

# MANAGING PLACEMENT TRANSITIONS RIGHT TIME VIDEO

## Key Points

### General Information

Everyone experiences transitions, and while some changes can be positive, transitions can have a major impact on children who have been separated from their parents through the child welfare system or through adoption. For these children especially, transitions can affect their short- and long-term well-being. As defined in this video, the different types of transitions include children who move from one foster home to another foster home or to an adoptive home, children who move from their birth home into foster care or an adoptive home, children who move from residential care to a foster home, and children who move from foster care back to their birth home. When each of these transitions take place, the move has consequences for the child's physical surroundings and numerous areas of their life, including emotions, relationships, and education. Given the extent of the impact transitions can have on a child's life, it is critically important to find ways to minimize the disruption caused to the child by making transitions less traumatic.

Depending on the situation, parents who are fostering or adopting will have different roles in a transition, including the following:

- Preparing to receive a child into their home who is moving from a hospital, shelter, group home, foster home, or juvenile facility.
- Helping a child move out of your home and into another home such as the home of a relative, an adoptive home, or, in the best-case scenario, back into their birth parents' home.
- Caring for a child who has just been separated from their parents or a child who needs to leave a placement unexpectedly (unplanned moves are often due to an emergency or dangerous situation).

### Part 2: Prepare Children for Moving to a New Placement

- Whether you are welcoming a child into your home or helping a child transition out of your home, planning and preparation are key to a successful, smooth transition.
- Be thoughtful and planful in preparing a child for a transition. When possible, it can be helpful for all the parties involved in a transition to meet beforehand to get to know each other, discuss any concerns, and talk about what each person needs to do to make the child's transition go smoothly.

- Reaching out to a child’s caseworker can be helpful, especially to learn the child’s history and needs. For example, knowing a child’s school history can be very helpful but that information is rarely given in the child’s file notes and given to the new placement during transitions.
- If parents who are fostering or adopting are not able to talk with the child’s parents, another option might be speaking with other adults who are important in the child’s life such as an extended family member, a teacher, or a neighbor. Not only can these other adults offer additional information about the child but they can also stay connected with the child and provide important emotional support. When parents who are fostering or adopting reach out to cooperate and collaborate with other adults important to the child, it can be a powerful way for the child to feel that their “old life” and “new life” are integrated. It is very important for the child to see that adults with important roles in their life are all working together on their behalf.
- For planned moves, “pre-placement visits” can help a child feel more at ease with the transition. If possible, have the child visit the new home and their new neighborhood. If the child is not able to visit the home, explore other possibilities such as visiting the child where they are currently living or having a video chat with child and showing them your home during the chat. If the child is currently living in a residential facility, it is important to visit the child at the facility before the move.
- Parents who are fostering or adopting can get a good sense of the child’s routines and preferences by spending time with the child before the transition. This informal time together could include activities such as taking the child to their medical appointments, participating in therapy with the child, or going clothes shopping. The people who are currently caring for the child are a valuable resource for learning as much as possible about the child’s preferences, routines, likes, and dislikes.
- Creating a photo album for the child is another option for preparing a child for a transition. The photos will help the child become familiar with their new home and the people, places and things in, their new environment. Be sure to label the photos with names so the child can learn everyone’s name before moving into the new home.
- Pre-placement visits can help the child feel they have some choice and control in the move. These visits enable a child to feel they have an active role in process and are selecting you as much as you are selecting them.
- If possible, talk to the child about the timing of the move. The child might not want to move until after a big event such as a school field trip, prom, or sporting event. When possible, plan a transition to coincide with a normal break (school holiday, summer) so that the child can finish meaningful events and have time to prepare for the move.

### **Part 3: Create a Welcoming Environment**

- Thoughtful preparation will help the child joining your family to feel welcome and connected. During the early days after the child has moved in, limit the number of new people in your home

because a child can be easily overwhelmed by being in a new environment and surrounded by unfamiliar people. Make sure to build in time for the child to just relax and adjust to the home.

- Some practical ideas to create a welcoming environment include the following:
  - Ask the child to talk about foods they like and don't like, and then try and to have some of their preferred foods in the home.
  - Ask the child about their preferences and pet peeves in their daily life. For example, ask how they would like you to wake them in the morning.
  - Soon after the child moves into your home, take them clothes shopping so they feel like they fit into the environment and have clothes similar to those of the other children in the home or at school.
  - Let the child decorate or paint their room and/or make some decisions about decoration.
    - Find out if the child has hobbies or special interests, and then encourage the child to pursue their interest by making the materials or space needed available.
    - Place photos of the child prominently in your home.
    - On the night the child arrives in your home, make a special meal, including some of the child's preferred or favorite foods.

#### **Part 4: Set-up for Success**

- After the child has had some time to adjust to the home, engage the child in light conversations about curfew, safety, chores, and the household's rules and routines. Having this kind of conversation helps the child to know what is expected of them. If there are other children in the home, have the child talk to the other children about rules and expectations. It is important for the parents who are fostering or adopting to recognize that the child is coming from a completely different environment and will need time to get used to their new home and new environment. Therefore, it is important that parents who are fostering or adopting are flexible with routines in the first few days after a child has moved into the home.
- Be respectful of belongings the child brings with them. Even if the belongings appear dirty or broken, don't wash or throw out anything without first getting the child's permission. A scruffy toy or blanket might hold powerful, comforting memories for the child.
- Pay close attention for emotional triggers and stay aware of and be attentive to signs of distress or changes in the child's behavior.
- Supply personal items the child might need, but don't overwhelm the child with gifts or toys.
- Check-in with any other children in the home to see how they are adjusting to having another child in the home.
- Not all placements can be carefully planned and some must be carried out as an emergency. Emergency placements should be approached with extra care, especially if it is the first time the child has been removed from their birth home.

- Recognize that while you might be excited about the child moving into your home, the child might feel that this is the worst day of their life.
- Parents who are fostering should make it clear to the child that they recognize the child's pain and want to be supportive. Clearly communicate to the child that you understand this might be a difficult time for them and you understand they might be feeling many emotions, ranging from feeling sad and confused to even feeling excited about something in the new home. Tell the child you are there to support them and you are pleased to have them as a part of your home.
- Especially with emergency placements, it is helpful for the child to understand that parents who are fostering or adopting do not have expectations of them when they first move into the home.

### **Part 5: Preparing Children for Leaving a Placement**

- Children might need to move out of a placement for various reasons, including reunification with birth parents, adoption by another family, or moving to a new living situation.
- When a child is going to move out of a placement, it is important to start talking with the child about the move as early as possible. Prepare the child for the transition by asking about their concerns, talking about their feelings about the move, providing encouragement, giving them any details you have about where and when they will be moving, and answering their questions as best as possible.
- If possible, reach out to the next family who will be caring for the child and establish a relationship. Building this connection is a great way for the parents in the next placement to learn about the child's routines, habits, health considerations, likes, and dislikes.
- To reduce the stress of a transition, give close attention to planning the logistics of the move. Think about what details need to be wrapped up before the move, such as completing a school project or a final dental procedure. Consider arrangements you will need to make to ensure the child has contact with important people in their life such as visits with extended family members and/or siblings.
- If you make pre-placement visits to the new home, afterward be sure to check in with the child because a casual conversation can provide clues about the child's readiness to move.
  - Be encouraging about the move while also being supportive of the child's emotions;
  - Check for signs that the child is starting to make sense of all that is happening and is beginning to accept the move. For example, it can be a positive sign if the child has started leaving things at the new home.
  - Communicate with the child's caseworker about how ready the child seems to move.
- Remember that loss is a part of every transition; everyone experiences loss when a child moves.
- Make sure the child understands they are not being moved because they did something wrong; clearly explain the reasons for the move. For example, a judge might have decided the child should leave your home or the move might be the result of their parents doing the hard work required to have the child return home. Be sure the child understands they are loved and will not be forgotten.

Create a leaving ritual; for example, prepare a special goodbye dinner during which everyone shares stories and pictures about their experiences together.

- It is critically important to limit the number of moves a child has to make. When parents who are fostering or adopting have requested a child be moved out of their home, the child will likely feel rejected, unwanted, and unloved. This is why parents who are fostering or adopting should not accept children whose needs are beyond the parents' level of skill. While stretching your skills to meet a challenge can be a good way of increasing capacity, when a child is involved, it is better to build as many skills as possible before following a path that can lead to more loss if the placement does not work out.
- Regardless of the circumstances, when a child leaves a home, parents who are fostering or adopting will experience a loss. These parents should remember to take good care of themselves and to check in with their support systems. A child's transition out of a placement not only affects the child but also impacts parents who are fostering or adopting. The days and weeks around transitions are times when self-care is important. In addition, it is important that parents who are fostering or adopting have a support network they can reach out to for support.
- When possible, parents who are fostering or adopting should keep a connection with the child who has moved from their home. Just because people cannot always live together does not mean a relationship has to be broken. No child can have too many adults in their life to love, encourage, and support them. Rather than a move meaning the child is losing people, keeping a connection grows the child's support network. Maintaining a connection can be powerful because even if the child struggles after the move, they will still know their support people are just a phone call away.
- Overall, the most important thing is to make sure the child knows they matter. When a child leaves your home, the goal should always be that the child is in better shape than when they first arrived.