion.** In collaboration with the social worker, the parents should decide if they want to talk with the child first and have the social worker reinforce what was said in a later conversation, or if they would like to talk to the child together about the change from being in foster care to being adopted. Parents should be prepared to answer the child's questions that may be raised by the discussion.
- **Help the child talk about the perceived difference** in his or her own words. The parents should ask open-ended questions of the child such as, "How do you think being adopted will be different from being in foster care?" or "What do you think the biggest difference will be, when you're adopted?"
- **Help the child draw analogies** to something in the child's own life. For instance, a parent might say, "This is like the time when"

There are a number of changes in status that will affect the child, and these should be discussed, depending on the child's developmental level.

1. To help the child understand the *legal differences* between foster care and adoption, foster parents might talk about how the adoption court hearing is different from other court hearings the child might have remembered from foster care. Some parents may explain adoption by using marriage as an analogy. The court hearing is like the marriage ceremony, and the adoption certificate is like the marriage certificate that makes the

relationship legal and permanent. (Parents who use this analogy should be prepared for questions about divorce, depending on the child's experience.)

- Older children who are aware of the foster care board payment or adoption assistance their parents receive might be helped to understand the *financial differences* inherent in foster care and adoption. These payments might be compared to a child's allowance; older children may be able to understand the payments as costs to meet the child's needs. Experienced adoptive parents note the importance of honesty, compassion, and developmental appropriateness in conversations

with children regarding these issues (Laws, 2004).

- To help children understand the *parenting differences* between foster care and adoption, parents might remind the child that when in foster care, the parents had to get a permission slip signed by an agency social worker to go on a field trip, spend the night at a friend's house, or travel across State lines; now that their foster parents are their legal parents, the parents can sign permissions for these types of things without needing to go through an agency or court.

One way to explain the changes from foster care to adoption is to talk about the roles that different parents play in the child's life. (See box below.)

ASPECTS/ROLES OF PARENTING FOR CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT

Birth parents—give children life, gender, physical appearance, predisposition for certain diseases, intellectual potential, temperament, and talents. These aspects never change.

Legal parents—provide financial responsibility, safety, and security; make major decisions (where to live and go to school), and are legally responsible for the child's actions. While children are in foster care, the court/agency plays this role with a child. Upon adoption of a foster child, this role is transferred to the adoptive parents.

Parenting parents—provide love, discipline, daily needs (food, clothes, toys, etc.), homework help, transportation, life skills, values, religion, and more. Foster and adoptive parents play this role in the child welfare system. If children are in residential care, this role might be played by house parents or childcare workers (Fahlberg, 1991).

Helping Children Understand Their Own History

Parents can help children review and understand their previous life experiences to clarify what happened to them in the past and help them integrate those experiences so they will have greater self-understanding. Foster/adoptive parents and children's therapists and social workers can help children in answering important questions about their lives—both to assess their readiness for and to prepare them for staying permanently in their family (Henry, 2005).

QUESTIONS FOR CHILDREN TO ASSESS WHERE THEY ARE ON THE PERMANENCY CONTINUUM (HENRY, 2005) ▾

- Who am I? (question related to identity)
- What happened to me? (question related to loss)
- Where am I going? (question related to attachment)
- How will I get there? (question related to relationships)
- When will I know I belong? (question related to claiming and safety)

Children's answers to these questions will change, depending on their developmental stage. Their responses can guide parents and therapists in helping the children achieve feelings of permanency.

There are many ways families can help children in answering these important questions and in understanding their unique history. Life books, ecomaps, lifemaps, and lifepaths are all tools used by foster/adoptive parents and children's therapists to help children of various ages understand and find ways to visually represent the answers to questions of how they came to be separated from their birth family and where they will ultimately belong (Fahlberg, 1991).

- A **lifebook**, is essentially an account of the child's life in words, pictures, photographs, and documents. While lifebooks can take many forms, each child's lifebook will be unique to that child. Foster parents can assist in creating a lifebook for a child by gathering information about a child and taking pictures of people and places that are—or were—important to the child.
- An **ecomap** is a visual representation of a person and the important people and activities in his or her life. A child's ecomap may have a circle in the middle of the page with a stick figure of a child, along with the question "Why am I here?" Lines are drawn out from the circle like spokes to other circles representing the court, other foster families, siblings, school, or to other topics such as "things I like to do" to visually represent what and who is important to a child and to help the child understand how he or she came to live with the adoptive family (Fahlberg, 1991).
- **Lifemaps or lifepaths** are visual representations to help children understand the paths their lives have taken and the decision points along the way. They may

have stepping stones to represent a child's age and a statement about where and with whom they lived at that age. They may have lines that go to a drawing of a house representing any foster homes a child lived in, the years the child lived there, and a mention of who lived with the child at that house, if known (Fahlberg, 1991).

The most important information to include in any of these tools to help children understand their past history is information about the child's birth and an explanation of why and how the child entered foster care and how decisions about moves and new placements were made. A baby picture and

pictures of birth parents should be included, if possible. If no information is available, children can draw a picture of what they might have looked like. Statements such as, "there is no information about Johnny's birth father in his file," at least acknowledge the father's existence. The importance of honesty, developmental appropriateness, and compassion in any explanation of difficult and painful circumstances that bring children into care is important for children.

Working with these tools provides an opportunity for the child to experience and work through the feelings of loss; therefore, they are beneficial therapeutic methods to help children with the grieving process.

POSSIBLE ITEMS TO COLLECT/INCLUDE IN A CHILD'S LIFEBOOK:

- Developmental milestones (when a child first smiled, crawled, walked, talked, etc.)
- Common childhood diseases and immunizations, injuries, illnesses, or hospitalizations
- Pictures of a child's birth parents and/or birth relatives and information about visits
- Members of the foster family's extended family who were/are important to the child
- Pictures of previous foster families, their homes, and their pets
- Names of teachers and schools attended, report cards, and school activities
- Any special activities such as scouting, clubs, or camping experiences
- Faith-based activities
- What a child did when he/she was happy or excited and ways a child showed affection
- Cute things the child did, nicknames, favorite friends, activities, and toys
- Birthdays or religious celebrations or any trips taken with the foster family (Fahlberg, 1991)

Helping Children Adjust to Losses

Adoption experts acknowledge the importance of helping children integrate their previous attachments to important people in their lives in order to be able to transition that emotional attachment to a new family (Donley, 1988; Fahlberg, 1991; Henry, 2005). Integration is a way of helping children cope with the painful realities of the separation from their birth families that often impact their future behaviors and can create extraordinary stress between them and their foster/adoptive parents. The five-step integration process, first described by adoption pioneer K. Donley (1988), is an effort to clarify the child's permission to be in foster care, to live with new parents, to be loved by them, and to love them back.

Steps in the Integration Process:

- **Create an accurate reconstruction** of the child's entire placement history. Creating a lifebook, lifemap, or ecomap with a child helps a child to see and understand his or her own history.²
- **Identify the important attachment figures** in the child's life. Foster parents might be able to learn who these important people in a child's life are by listening to the child talk about people from previous placements. These attachment figures might be parents, but they could be siblings, former foster parents, or other family members.

² V. Fahlberg describes more about these techniques and how to use them with children of various ages in her book, *A Child's Journey Through Placement* (1991).

- **Gain the cooperation of the most significant of the attachment figures** available. If possible, parents should cooperate with the birth mother during a child's visits or gain the cooperation of a birth grandparent or relative to whom the child was attached. Even if the birth family is not happy about a child's permanency goal of adoption, there is likely to be one important person (a teacher, a former neighbor) who will be willing to work with foster/adoptive parents or the agency to make a child's transition to adoption easier.
- **Clarify the permission message.** It is important for children to hear and feel from people who are important to them that it is all right to love another family. The important person in a child's life who is available to give the child that message should be sought out to do so.
- **Communicating it to the child.** Whether the "permission to love your family" comes in the form of a letter or phone call from grandma or from the birth parent during family visits, it is important that children hear from that person that it is not their fault they are in foster care and that it is all right to love another family. This "permission" will go a long way to helping a child relax and transfer his/her attachment to the new family (adapted from Donley, 1988).

In working with children during this transition phase it will be important for parents and others working with the child to use the following skills (Henry, 2005).

- Engaging the child
- Listening to the child

- Telling the truth
- Validating the child's life story
- Creating a safe space for the child
- Realizing that it is never too late to go back in time
- Embracing pain as part of the process

Helping Children Transfer Attachments

Once it is clear that a child will be adopted by the foster family, there are many things parents can do to signal to a child that his or her status within the family has changed. Some of these include:

- Encouraging the child to start calling the adoptive parents "mom" and "dad"
- Adding a middle name to incorporate a name of family significance
- Hanging pictures of the child on the wall
- Involving the child in family reunions and similar extended family activities
- Including the child in family rituals
- Holding religious or other ceremonies to incorporate the child into the family
- Making statements such as, "In our family, we do it this way" in a supportive way
- Sending out announcements of the adoption (Falhberg, 1991)

Conclusion

While on the surface it may seem easy for a child to stay in the family in which he or she was living as a foster child, in reality, the internal process for a child and family is much more complicated. Allowing children to just "drift" into adoption without acknowledging the very significant changes for the family may lead to later difficulties. Foster/adoptive parents need to help children consider and understand their own history and reasons why they cannot live with their birth family, help them adjust to this loss, and help them transfer their attachments to the foster/adoptive family. In helping children, families will need to consider each child's needs as they are related to the child's age, health, personality, temperament, and cultural and racial experiences.

Other foster/adoptive parents can be a great resource for families. The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory has a list of foster and adoptive support groups in each State. Go to www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.

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