

Thoughtful Visitation Practices Prevent Disruption

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by Virginia Sturgeon

After nearly 30 years of working in the adoption field—21 in special needs adoption—Virginia Sturgeon recently retired from Kentucky's Special Needs Adoption Program. Her life still, however, centers around adoption. Virginia and her husband are the parents of a son adopted transracially at age 16, and Virginia currently works as an adoptive family support specialist, a private adoption consultant, and a nationally recognized trainer.

Foster children who are waiting to find a permanent home today have experienced loss upon loss. As we plan for their adoption, the last thing we want is a disruption—yet another loss. Factors that influence disruptions are often outside the placing agency's control, but careful planning for a child's transition to adoption can significantly improve chances for a successful adoption. To help prevent disruption from the beginning of a child's relationship with a new family, the agency as well as the child's worker, current caregiver, and adoptive family must be committed to carefully conducting pre-placement visitation.

Most children who join adoptive families today are older and have experienced many moves. Because moving is painful for everyone involved, and some agencies and families are anxious to move the adoption forward, the pre-placement visitation period is often short or almost non-existent. We mistakenly tell ourselves that moving the child quickly into the new family will keep him from feeling torn between his current caregiver and the adoptive family. We rationalize that quickly moving the child into his adoptive family will save time and money—especially for cross-jurisdictional placements.

So Why Have Extended Pre-Placement Visitation?

After nearly three decades in the adoption field—including 18 years parenting an adopted child who has special needs—I have repeatedly seen the value of extended visitation. Visitation gives the child a chance to get familiar with her new neighborhood, see his new school, and perhaps make friends with some of the neighborhood children. It allows for a gradual "getting used to" all the new people and places that will be a part of the child's life in the adoptive family.

Making a lifetime commitment, which adoption should be, should not happen quickly or under pressure. In many ways, adopting the older child or a child who has special needs is more like entering into a marriage than becoming a parent. Especially with older children, adoption brings together individuals with unique experiences, ideas, habits, and values, and asks them to suddenly live together in a family unit.

How Should Pre-Placement Visitation Occur?

Before the child and adoptive family meet for the first time, the worker, foster family or other caregiver, and adoptive family must agree on a visitation plan. An ideal place to establish a plan is at a pre-placement conference where all the significant people in the child's life gather to share information about him or her with the adoptive family. The plan should include information about when and where visits will occur, the role of the adoptive and foster parents (and others, if need be) during visits, and how long visits should last. Everyone at the conference (including the child if he or she is older) should agree to the plan, and sign and receive a written copy of it. The plan is not, however, set in stone; it serves more as a flexible guide for the visitation process.

When a child and her new adoptive parents meet for the first time, the initial introduction is always awkward and nerve-racking. Because the child is risking the most, the first visit should take place

where the child is most comfortable, usually the foster home. The visit should also be short, usually no more than two to four hours. Ideally, the adoptive family will have prepared a family life book, a picture album of the family, neighborhood, house, etc., to share with the child prior to this meeting.

The frequency, duration, and site of visits after this initial introduction will depend on the child's age and needs, but for at least one visit, the foster family, or one of the foster parents, should accompany the child to visit the adoptive parents. In all probability, the child has a stronger relationship with her foster parents than with the social worker and needs their permission to move on to the adoptive family. Visiting together in an adoptive family's home helps the foster family to give, and the child to receive, that permission.

When getting to know a young or developmentally delayed child, adoptive parents may need to conduct several visits in the foster home, and share parenting responsibilities with the foster parents. By co-parenting with the adoptive parents, the caregiver signals to the child that he or she approves of the family and the child can trust them too. Visits usually need to occur within a short time period; a few days between visits is typically all young children can manage if a consistent transfer of parenting is to be achieved.

Older children may need several visits in their foster home and/or community or they may be anxious to start visiting in the adoptive family's home to begin their transition. Unlike younger children, older children can tolerate longer periods between visits, but they must be aware of the plan for them, and still need enough time to get to know and feel comfortable with the adoptive family.

Once visitation begins, it should steadily progress from daylong visits, if distance allows, to overnights, weekends, weeks, and more extended periods. In my experience, a final four-week visit prior to the actual placement works well for everyone. It allows the child and family to start a routine, and gives the parents time to see what it will be like to juggle school, after school activities, family events, work, etc.

A four-week visit also gives everyone a chance to relax and be him or herself. As I always say, "all of us can be on our best behavior for a weekend or even a week; few of us can remain charming for a whole month." Both the child and family members need to experience what the other is like on bad days as well as good ones. It may be that the visitation period brings the family to a painful realization that the placement will not work. But at this point, the decision to stop visits, while difficult, is much less damaging than terminating a placement (and breaking a promise of permanence) later on. Everyone knows that the purpose of visiting is to see if the placement will work; that is why they are called visits.

How Can We Afford to Do This with Interstate Placements?

"We can't do all these visits with interstate placements. It takes too much time and money." I frequently hear this argument from agency administrators. My response: you cannot afford not to do them.

Moving to a new family is difficult. When that family lives hundreds of miles away it is especially hard. Everything in the child's life is changing. He may be moving to an area where the culture is totally different from anywhere he has lived before. In such instances, it is especially important for the child to spend time with the adoptive family in their home before the final placement.

We must also remember that these are children, even the adolescents. We should not put them on a plane alone to travel for visits. For the first visit out of state, the child's worker should accompany him or her and lodge close to the adoptive home. That way the worker can provide support to both the child and the family. After that, an adult the child knows (such as the child's foster parent or caregiver) needs to travel with the child each additional extended visit.

At the end of the final extended visit, the adoptive family and child should return to the child's former

residence together, to say good-bye and retrieve the rest of the child's belongings. The final return to the foster home is also a good time to celebrate the adoptive placement. The agency could host or sponsor a ceremony where the adoptive parents, foster parents, worker, and child sign a document committing themselves to the adoption. The ceremony could then be followed with a pizza and ice cream party. The foster family's involvement in the ceremony and party would again signal their approval of the adoptive placement.

Agency administrators repeatedly say, "it sounds good, but it simply costs too much." Yes it does involve money—sometimes a great deal of money. But on the flip side, we are talking about the life of a child and a family. How much is permanency worth? I personally think having a permanent family is priceless. How can we put a dollar figure on the lifetime commitment the child and family are making?

In practical terms, how much do we save when a child disrupts and comes back into care? Not only does the state assume the foster care charges; they now have responsibility to find a new home for a child who has regrettably suffered yet another damaging loss.

I have seen the difference between well-planned placements and ones that are made quickly. Children often act out their apprehension about moving as visitation progresses or might beg to stay with the adoptive family. These behaviors sometimes tempt parents and workers to rush the placement in hopes that placement will alleviate the stress for both parents and child. At other times children have been moved quickly because it was "too expensive and time consuming" to follow an extended visitation plan.

I placed one 17-year-old (I'll call him John) who was very apprehensive about moving from Kentucky to New Jersey. John had rejected the idea of adoption before, and needed time to feel safe enough to decide that indeed he did want to be adopted. The adoptive family visited him several times in Kentucky, and then he traveled to New Jersey. On one of the visits to New Jersey, John's foster father—with whom John had a very good relationship—came along. Gradually John's visits to New Jersey got longer, and he had a chance to visit high schools and choose one where he felt comfortable.

When he was ready to make the move, John let us know, and the adoption has been very successful. John was vice-president of his senior class, and a member of the national honor society and the track team. He now attends college, and returns to Kentucky every year with his adoptive family. Had we insisted that John move quickly into his adoptive family, I know he would have simply said "NO" to the entire adoption. He needed time and he needed to be part of the decision-making process.

Certainly some of the adoptions done quickly work, however, so why change what you are doing? Put simply, giving the child and family the opportunity to get to know each other and have some experience living together for more than a weekend will greatly enhance the chances for long-term adoption success that benefits everyone concerned.

There used to be a commercial that said, "It's what's up front that counts." Up-front planning for visitation can make a big difference for agencies, children, and adoptive families. Invest in every child's future with carefully structured and enhanced visitation practices. It's an investment well worth making!