

Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency

Children, including youth, leaving out-of-home care for adoption or other family permanency require preparation and support to help them understand past events in their lives and process feelings connected to their experiences of abuse and neglect, separation, and loss. They may be challenged by new surroundings and need to affirm their own identity and allow themselves to create new or different relationships with their birth and adoptive families as well as others. Achieving permanency is not just an *outcome* for these children; it is a *process*.

This bulletin will help child welfare professionals better understand the feelings and emotions children may experience regarding permanency and prepare them for placements with permanent families. Its focus is on adoption, but much of the information

is also applicable to children with other permanency goals, such as kinship care or guardianship.

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UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS REGARDING PERMANENCY

Those working with children who have been in out-of-home care and are preparing for permanency should make sure they understand how each child perceives their situation. How a child views the permanency process will likely be very different from how a professional views it. Prior to and during the transition to a new family, children may experience the following emotions or feelings:

- **Loss and grief.** The loss of a parent can be one of the most significant losses a child will ever experience. Children who are placed in the child welfare system may have complex histories of loss and unresolved grief. The loss of a parent—temporary or permanent—can have a profound impact on a child, even if they were removed from the home as a result of a parent's maltreatment (National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative [NTI], 2019). In addition to the loss of their parents upon removal from the home, they also may experience the loss of siblings, friends, supportive adults, classmates, pets, familiar surroundings, cultural connections, and more. Each subsequent placement transition could also lead to additional losses. Children experiencing loss may exhibit fears of abandonment, lack of trust, and issues of holding on and letting go (NTI, 2019).
- **Uncertainty and confusion.** Many children are left to wonder about the circumstances that brought them into care, why their families may not be able to continue caring for them, and who will be there to take care of them and protect them. A child may experience anger, sadness, and even depression. Many children struggle with their changed role within the family system or sibling status when they are removed from their birth family. For example, a child may have been the only child in their birth family, but the adoptive family may include several children. Children also may continue to worry and think about their birth families. They may be confused if their own feelings about a permanent placement do not match others' expectations of how they should react. For example, adults in the child's life may expect him or her to feel happy or grateful to be joining a new family, but the child may still desire to live with their birth family or be grieving the loss of that family (NTI, 2019). When children are placed with relatives, they may feel uncertain or confused about their new role within the family and about how others' roles may change (e.g., the child's grandmother or aunt may now be acting as the mother figure) (NTI, 2019).

For information about working with parents adopting a child from foster care, refer to Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Preparing Adoptive Parents](#).

- **Anxiety.** Children about to join or who have joined a new family may feel anxious about the transition (Jarema, 2012). Just as they may grieve being separated from people and places familiar to them, they may worry about the changes and different situations they will encounter with their new family, home, school, etc.
- **Divided loyalties.** Many children, particularly adolescents, have conflicting feelings about being a permanent member of a new family. They may still have strong emotional ties to parents and siblings and may fantasize about or hold out hope for reconciliation even when legal ties have been terminated.

Caseworkers who understand children's experiences from the child's point of view will be better able to help them address past issues and explore the possibilities of new relationships. It is important to acknowledge the feelings the child is having, as minimizing them may result in additional unresolved grief (Pickover & Brown, 2016). Caseworkers also should recognize that each child's thoughts and feelings, as well as any resulting behaviors, stemming from the transition to the permanent home may be different.

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR PERMANENCY

Working with children to prepare them for permanency in relationships should include both steps to address past traumas of loss and abuse/neglect and opportunities to give meaning to existing and future relationships. Several foundational principles can help agencies implement an overall approach

to supporting and guiding children as they identify and establish permanent relationships:

- Permanency is a *process* for a child, not just an outcome. It should begin before placement and extend after the placement has occurred.
- Preparing children for a new home should occur regardless of the permanency goal or outcome.
- Encourage children to express their emotions, concerns, and thoughts regarding the placement and validate their feelings.
- Maintaining connections to the birth family and important people from a child's past may help to foster positive identity development and mitigate negative outcomes.
- Permanency work with children requires time, consistency, honesty, and authenticity from social workers.
- Work with children should not be considered only in the context of therapy. Although behavioral health services may be appropriate for any individual child, engaging the child in activities, tasks, and conversations to prepare him or her for permanency can be the work of caseworkers, caregivers, social workers, family members, court personnel, and others. In some cases, birth parents or other birth relatives may be able to help the permanency process by giving their children "permission" to move on to a new family.

- The readiness activities children and youth engage in must be developmentally appropriate. The cognitive and emotional abilities of the child should determine the types of activities and resources used in permanency preparation work.
- Permanency planning (the legal process) is distinct from permanency preparation work (the relational process). Children can be empowered by their participation in the planning process (as age appropriate and if desired), including their involvement in recruitment and family-finding activities, and by knowing and understanding the steps in the permanency and transition processes. Although these activities may engage them in some of the emotional tasks of preparing for permanency, a more comprehensive preparation program should help them explore their feelings about life events and support their readiness for permanency.
- Children need preparation for new family relationships, just as adoptive parents and guardians do.

This section describes strategies caseworkers can use to prepare children for their transition to a permanent family.

ENSURING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND PERMANENCY

Children, particularly younger children, may have difficulty understanding what joining a new, permanent family means. They may not understand the difference between foster care and adoption (or other permanency options). Children being adopted by their

foster family still may find the transition confusing or experience difficult emotions, even if they have a good relationship with their foster family (NTI, 2019). While initially in foster care, children may believe that reunification with their birth family is still possible, and during the transition to adoption, they may experience a different set of emotions and behaviors than when they were first removed from their home.

Below are some ideas that may help to encourage that process (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015):

- Explain what a permanent family means in terms that are appropriate to the child's age and developmental level.
- Ask children to respond in their own words to open-ended questions about any perceived difference between foster care and adoption (e.g., "How do you think being adopted is different from being in foster care?").
- Let children know that being adopted does not mean they need to forget about their birth or foster family.
- Remind children that adoption makes them a "forever" member of the family, even as an adult.
- Provide opportunities for children to speak with other children who have been adopted about the permanency process (as appropriate).

Helping Foster Parents to Support Children Transitioning to Permanency

Foster parents can play a critical role in helping a child transition from foster care to adoption or other permanency. In some cases, they may become the child's adoptive parents, but they frequently also may be helping the child prepare to join another family. Foster parents can also give children "permission" to join—or explore joining—a new family. Caseworkers can support foster parents in this process by providing them with the following tips and responsibilities (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2019):

- Consider themselves part of the transition team.
- Read books to the child related to adoption and families.
- Help the child recognize and manage their feelings.
- Provide relevant information to the caseworker and therapist, if applicable.
- Provide material to the caseworker to assist in keeping the child's lifebook current. (See the Lifebooks section in this bulletin for more information.)
- Remind the child they will always care about the child and reinforce a positive self-image for the child.

Caseworkers should also be aware that foster parents may experience their own grief when a child leaves their home. To help reduce and resolve the grief foster parents may feel, caseworkers and agencies can ensure that foster parent training or other preparation includes information about what it may be like for them when a child leaves their home, allow the foster parents to participate in the child's transition to a permanent home, and provide support to them during and after the transition (Hebert, Kulkin, & McLean, 2013). This may also assist in retaining foster parents for future placements.

EXAMINING LOYALTY TO THE BIRTH FAMILY

Children who will be or have been adopted may still feel a sense of loyalty to their birth parents as well as their foster families or relative caregivers. This is normal. Caseworkers can help children understand these feelings and seek ways to establish new, loving relationships with their adoptive family while also honoring their birth family. For example, it is often in the child or youth's best interests to maintain postadoption contact with their birth family. This ongoing

connection can lessen the loss and grief associated with separation, support identity development, and help children and youth overcome adversity as they prepare for adulthood. (See the Discussing Postadoption Contact section of this bulletin for more information).

Names may also be a worry for some children. Some children may want to change their last name to match that of their adoptive family, but others may want to maintain the name they have always had, which is part

of their identity and birth family (Jarema, 2012). Caseworkers can address this issue with the child as well as the adoptive family. Additionally, some children may be apprehensive about calling their adoptive parents "mom," "dad," or another familiar name (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015). Caseworkers can explain to children that they can refer to their adoptive parents by a name with which they are comfortable. It can be a different term than how they referred to their birth parents. If a relative is the adoptive parent, the child may want to continue addressing them as before (e.g., grandpa, aunt).

Caseworkers also can discuss these issues with the birth, foster, and adoptive families so they can ensure children feel they have "permission" to establish new relationships. It is necessary for children to hear and feel from people who are important to them that it is okay to love another family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

DISCUSSING POSTADOPTION CONTACT

Whenever possible, children who are adopted should maintain connections with their birth family, including siblings and others. Postplacement contact with birth families, as well as other prior caregivers, can enhance children's emotional well-being and help them navigate this journey in several ways, including the following (NTI, 2019):

- Prevents denial and avoidance of their circumstances
- Manages emotions about separation
- Provides opportunities to validate their feelings

- Allows them to consider the reasons why they were separated from their family
- Decreases magical thinking (i.e., children's creation of unrealistic fantasies to fill in unknown information about their birth families)
- Decreases feelings of conflicted loyalty
- Helps the child develop their cultural identity

Caseworkers should explain to children in a developmentally appropriate way that they may be able to maintain some degree of contact with their birth family and other prior caregivers (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015). However, caseworkers should also be honest with them about circumstances that may hinder potential communication (e.g., safety issues, mental health issues). Additionally, caseworkers should let children know that the number and duration of the visits may change over time and the caseworker or other agency staff will not be there to supervise the visits.

For more information about maintaining connections, read Information Gateway's [Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families](#) or visit the Information Gateway [Adoption](#) webpage.

HELPING CHILDREN GET TO KNOW THEIR PERMANENT FAMILIES

Children will likely be curious or anxious about living with a new family. Caseworkers can help ease children's minds by providing information, as appropriate, about the family and their new home and by arranging for preplacement visits. Information that could be shared with children includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Basic information about the adoptive parents
- Information about any other children in the family
- Where the family lives
- What the family's interests are
- Pictures of the family
- Information about pets
- The family's culture or religion, if different from the child's

Reviewing this information with children prior to them meeting the prospective parents helps ensure they are not complete strangers to the child (Jarema, 2012).

Caseworkers also may want to help the child understand family rules as well as the consequences when rules are broken (Wynne, 2016). If a child has been maltreated, they may perceive any physical punishment as abusive. Consequently, caseworkers should urge adoptive parents to use nonphysical methods of punishment.

Preplacement visits should occur before the official placement to help the child and family become better acquainted and ease the transition (Wynne, 2016). Even if the child already has a relationship with the family, these visits are an important part of the process. If possible, these visits should begin with daytime visits in the child's current home or somewhere they are comfortable and then progress to visits in the adoptive family's home, beginning with day visits and eventually leading to overnight and weekend visits. During visits that occur in

the adoptive family's home, the caseworker could encourage the child to bring one or two of their personal belongings to leave there. Additionally, the caseworker could recommend to the adoptive family to allow the child to provide input on what items are placed in the room or what colors will be present (AdoptUSKids, n.d.).

If in-person visits are not possible due to long distances, online meetings (e.g., Zoom) may help the child and family get to know each other and build familiarity. The caseworker should assess the child's comfort level before and after visits. These visits can assist in lessening children's fears and worries, transferring attachment to the adoptive parents, initiating the grieving process, empowering the new caregivers, and reassuring commitments for the future (NTI, 2019).

LIFEBOOKS

When children spend extended periods in out-of-home care, memories of significant events and people can be lost. Children may lose their sense of self: who they are, where they have lived, the people they have lived with, where they went to school, memories of favorite items (e.g., stuffed animals or blankets), and more. Lifebooks help children remember and maintain connections from their past as well as integrate their previous experiences into their current lives. Several resources exist to help caseworkers, birth families, foster and adoptive parents, and other important adults work with children on creating and maintaining this record of their lives. For additional information, visit the [Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange's Lifebook webpage](#).

GOODBYE VISITS

During goodbye visits, children and their birth parents meet prior to the final placement decision to help each of them process the upcoming adoption. (In some cases, these visits may occur when a termination of parental rights is granted, even if an adoption is not imminent.) Contrary to the term, however, this meeting does not necessarily signify that the child and birth parents will cease all contact. Many birth parents and children maintain relationships well past this visit. During the goodbye visit, it is helpful for the child to hear the following messages from their birth parents (Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services, 2013):

- They are loved.
- They will be missed.
- The family's involvement with the child welfare system is not the child's fault.
- It is okay to be happy and love someone else.

If an in-person goodbye visit is not possible, caseworkers can work with the adoptive and birth parents to find an alternative, such as having the adoptive parents read a letter written by the birth parent, playing a video of the birth parents, having a virtual meeting (e.g., Zoom), or conducting the meeting with another birth relative (NTI, 2019).

For an example on how goodbye visits can be conducted, read Kentucky's [Tip Sheet: Preparing for the "Goodbye" Visit](#).

It is also important for caseworkers to ensure birth parents are emotionally ready for goodbye visits as part of the transition process. The links above also provide information about how to prepare birth parents.

ENSURING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Even when caseworkers use the other strategies described in this bulletin, issues such as loss and grief may emerge as children and families move through different stages. Children in foster care often have traumatic histories that affect them in ways that may be difficult for them to put into words and that may make it harder for them to form trusting relationships with new family members (Lefebvre, 2013). The sense of loss may be greater if the child has experienced multiple foster placements. An adoption-competent behavioral health professional can be exceptionally valuable in helping children understand and, if needed, resolve any related emotions and feelings. For information about helping families select a behavioral health professional, refer to Information Gateway's [Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists](#).

3-5-7 Model

The 3-5-7 Model helps children frame past experiences and address current circumstances to help them explore and understand permanency in relationships. It specifies three tasks, five questions, and seven skill elements (Denby, Gomez, & Alford, 2018).

The tasks are (1) clarification of life events, (2) integration of the experiences and meanings of relationships in different families, and (3) actualization of memberships in their identified network of families. The child works on these tasks by exploring five conceptual questions, each of which addresses a specific issue:

- 1.** What happened to me?
- 2.** Who am I?
- 3.** Where am I going?
- 4.** How will I get there?
- 5.** When will I know I belong?

The final component of the model is the seven skill elements used by those working with the children:

- 1.** Use engagement activities that encourage expression of feelings and thoughts about life experiences.
- 2.** Create a safe space for expressing feelings.
- 3.** Recognize that behaviors are based in pain and trauma.
- 4.** Respond briefly to the child's comments in order to provide space to grieve.
- 5.** Listen.
- 6.** Affirm their stories.
- 7.** Be present as they do the work of grieving.

These elements may vary slightly according to the age of the child.

Find more information about the [3-5-7 Model](#) on its website.

CONCLUSION

Preparing children for adoption and other permanent relationships should be a process that involves the caseworker, foster and adoptive families, relative caregivers, and others who are important to the child. With the appropriate supports, children and families can heal from difficult life experiences, move toward resolution of past losses, and build readiness for relational and legal permanency. It is also important to remember that helping children transition to a new permanent family does not mean they must sever all ties with their past. Maintaining relationships with their birth family and other connections to their past can help children form positive identities and promote their well-being.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#): Offers resources for children, teens, and adults
- [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative](#): Provides two state-of-the-art web-based trainings that focus on building the capacity of child welfare and mental health professionals to understand and effectively address the mental health challenges for children experiencing foster care, adoption, or guardianship and their families
- [Books About Adoption](#) (PBS Kids for Parents): Lists books for children about adoption
- [Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway): Offers tips to help foster parents prepare children in their care for adoption
- [Talking With Older Youth About Adoption](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway & AdoptUSKids): Provides child welfare professionals with a framework for how to talk with older youth about permanency, including key considerations and suggestions for starting a conversation as well as ways to make these discussions more effective and meaningful

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