



Preparing Children for Reintegration

Moving into family based care is a process, not an event. It's a time of change and adjustment, discovery and challenge.

- Any change in primary caregiver is traumatic. There will inevitably be trauma when the child is moved to a different day-to-day caregiver (even if it is their family), especially when the child has formed an attachment to the current caregiver.
- Planning and visitation must be part of any move to a new caregiver to minimize trauma and to increase placement success by helping children feel confident about the change.

A **well-planned move** shows children that:

- There is some predictability in their world. The move takes place for a reason that, with help, they can understand and process.
- The people they value also value them. Their parents and the adults around them care about the pain of moving and will comfort them when they grieve.
- Parents and families will want to get to know them. They are not asking the child to simply change to meet their expectations.
- They will not be moved abruptly and without warning. They can relax instead of guarding themselves.
- Their feelings matter. They matter.
- They are important enough that people will arrange their life events around them.

Lack of proper transition planning and preparation can have a negative impact on the children in many ways:

- Children lose the people to whom they are attached, so they decide not to risk other attachments.
- Children get the message that people are replaceable.
- Children are afraid much of the time. They believe that their worlds can be changed at any moment.
- Children begin to believe that their feelings don't matter. No one really cares how they feel about leaving the home and people they love. They are not worth much.
- Children feel that adults do not have children's best interests in mind. Therefore, they will control adults as much as possible.
- Children decide that they need to either be in charge all of the time or just give up.
- Children lose a sense of who they are. Their identity formation is interrupted. They become easily manipulated by others. They struggle to choose life patterns that fit well, careers, and life partners because they do not have enough sense of self to make these choices.

In transition, pay careful attention to:

- Communicating honestly to children throughout the process -it is difficult but helps them understand each step of what they are going through.
- Maintaining the child's identity and areas of mastery.
- Transferring attachments from one caregiver to another as much as possible.
- Maintaining attachments to prior caregivers, and friends.
- Moving children with as little shock and trauma as possible.
- Helping them calm down and achieve predictability in their new homes as quickly as possible.
- Providing transparency in timelines – explain what is happening more than once to the child.

- Explaining the reason for the transition in a child friendly way, and listening to children's views, hopes and hesitations.
- Remembering to listen, listen, listen to the child's expression of their needs.
- Remaining positive - the attitude of the caregiver toward the transition will influence the child's view of change.

There are **universal messages** that need to be addressed at each point in the process:

- What do you want?
- What do you need?
- How to keep contact with people? Who are the important people in your life?
- You will be safe

Pre-placement visits provide opportunity for the child and family to get reacquainted 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.

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.

Plan out the preplacement visit schedule – move forward as the child and family are ready. Do not rush.

Give the child a written schedule of the visits and process and make every effort to stick to it. It can be difficult for families to accept that the number of visits varies according to the needs and readiness of the child, not their own convenience.

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.

First visit:

- Let the child help plan the activities for the first visit, such as sharing his/her life book or playing a game. Help the child form some questions to ask the family.
- The social worker should facilitate the first meeting that preferably takes place in the child's CCI where the child is surrounded by familiar people. This meeting should be structured and not overwhelm the child.
- Encourage the family to ask questions about the child's routines and preferences in the CCI.
- It is important to check back with everyone after visits to process their reactions and see if they have concerns/questions. Don't forget the child care staff in the CCI.

Next visits:

- After one or more visits in the CCI, encourage a number of visits on neutral ground (park, restaurant, etc) before the child visits the family in their home.
- The parents may take the child on an outing without staff supervision, but it should not be longer than a half day. Remember to process feelings with both sides after each contact, addressing concerns as they arise.
- The next visit can be in the receiving home accompanied by the social worker.
- If all of these visits have been successful, overnight visits can be planned. Develop a "What If" plan with the child and parents. Discuss what the child should do IF . . . he/she wets the bed, wakes up in the night, doesn't like a particular food, gets scared, etc. Let

the family know what to do if the child gets sick, has a temper tantrum, or wants to return to the children's home. This lets the child know that everyone is working together and that problems don't have to be a big deal.

The goal of the transition is for the child to settle in to their home and adjust to their family as soon as possible. Life in a family might be quite different than the life they've had in the CCI.

- Explore the child's wishes, dreams and fantasies about life in the family. What are they hoping for in their family?
- You could complete some worksheets/art projects with the child where they draw or write about what they hope life in the family will be like, Get them to start thinking about their expectations.
- Be sure to discuss the reality of family life: no one is perfect and everyone has some positives and negatives.

The social worker should learn about the **family's culture** through discussions and visits with them. Understand what is important in the family (eg, high marks in school, a neat and tidy home, good manners, involvement in sports, etc.) Share with the child and discuss how they will assimilate into the family's culture, especially in areas that are different than what they are used to.

The social worker should also learn about the **family's dynamics** through discussions and visits with them. (e.g., who is the final decision maker in the family – mom or dad? 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.)

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

Remind the child that this is transition for all family members including parents, siblings, and other family members such as granny or aunty and uncle, so they need to be patient. When they are feeling frustrated, teach them to take a deep breath and say to themselves "Be patient." Tell the child, "If you are feeling like things are out of control, ask a trusted adult for help." (Brainstorm with the child who that might be.)

Maintaining Self-Identity

Definition of self-identity = Recognizing your unique qualities and potential as an individual; help the child understand this definition by explaining it in familiar words

- Help the child identify what they see as their strengths and interests through discussions, worksheets, art activities, etc.
- Reassure the child that what is important to them, and what they truly value does not need to change as they enter their family, but the outlets for their skills and talents may differ. For example, their values around hard work, honesty, being organized, and being energetic do not have to change, but their interest in dance, for example, may not be supported by their family if they do not have the resources to provide lessons... or their interest in playing cricket may not be supported if there is not a team for them to join. They may need to find new ways to build their skills and interests based on what their family's interests and resources can provide.

Activities you could do with the child:

- Lead the child in a discussion (and possibly an art activity) around “Who am I when I am not with you?” to help them understand that their core will not have to change when they move to their family. Hobbies and interests may have to change based on family interests, but they will be the same person at the center of their being.
- You may also want to engage the child in an art project in which they create a mosaic, with the various pieces symbolizing parts of themselves and parts of their past and parts of their family. The finished mosaic shows that the many pieces can be put together to create a beautiful picture.
- What would you like your family to know about you? Make a poster or write a letter describing yourself to your family. Feel free to include anything you would want them to know about you.

Helping the child with the emotions surrounding the transition process.

The work of the child is to grieve old relationships in order to move toward new ones. The work of the social worker and other staff is to support the child through activities that encourage the expression of feelings and thoughts about life experiences.

- Even children looking forward to their transition will have feelings of adjustment and loss.
- Engage, listen, be truthful, validate, create safety, resolve and heal pain of the past.
- Create a safe space and plenty of time for expressing feelings.

Addressing past experiences is necessary in order to move forward:

Loss and grief - Children who live outside of their families often have a long history of losses and unresolved grief. They may have losses directly related to the circumstances that brought them into care (abuse, neglect), and they may experience additional losses when they are separated from their family and caregivers. They need to deal with these losses in order to be able to move on and return to their families.

Children also experience shame and guilt about living outside of their families. They have an innate sense of 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 what really happened that brought them into care - why their families were not able to continue caring for them. A child may experience anger, sadness, and even depression.

Allow children to understand and embrace their past, to look at the roots and gifts from each living situation they've had, and to recognize a way to take these strengths forward.

Building Coping Skills

The social worker should recognize that the child may feel more comfortable discussing transition issues with the current caregivers rather than their (new) family, and the social worker should ensure that the child knows the social worker and other staff are always available to them.

However, the social worker should work with the child and family to resolve issues, and not take the place of the parents as problem solvers.

It is common for the child to experience contradictory emotions. The child may experience feelings of disloyalty to the resource provider for wanting to return home. They may feel disloyal to the (new) family because of their warm feelings for the caregivers and children in the CCI. Let the child know this is common and normal, and it is perfectly ok to share their love.

Give the child space to express their feelings of:

Sadness for leaving the familiarity and comfort of the CCI, the current caregivers, the friends.

Encourage the child to draw pictures or write letters to those left behind, and be sure to set up a system for future communications.

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. When children go home from care outside of the home, families and kids have to get to know each other once more. Parents have changed, and their kids have had experiences in care that their parents don't know about or understand. On top of that, it can be difficult to deal with the anger, guilt and anxiety they all feel, and to show each other the love and happiness they have inside.

In reintegration, the child may wonder, "What is different that makes it safe for me to return? How does my family feel about me going home? Will I go to my old school and how will they react to me? Who do I talk to if negative things happen?"

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?

Build self-calming and anger management skills in preparation for the transition.

Activities to help child express emotions

- Use books and storytelling to help young children express their feelings
- Make a worry box. Help the child write down, draw, paint, cut out of magazines all of their worries about going to their (new) family. Once all of the worries are in the box,

have the child close the worries in the box and put the box away. Every once in a while, address the worries in the box and see if they are still worries. When the child is ready, destroy or get rid of the box in an appropriate way. (e.g. throw away, burn, step on etc.) You could encourage the child to take the worry box (or the concept) to their new home and teach the parents how to help the child use it.

Caregiver emotions – Don't forget that the child's caregivers (and you as the social worker) will have emotions about the child's transition, too. Be aware of the caregiver's and your own emotions and judgments. Understand that you will experience sadness at the loss, and anxiety around the child's future. It is ok to share your sad feelings with the child, but don't overwhelm them with your concerns. Remember, the child will pick up on your apprehension, so remain positive.

Transition Day

Children often have a hard time saying good bye and need the help of adults to do so in a positive manner. Depending on the child, you may want to hold a small good bye party with the staff and other children. However, some children might find this overwhelming and would prefer a quiet send off. In any case, allow the other children to prepare a card, and invite the staff to write their best wishes to the child.

- Help the child pack up their belongings in a cute, personalized bag to give them the dignity and respect they deserve (never pack things in a trash bag or old box).
- Give the child an object that has meaning to them from the CCI. This gives them something remember or think of that would make them feel loved.
- You may want to consider sending the child off with a "Happiness Pack" from the CCI, which includes some or all of the following items:

A candle – to light the way

A star – to wish upon

A string – to hold themselves together when things get tough

A Coin – so they are never without money

A Rubber band – for when they are stretched to the limit

An Eraser – to erase their mistakes

A Heart – to show they are always loved.

The social worker should help the parents plan a small celebration to welcome the child into their home.

The social worker should accompany the child to the new home and help them feel settled when they arrive. Be sure to let the child know when you will be following up, and let them know where to contact you if they need you sooner.