



## Family Preparation, Education, and Support

### **Expectations and Emotions**

The transition of bringing a child into a family is a process, not an event. Whether parents/relatives are reuniting with their child or welcoming a new child into their family, this is a time of change and adjustment, discovery and challenge.

The successful transition is a team effort between social worker, child, and family. Family preparation should include the child and all family members, including siblings, and all must have a voice in the process.

Plans for work with all families is determined by whether or not the receiving family has a relationship with the child.

- For example, parents who placed their child in the CCI within the past two years and have maintained visits have a high degree of knowledge about the child. Parents/family members who have not maintained visits/contact have a low degree of knowledge and will require more guidance. Foster/adoptive parents will have no real knowledge of the child, even though they may have met.

In reunification and adoption/foster care, when children come home, everyone wants things to be positive. But typically parents and children have strong feelings and it's not easy.

- Children may be angry at their parents/relatives for past difficulties or for taking them from the CCI that has become their "family". There can be confusing emotions and tensions, both for children and parents.

- After being apart it can take time to get to know--and trust--each other again. Parents have changed, and their children have had experiences in the CCI that their parents don't know about or understand.
- There may be new siblings at home that the children don't know; it can take time to get to know one another.
- Children placed in non-relative situations will also have some negative feelings, although they often hide these in the early part of placement.

Preparing for transition means learning about the emotional side of transition, including coming to terms with what that experience might be like for different family members and how current family relationships might be affected.

- It's common for parents and children to have a mix of feelings about the upcoming transition--excitement, relief, joy, ambivalence, anxiety, stress, hope, anger, and insecurity.
- Parents and children may not be ready or willing to talk with a social worker about their feelings, but social workers can explain to all family members that it's normal and OK to feel a wide range of emotions.
- Sometimes, parents feel rejected. The parents have many of their hopes pinned on this new family unit. But then, because the child is angry or traumatized, the child misbehaves, and the parent in turn feels angry and let down. In non-relative placements, these feelings can lead to disruption, so preparing all for this possibility is extremely important.

Parents and family members also need to understand that the child might be experiencing many emotions. This will help them to understand the reason behind some of the behavior the child might exhibit. As mentioned in the unit on Preparing Children:

- Children who have lived outside of their family often experience shame and guilt. "I must have done something really wrong or must have been a bad person for my family to abandon me."

- Confusion and anger - Many children wonder why their families were not able to continue caring for them. A child may experience anger, sadness, and even depression.
- Sadness for leaving the familiarity and comfort of the CCI, the current caregivers, the friends
- It is common for the child to experience contradictory emotions. The child may experience feelings of disloyalty to their caregiver in the CCI for wanting to return home to their family. They may feel disloyal to the (new) family because of their warm feelings for the caregivers and children in the CCI. This is common and normal, and the children have been told it is perfectly ok to share their love.
- Fear and Anxiety – In reintegration, children may worry that the family will be angry with them, will not really want them back, or will be unable to care for them upon their return. Child may feel insecure and be "clingy" due to fear of another separation from family.

In adoption, children may worry about fitting in with their new family...will their family really love them? Will they have to go to a new school? What if they don't like their siblings? What if their adoptive parents decide to give them back?

During contacts with family throughout the transition process, social workers should help them examine their expectations about reintegrating or fostering/adopting.

- What are the family's hopes and dreams and how does that match the child's traits? Do the family members envision that the child will forget about the time they spent in the CCI? Or do they think their children will miss living with their caregivers in the CCI? Do they picture their family bonding right away, or do they think it will take time?
- Parents should be aware that the child may compare their (new) parents to their caregiver in the CCI. In foster/adoption situations, children will compare new family members to all previous placements, and will often make up stories about previous caregivers.
- Parents may have times of uncertainty about their ability to meet the child's needs and may feel frustrated or disappointed in themselves.

It will be important to give family members a chance to express their emotions in a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere. Use your listening skills and guide the parents as they work through their concerns. When families are open to the idea, teach them to hold family meetings on a regular basis to keep the lines of communication open.

### **Family Education and Support**

Conversations with the family should focus on:

- What do the families need to be thinking about to prepare for the child's transition to their home?
- How can social workers help families get ready?

Use the Home Thrive Scale™ completed during earlier visits, to look at areas of concern regarding the family and the child, and make plans to help the family address them.

- In reintegration, work closely with the family to address the cause of original separation. (Why was the child placed in the CCI, and what can change so the child can return to their family home?)
- In adoption/foster work, focus on parents' expectations for children in their home and how that matches (or mismatches) the child's abilities.
- Discuss community services, government support, etc. (What services can the family avail themselves of in the community?)
- Will the CCI be able to continue to support the family (education, health care, counseling, etc.) at least for a short term?

Work with the family to build a strong support network. Completing a schedule of a family's typical day/week, allows family members to visualize what help they have, what help they need, and how to fill in the gaps. For example, when will they need child care? Who will get the children to/from school?

Families need information to help them understand the kinds of behaviors they may see once the child comes home, and practical skills for helping manage the child's behavior, (eg, learning issues, anger, bedwetting, etc.)

- Emphasize that positive discipline techniques and the importance of attachment should be taught to the family by the social worker in a conversational manner, using examples of the child's common behavioral issues as a guide.
  - Social workers should **NOT** lecture to the parents or provide a lengthy presentation on discipline techniques or attachment.
  - Instead, the social worker should discuss specific behavioral concerns with the parents and offer suggestions of ways to handle that behavior, referring to techniques that were effective with that child in the CCI.
- The social worker needs to be proficient in positive discipline techniques and attachment behaviors to be able to support and educate the family.
- It is important to address any special needs of the child such as learning issues, ADHD, bedwetting, depression/anxiety, or others, and offer guidance to the parents in techniques to support the child with their issues.
- Again, the social worker should NOT present the information in a lecture format, but should share the content in an informal manner.

Parents should expect a honeymoon period early in the reintegration, where all seems to be going smoothly. However, as the child becomes more comfortable, they enter a testing phase, where the child tests the boundaries of their behavior – what they can get away with and what the parents will stand firm on.

- Remind the parents to flood the child with love, understanding that the child's acting-out behavior is a result of the many emotions the child is feeling.
- Setting clear expectations and using positive discipline techniques will be very important during this time.

Remind parents to build positive memories during this time of transition. Find reasons for mini-celebrations and just enjoy their time together. Focus on the positive and what is going well, and don't dwell on the difficulties of transition.

### **Family Dynamics and the Child's Self-Identity**

It is important to make the transition to family life as smooth as possible for the child, and helping the child to carry their self-identity (as discussed in the Preparing the Child unit) will be important for the transition.

Review the following characteristics of family life previously covered in the unit titled Preparing the Child:

- The social worker should learn about the family's culture through discussions and visits with them. Understand what is important in this family (eg, high marks in school, a neat and tidy home, good manners, involvement in sports, etc.)
  - Discuss how they will help the child assimilate into the family's culture, especially in areas that are different than what the child is used to.
  - The social worker should be sensitive to the fact that most parents, especially in relative placements, will usually expect the child to "come into line" quickly with the family's rules. The idea that each will need to change some to make this work well is a new concept to many parents. It helps to keep reminding adults of the ultimate goal – a peaceful, loving home life for everyone.
- The social worker should also learn about the family's dynamics through discussions and visits with them. (eg, Who holds power in the family? How are decisions made and by whom? What unique characteristics does each sibling bring to the family and how do they interact with each other and with the parents?, Do extended family members have a role in the family? etc.)
  - What role will the child play in the family? How will the parents help the child learn their role?

- The social worker should learn about the family's daily/weekly schedule and encourage the family to discuss with the child so they know what to expect. Problem solve if necessary.

Parents need to know that it will be important for the child to maintain their self-Identity as they move into their new home. "Self-identity" definition = Recognizing your unique qualities and potential as an individual

- Often, children feel they will have to become a whole new person to live with their new family. They will have to find new habits, interests, hobbies and a new way of living.
- However, it will be important for the child to understand that what is important to them, and what they truly value, does not need to change as they enter the family, even if the outlets for their skills and talents may differ.
- The child may need to find new ways to build their skills and interests based on what the family's interests and resources can provide. Discuss ways the family can support the child in this effort.

Consider ways the family can help the child maintain their self-identity by allowing them to decorate their own spaces, spend time doing what is important to them, continually assessing their strengths and core values, etc.

### **Visits and Transition Day**

Think about the importance of sharing background information about the child that is relevant and that the child has agreed that you may share.

- Gather information about the child's current routine (ie, foods, sleep routines, games they enjoy, comfort items, etc.) and provide to the family.
- Tell the family what information has been given to the child about the household and the expectations.

Note the importance of explaining the following guidelines around pre-placement visits to the family:

- These visits provide opportunity for the child and family to get to know each other, and for the family, child, and social worker to identify and resolve problems which occur during visits.
- Time frames for pre-placement visiting will vary with particular children and with age. There is no one plan that fits all children. (Time frames were discussed in the Preparing Children session, but listed here again if review is needed.)
  - The amount and kind of preparation necessary will vary according to the child's age, length of time in out-of-home care and relationship with the family and caregiver. As a guideline:
    - Ages five to eight, plan on two weeks to transition from the first visit to the move.
    - Age eight to twelve will likely need at least three weeks
    - A teenager might be longer or shorter than three weeks, depending on the teen's personality, confidence, and how close the new home/school matches what they are leaving behind.

There is a need to plan out the preplacement visit schedule and move forward as the child and family are ready. Do not rush.

- Give the family a written schedule of the visits and process, and make every effort to stick to it.
- Be aware that both the child and the receiving relatives will often ask for a speedy placement. This is part of the honeymoon experience and not in the best interests of either party.
- It is important not to move the child before he/she feels safe with the parents, and the parents have had a realistic view of the child's behavior. Whenever possible, it helps to have an extended visit, longer than a weekend, prior to moving day.

Invite the family to prepare a welcome for the child on the official day of transition. Depending on the desires of the child and family, it may be a simple family celebration or a special meal.

- The younger the child, the more important it is not to have extra people overwhelm the child in the first weeks. Often families want to have big parties or allow many visitors. It is much better to let the child settle for several weeks.

On the first day in the new home, the new family should show the child around, noting where they will sleep, where the toilet is, where they can find food and other supplies, etc.

- In most cases the child will have been in the home on a pre-placement visit, or perhaps will have lived in this home in the past, but this “tour” is comforting to children.
- This is also a good time to tell the child what to do if they awake in the night, etc.
- The parents should offer a snack or meal, help the child unpack, and explain basic “home expectations.”
- Plan for some time for the child to adjust. Parents shouldn’t overwhelm the child with activity; just make sure they know that you are there for them.

Invite the child to share their LifeBook with the family when they are ready.

### **Follow-Up Support**

Purpose and timing of follow up visits:

- Follow up calls and visits provide the opportunity for parents, child, and social worker to identify and resolve problems which have occurred. They should be friendly, informal, supportive, and non-threatening. Remember, the social worker is part of the team focusing on the family’s strengths and building on them.
- When the child has been with the family for a week or two, the social worker should make at least one home visit to provide support and encouragement to the family and child.

- Follow up contact should be made on the phone every week for a month, and through a home visit once a quarter for up to 2 years. More frequent visits can be scheduled if there is a need.

Note that in all calls/visits, the social worker should ask about the positives along with any problem areas/concerns. Most issues will be about mismatched expectations and behaviors the child exhibits that the family finds unacceptable. The social worker should use their listening skills to understand the situation, and help the family problem solve. The purpose of follow up is to continue to support the family and ensure that they are capable of caring for the child and other family members.

Visits should include private conversation with the child to ask what is going well and to identify any problems and provide hope and encouragement.

During early weeks, the child and family will likely be on “honeymoon”, where behavioral issues are minimized, so you may not hear about them at this time. If the adult or child does talk about major problems this early in the placement, it is a serious indication that you must intervene and help them.

- Help adults adjust expectations.
- Remind parents to be patient and focus on building good memories.
- Review positive discipline techniques.
- Refer to community resources as needed.