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## MANAGING PLACEMENT TRANSITIONS QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### **Question 1: What are some general strategies to support children moving (or *transitioning*) from one foster home to another or from a foster home to an adoptive home?**

Be honest with children about why they are leaving one home and transitioning to another. A child naturally will feel anxious, no matter what the reasons for the move, and will need clear, honest information. You will need to tailor this information to the child's developmental age; that is the age at which the child functions emotionally, physically and socially. Because traumatic experiences can interrupt development, a child's developmental and chronological ages can be different.

Parents who are fostering or adopting a child need to accept all of the feelings the child might have about the move. These could include feelings of sadness, anger, fear, happiness or relief. Whenever possible, let the child take part in planning and making decisions for the move. Allow the child to decide what to bring along or how to say, "Goodbye," to special people.

Don't put too much attention on the child's behavior related to the transition, just enough to help you understand how the child might be feeling about the move. Don't expect the child to "act your age" and not react emotionally to the transition. Remember that during times of change, children might return to behaviors they had when they were younger (called *regression*), such as thumb-sucking or bed-wetting. This regression to earlier behaviors is normal. Your goal is to meet the underlying needs behind the behaviors you observe. For example, regression to thumb-sucking might mean all the changes in the child's life have made the child feel insecure. So, the child might need more reassurance and extra comforting.

If a child doesn't want to talk, it is important that you not force a conversation. Instead, stay available; and offer comfort as needed. Stay close, but not too close. Maybe check on the child frequently, but don't hover. It is normal for a child to need space and time to feel comfortable during transitions. If a child is moving into your home, one way of helping with the adjustment is to find out what the child likes or what makes the child feel comfortable. Then include these things in your daily routine from the start. For example, you might cook the child's favorite meal, have a favorite snack food available or plan an activity that you know the child enjoys.

If a child is leaving your home, make sure all of the child's belongings go to the new home as well. Give the child pictures and special mementos that will help the child to remember you and your home. Depending on the child's age and the situation, give your contact information so the child can stay in touch.

If a child is moving into your home from another place, let the child keep all personal belongings, even those that seem old or not in good shape. Give the child plenty of time and space to unpack and to settle in. This might take longer than you expect.

## **Question 2: What is a disruption, and what are some strategies to prevent disruptions?**

**Disruptions** are moves that are not required to happen but instead occur because a parent feels unable to care for the child in the parent's home. There are many things you can do to prevent placement disruptions.

First, if a disruption does occur, children need specific, factual information about the events leading up to the disruption and the cause of it. Nothing is more frightening and unsettling for a child than not knowing why something happened. If a child does not have the chance to grieve the loss of his/her family members, the child will have a harder time accepting a new family. Lifebooks are a good tool to help children work through their difficult experiences. Lifebooks are a collection of pictures, important papers and other items that a child can view over and over again to help sort out feelings about all of the changes in the child's life. When a child feels comfortable sharing a personal Lifebook with you, going through the book together can be a great way to connect and to comfort the child about experiences of loss and trauma. When given enough time and support, most children will express their feelings in their own time. Helping children to stay in touch with important people in their lives also is a good way to prevent disruptions. If appropriate and in the best interests of a child, make sure the child has contact and visits with his/her family members (parents, siblings, grandparents etc.) and other persons who have had important roles in the child's life.<sup>1</sup>

Second, parents who foster or adopt need to continue learning more about the kinds of issues and experiences that have influenced children in their care. Knowing this background can help parents to be not only more realistic but also better able to recognize even small signs of progress. Families that are fostering or adopting need to attend trainings that will help them to understand the child in their care better. These parents need to seek training opportunities that will help them learn to parent the child in a way that is trauma-informed and responsive. Parents may wish to consult a child's case manager about upcoming trainings or other local resources focused on building trauma-informed parenting responses. Many useful resources can be found on the Child Welfare Information Gateway ([www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)) and The National Child Traumatic Stress Network ([nctsn.org](http://nctsn.org)).

Third, families also need a network of caring people whom they can call for support so that the family can be strong for the child. Being able to talk with other foster and adoptive parents can help families adjust to having a new child in the home. Staying in contact with the child's previous foster parents can be a good support for the child and for the new parents who are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nacac.org/resource/plan-prepare-support-prevent-disruptions/>

fostering or adopting. The previous foster parents might even be able to provide respite care (planned or emergency temporary care). Respite care can give you a break while giving the child a chance to visit and to reconnect with a previous foster family. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Requesting help from your caseworker or other professionals working with you and the child is a sign not of weakness but of strength. Reach out early and often for help and support.

Fourth, make sure to take time for yourself, your other relationships and the activities you like to do. Your good self-care will help the child in your home by allowing you to "recharge your batteries," which will make you better able to respond to the child's needs.<sup>2</sup>

Last, work with the child's case manager to find out as much about the child's background as possible. The more you understand about this, the more you will be able to understand the child's behaviors.

Remember that when a child comes into your home, you need to focus first on building a relationship with the child. This can be hard because a child's behavior often makes it difficult for you to connect with each other. You will need to remember that if the child has moved around a lot, the child probably will take some time to become willing to trust and to connect with someone new. A child who has experienced loss and rejection may try to avoid future feelings of loss and rejection by acting in ways that seem sabotaging of the placement. "I'll reject you before you have the chance to reject me" can be a way for a child to protect oneself emotionally. By recognizing that this is how the child is coping with the overwhelming feelings of loss and rejection, you can prepare yourself not to take things personally and to focus instead on helping the child to feel safe and connected and to know that you care.

Predictability and structure will help a child feel safe and will begin to build trust. Telling a child new to your care about your daily routines and then following your routines as much as possible is important so that the child can predict what is coming next. Make sure that your expectations are consistent. This consistency will help the child adjust to you and to your home. Give the child time to adjust and to become settled in the home. Settling in will take time, and setbacks might occur along the way. Any time you feel as though you have hit a bump, reach out for help before the bump grows into a situation and the situation becomes a crisis.

**Question 3: What are some key ingredients of a well-planned move from one foster home to another or a transition from a foster home to an adoptive home?**

Child welfare professionals often use the term *planful transition* to refer to the process and the final plan for a child's smooth and successful move to a new home. A planful transition involves everyone with responsibility for the child's well-being (the child welfare agency, foster parents, birth parents, therapists, caseworkers, etc.). All of these persons work together to ensure that the transition is well thought-out and that all actions are chosen with the aims of:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nacac.org/resource/plan-prepare-support-prevent-disruptions/>

- easing the trauma that a move can cause a child,
- helping to maintain the child's connections to his/her family, to previous foster families and to others important to the child, and
- easing the child's relationship building with a new caregiver.

A planful transition is made specifically for each child by considering the child's unique background, developmental stage, psychological and emotional needs, physical and mental well-being, safety and connections with current and future caregivers. A planful transition provides information to let the child know how to stay in touch after the move with persons who were important to the child before the move. The child also will need a chance to say, "Goodbye," not only to persons in the home but also to others important to the child, such as teachers or friends in the former neighborhood. All of the child's belongings should be packed carefully into a suitcase and moved with the child to the new home. Allow the child to keep all of these things, even those that look worn out or not in good shape.

### **Preparing a child to leave your home**

Here are some things you can do to help with a smooth, successful transition while preparing for a child to leave your home. First, share information with the child about the move or transition. Giving advance notice of a transition lets the child start to make mental adjustments to the move. Older children are more likely to need more notice of a move than younger children. Think about school or community activities in which the child takes part (such as community sports teams or Scouts). As much as possible, plan the timing of the move to limit the child having to miss important events. Give the child something special that represents the time you spent together. This could include pictures of you and the child together and other mementos from the time the child stayed with you. Accept all of the emotions that the child might have about leaving, and don't take it personally if the child starts to withdraw from you. If possible, try to time the move at a natural break in school such as the summer break or winter holiday. If possible before the day of the actual move, take the child on several visits to the new home where the child will be moving. Make sure to give the child time to ask questions and to express worries about the move.

### **Preparing a child to move into your home**

Try to meet with the child one or more times before the day of the move. If you cannot meet in person, then call the child on the phone; or schedule a video chat such as a Skype or FaceTime call. To help a child moving into their home know what to expect, some families give the child a scrapbook or album with pictures of their home and their family members. This lets the child see what the house and family look like before the move.

If you are able to meet the child in person before the move, consider having your first meeting in the child's current home, where the child will feel more comfortable. On the next visit, you might consider meeting the child in a park or other neutral location. After that, you might invite the child and the current caregiver to your home for a short visit. Finally, the child, unaccompanied, can spend time with you in your home before moving day.

On the day of the move, make sure that you have time to spend with the child to provide extra support. The child will need time to get used to the new home. If a child doesn't want to talk, it is important that you not force a conversation. Instead, stay available; and offer comfort as needed. Stay close, but not too close. Maybe check on the child frequently, but don't hover. It is normal for a child to need space and time to feel comfortable during transitions.

During and after a move, you should expect some bumps in the road and that your routines will need some adjustments. Little things that you hadn't considered might cause a temporary wrinkle that will need to be ironed out. For example, if the previous foster parents allowed the child to give their dog treats from the table, the child might take a while to learn and to remember that you don't want your dog to get table treats. Encouraging continued contact with persons important to the child before the move into your home can provide good support for the child during the transition. You will want to keep in touch with the child's former foster family to get answers to questions about what the child likes, the child's routine, favorite activities and the kinds of things that seem to give the child the most comfort.

**Question 4: How can parents who are fostering a child help the child to maintain connections with his/her family as well as other persons important to the child?**

Parents who are fostering need to talk with the caseworker about maintaining the child's connections. The caseworker can provide knowledge, guidance and input about the child's family members and other persons important in the child's life with whom maintaining contact is encouraged.

In some cases, a court will order a specific visitation plan for the child, parents, siblings or others connected to the child. It will be necessary to follow this plan. Caseworkers, parents who foster and those monitoring visits may have a responsibility to provide information that will assist the court in determining a visitation plan that best meets the needs of the child to maintain important connections safely.

Once a plan has been developed, either with the caseworker or through the court, the parent who is fostering will be an important partner helping to ensure that these connections are maintained for the child. Among the ways to maintain these connections are inviting members of the child's family to celebrations, school events and other activities where the child is participating; facilitating visitations; hosting visitations, and allowing the child to write letters to family members or to call them. Parents who are fostering also can help to keep these connections intact by allowing the child to keep personal belongings brought with the child to the foster home. A child's personal items can represent connections to family members. Belongings such as stuffed animals or blankets may evoke sensations or memories attached to them that can be comforting to the child. It is also important for parents who are fostering never to talk about the child's family in a negative manner. Encourage the child to display family pictures in your home and to share stories and memories about these family

members. If the child is from a different culture than your own, find ways to incorporate part of that culture into your own family, such as through food, music, holidays and rituals.

Children can benefit as well from maintaining connections with previous foster parents and caregivers. Some children might have spent time in group homes or other settings where they formed relationships with staff members. Classmates, friends or children with whom they lived in previous homes may be additional connections. Talk with the child about persons previously important in the child's life. Then consult with the caseworker about the advisability of maintaining these connections.

### **Question 5: What do children say they need during a transition?**

Children tell us that they need parents who are fostering or adopting them to make them feel comfortable during transitions.

- They don't want to feel "different." They want to be treated just like other children in their new home.
- Children want parents who are "real" with them and parents who do what they say they will do. (In other words, they want parents who can be trusted to keep their promises, to keep their word).
- They need parents to "take it slow" with them, to ask them what they need and to be prepared to teach them what they have missed previously.
- They need parents to give them space and time to talk about persons who are important to them.
- They need parents who will get to know them and who will incorporate into the daily routines of the household the activities that the children like to do.

Although setting basic rules for your home is important, you need to avoid having so many rules that a child moving into your home feels overwhelmed or unwelcome.

### **Question 6: What are some practical techniques to make sure that children moving into your home will feel welcome and connected?**

Many techniques can help a child moving into a home feel welcome. Whether a particular technique is practical for a specific child depends on the child's age and personality. Following are suggested techniques for you to consider putting into practice as a parent fostering or adopting:

- Recognize that the child has experienced a loss due to the move. Talk with the child; interact with the child in ways that show you are aware of the loss and that you care. Offer support for whatever the child is feeling.

- Instead of asking the child to get to know you, show your interest in getting to know the child. However, don't pepper the child with a lot of questions. Allow time and space for the child to share with you what the child feels is important.
- Limit your activities and commitments that will take you away from home so that you can spend as much time as possible with the child.
- Tell the child about your daily routines. Follow those routines as much as possible so that the child can predict what is coming next.
- Cook the child's favorite food upon arrival in your home. Let the child help to pick out groceries so you will have some of the child's favorite foods and snacks available in your home.
- Provide the child with opportunities to make choices about matters over which the child can exercise some control, such as how to arrange the bedroom, which clothes to wear, which foods to eat.
- Take the child on a tour of the house. Explain any critical rules the child needs to know, such as house rules about going into another person's bedroom. Focus on the major rules – don't give the child a long list of rules that can make the child feel overwhelmed or unwelcome.
- Give the child time and space to feel comfortable with the new living arrangement.

**Question 7: What are some practical techniques to make sure that children moving out of your home have a smooth transition?**

Many techniques can help to ensure that a transition out of a home happens as smoothly as possible. All of them won't work for all children; some depend on the age and personality of the child. Below are some strategies that might make a difficult move a little smoother:

- Provide advance notice and time to prepare for the transition. Plan at least several weeks of transition time for children who are in the elementary years and older. If the move happens too fast, the child will have a harder time understanding the reasons for the move. Let the child plan and make some decisions about the move to experience a sense of having some control over it. For example, allow the child to make decisions about which belongings to take to the new home and how soon to let friends know about the upcoming move.
- Whenever possible, try to time the transition during a natural break in the child's school year, such as during summer break or winter holiday break.
- Talk with the child about the move, including your feelings about it. Let the child know you are aware that the move is a loss for the child, and give the child plenty of time and opportunities to express feelings about it. Be honest, but make sure that what you communicate does not contribute to the child feeling guilty or to blame for the move. Children need time to come to terms with the reality of the loss of persons they have come to know and surroundings that have become familiar to them. They will need help filling in the blanks about what happened or what caused the move so they can go forward in their lives.

- If possible, find a way to maintain your connection with the child after the move, including staying in touch through Facebook, text messages, phone calls or video chats (such as FaceTime or Skype).
- Connect with the place where the child is moving, and let the caregivers there know about the child's dislikes and likes. You can do this through a phone call, a logbook that the child takes to the new home, or both.
- Give the child pictures to preserve memories of the time spent in your home. Write names and dates on the back of the photos. If possible, create a scrapbook or photo album that records all of the major events in the child's life that took place while the child was in your home.

**Question 8: What impact do transitions have on children's lives, including their emotional, educational, relational and physical well-being?**

All children need caregivers who are consistent and able to meet their needs. Having their needs met by a trustworthy, reliable person helps children to develop the security to explore the world and to learn new skills. This supportive relationship also helps children learn that they can rely on others to help them.

Children who are moved too fast or too often start to believe that all relationships with people and homes will disappear sooner or later. Children who have experienced many moves or sudden moves are likely to feel angry or helpless about losing important persons in their lives. These feelings can negatively impact their ability to form emotional bonds with their new caregivers. To protect themselves from experiencing more loss and pain, these children unintentionally might try to stay emotionally distant from new people and their new home.] One young lady in care said that she had stopped making friends because always having to say, "Goodbye," was too painful for her.

Too many moves can cause children to become insecure and fearful. They might think that anything can happen, at any minute, without any notice. This is a scary way to experience the world.

A child who moves from one home to another can lose touch with persons who helped the child to grow and who know the stories about important happenings in the child's life. When children move over and over again, they lose even more connections to persons with whom they have shared experiences. Because of experiencing this loss over and over again, these children can have difficulty staying connected to their past. This can lead to the children feeling disconnected, confused, alone or lost. They might decide not to take chances with new persons; and that choice can stop them from forming connections with a new family, new friends or a new community. Children with a history of many moves might feel as though they have holes in their past. That feeling can affect the way they view themselves and their place in the world. Over the years, these children might forget homes where they have lived, persons with whom they have shared a home, or even periods in their lives.



When a child feels unable to rely on a caregiver to be consistent and to meet the child's needs, the child's emotions may intensify; the child might even reject a caregiver's attempts to provide help or comfort. This rejection can make the caregiver feel pushed away by the child. The child also might feel a lack of control over life. Because of this feeling, as a means of trying to take control, the child might behave in ways that disturb routines and create chaos in the home. By generating extreme disorder and making life difficult for everyone in the household, the child feels in charge of causing the move — which the child believes is inevitable and unavoidable — rather than somebody else making that decision.

Children who have moved over and over again might not develop a strong self-identity. Self-identity is the way a person thinks of oneself, such as the individual's personality, skills and abilities, physical features and beliefs. Children without a strong self-identity can be led, controlled or influenced easily by others. Even as these children grow older, they often have difficulty choosing a career or the right partner because they don't trust themselves to make these choices. All of these issues make it critically important for caregivers to keep trying to connect with the child and to work hard to meet the child's needs as much as possible. Children in care have said it is important to them that caregivers actually **do** what they say they will do. In other words, caregivers need to be consistent and reliable to become worthy of the child's trust.

**Question 9: How can American Indian Alaskan Native parents who are adopting support a child's transition from foster care to customary adoption?**

Customary adoption's purpose is to address the American Indian Alaskan Native child's need for permanency and consistency while also meeting the need of the child to maintain connections within the culture and community of the tribe. Not all tribal nations have customary adoption available as a permanency option. It is important to note that for customary adoption to take place, it must be with the consent and participation of the child's tribe. Tribes can differ in their laws and customs regarding their approach to customary adoption. For example, some tribes may not require that the child's parents or the child to give consent for the customary adoption to proceed. However, this does not mean that input from the child's parents or the child is not obtained. For tribal customary adoption to take place, it must be deemed by the tribe an appropriate permanency plan for the child.

A common factor in customary adoption is that the child's parents' rights are not legally terminated. A major reason for customary adoption is to prevent the loss of birth parents and tribal culture that can be associated with Western adoptions when the American Indian Alaskan Native parents' rights are terminated.

If a child is moving from a foster home into a new home to obtain customary adoption, the child likely will experience loss related to the move. The child's loss of foster parents likely will be in addition to the sense of loss that the child feels about not being able to live with his/her

parents. If the child and the foster parents have built a strong relationship, it may be in the child's best interest to maintain the bridge between the former foster parents and the parents who are adopting because this can provide an uninterrupted network of support.

If a child is not leaving a home but instead is transitioning to a new permanency goal, recognizing the child's sense of loss about being unable to return to live with his/her parents is still important. In both scenarios, the child needs to know that their parents will retain their rights and will continue to be a part of the child's life. Customary adoption should be viewed as a way to expand the child's family, not taking away a part of the child's family.

Just as tribal nations differ in their approaches to customary adoption, the situation of each child and family varies. There is no cookie-cutter approach dictating how to proceed with a child making such a transition. Therefore, the parents who are fostering and the parents who are adopting need to have ongoing communication with the child to help the child make sense of what is happening.

Because customary adoption does not terminate the child's parents' rights, this can leave open the possibility of reunification. Even if a successful reunification is slow to progress or does not happen, customary adoption guarantees the child access to tribal customs, culture and community, which normally is left to the discretion of the adoptive parents. With customary adoption, the child need not fear being moved to another foster home or having to give up their birth parents (which is viewed by tribal nations who employ this permanency option as an unnatural condition). This needs to be explained to the child and reinforced as often as necessary.

Here are some techniques to help a child in transition by promoting understanding, communication and reduction of fear:

- Reinforce that the child is loved and cared for by many people and that this change is expanding their family not taking away their family. In customary adoption, both sets of parents have a parenting role.
- Explain to the child that while living in a customary adoptive home, the child also will remain or become an important part of a tribal community that supports and is in many ways similar to the child. Explain that this will include efforts to pave the way for the child to have connections or visits with extended family members and other tribal community members, as appropriate.
- Reinforce the child's American Indian Alaskan Native identity by demonstrating behaviors that show acceptance. Encourage and support the child's exploration and ongoing learning about tribal customs and culture.
- If possible, work with the child's parents in shared parental decision-making so that the child sees them not as "lost" but as part of the expanded family caring for the child.