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**NTDC Right Time  
FAMILY DYNAMICS  
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Question 1: When thinking about fostering or adopting a child, which family issues should parents consider?**

Families who are thinking about fostering or adopting not only will need the ability to handle their existing challenges but also the responsibilities and challenges of parenting another child. Those already parenting children may find it hard to devote the time and energy necessary to give a new child the amount of care and attention that will be required. An honest self-assessment of your time, energy and the supports your family will need to foster or to adopt successfully is essential.

Starting from a position of strength while also thinking through possible challenges is helpful when building new relationships. What do you consider your parenting strengths? Which age groups do you feel you can parent most effectively? Are you most comfortable and successful with toddlers or with teens? Think about the different challenges that you might face when another child enters your family. Which ones do you feel most equipped to handle? Which ones might you need more support to handle well? Many foster and adoptive parents originally felt they could not handle certain situations but then discovered themselves more capable than they had thought at first. Which special skills do you have? Some families do well with multiple children who have similar needs (such as children who are medically fragile or on the autism spectrum) because these families have gained the skills and knowledge necessary to meet these special needs successfully.

You need to evaluate honestly how much time, energy and resources you will have to meet everyone else's needs while still making sure to take care of your own. Self-care is critical. It is the practice of taking an active role in protecting your own well-being and happiness, especially during periods of stress. Self-assess your own history of trauma and loss. Think about what likely could be triggered in your mind if you foster or adopt a child whose history has similarities to your own. Make an honest evaluation of which challenges and situations you can and cannot handle. Also understand that you will continue to grow during the journey of fostering or adopting a child.

It is critical for parents who are fostering and adopting to understand that they and their whole household will have to make many adjustments to meet the needs of a child placed in their home. Many parents expect the opposite; they expect the child to do all the adapting. A child placed in your home should not be expected to make all the changes and to fall in line with the standards or patterns of your family life. Talking with other parents who have fostering or adopting experience can help you to learn what to expect and to get advice. They can share

strategies for providing the best support to all children in the family while adjustments are being made. Families need to look at their current routines and schedules and to make sure they are truly willing to make the changes and adjustments in their lives that will make a new child feel welcome in their family. Parents also need to consider the makeup of their family, including the ages of children in the home and how fostering or adopting a child will impact each member of the family and the family as a whole.

**Question 2: What are some ways that a family's "dynamic" or methods of functioning might change with the addition of a new child?**

The term *family dynamics* refers to the patterns and ways in which family members interact and function as a family. Adding children to your home will impact several areas of your family's dynamics. All families are made up of several sets of relationships, sometimes called *subsystems*. For example, parents are a subsystem within the family system. Children in the family are another subsystem, and each parent-child relationship is yet another subsystem. If there are two parents in the family and no children, a child joining the family results in three new subsystems: (1) Parent One and the child, (2) Parent Two and the child and (3) both parents and the child. However, adding a child to a family of three results in an additional eight subsystems! This means that there are many different relationships within the family that will need to be developed and nurtured.

When new members are added to a family, the previous relationships change. Parents who might have agreed all the time on previous matters can begin to be at odds about how to handle new challenges. Children already in the home might show behavior changes such as having tantrums, acting out or returning to behaviors they exhibited when they were younger (called *regressing*), such as thumb-sucking. These behavior changes might happen either because the children feel they are not getting the amount of attention they used to receive or because they are confused or anxious about the changes occurring in the family.

Fostering or adopting can change relationships with extended family members such as aunts, uncles or grandparents as well. Some extended family members might be very supportive of the decision to foster or to adopt. Others might not understand or support that decision. Family gatherings can become more difficult. They may have to be adapted to accommodate the child who has moved into your home. Talk with your extended family members before fostering or adopting a child. Let them know that you want them to be a part of your growing family and that you expect the new child to be welcomed by all family members. Be sure to share training videos and articles with them and to invite them to other educational opportunities such as panel presentations where they can learn about fostering and adopting.

For kinship caregivers, the changes in roles and relationships can be challenging and confusing for everyone involved. Grandparents become parents; parents, uncles and aunts become siblings; cousins become siblings or nieces and nephews. Each of these relationships has its own unique dynamic. While everyone is learning to adjust, it is important to ensure that the family

remains whole and connected. You can do this by keeping the lines of communication open, anticipating and preparing for changes and challenges, and having patience with family members as they learn to make changes.

Your **social network** (i.e., your network of friends, family, coworkers, etc.) and connections to your community are another set of dynamics that will change when you foster or adopt. Family members and friends will have differing opinions about fostering or adopting. Some might be very supportive while others will find it too difficult or uncomfortable to deal with the behaviors of a child who has experienced trauma, separation and loss. Parents who foster or adopt commonly make changes in their social network. For example, visiting the home of a friend or family member might become more challenging. Visitors coming to your home might disrupt schedules necessary for the new child to remain regulated.

Sometimes the activities the family did prior to fostering or adopting might not work as well once a new child has moved into the home. You must be willing to make some changes to your routines and activities to include the new child. However, it is also important for you to balance these changes so that the routines and activities for children already in your home can stay intact as much as possible. At first, you probably will find it harder to spend time outside of your home. Be prepared for this; have alternative plans to ease the tension or anxiety. While everyone is adjusting to a new normal, don't try to do too much. Limit your work and personal commitments as much as possible. During this period of adjustment, you will need to focus most of your attention on your family.

**Question 3: What can parents who are fostering or adopting do to ease the emotional stress that they or others in their home might experience?**

One of the best ways to ease your emotional stress is to look for support from other parents who have fostered or adopted a child. They can help you learn what to expect and can give you practical advice about how to deal with the stress you might experience. Joining a support group or being around families who are going through similar situations can be a great way to deal with emotional stress.

Handling parenting challenges becomes easier when we have positive relationships with family members, friends and neighbors. Having a network of caring people in our lives helps us to feel secure, confident, supported and empowered—which helps us all to become better parents. Your social network is an important source of support, especially while you are adjusting to caring for a new child. You can build a strong social network by focusing on the relationships in which you feel respected and appreciated. You will want to build a strong circle of persons to whom you can turn as different situations arise.

Foster and adoptive parents need to practice good self-care. Good self-care enables you to be hopeful and to prepare for the future. When you anticipate challenging situations and make plans for what you will do if they occur, you will be less likely to feel overwhelmed when they

happen. Part of self-care is preparing yourself for challenges. You can prepare yourself for the challenges of fostering or adopting a child by taking advantage of training and other opportunities to learn new skills. Self-care also means asking for help when you need it. Accepting help is important. You might need to practice doing that. Don't be afraid to let your case manager know when you need help or additional support.

Nonstop parenting can be stressful. You need to ensure that you take time to do things you enjoy. Find a way to have at least a few minutes to yourself every day. A few small ways to find stress relief include: taking a walk, enjoying a relaxing bath, reading a book, sitting on the porch, listening to music or drinking a cup of herbal tea. For some people, keeping a journal is an important tool to express emotions and to vent frustrations. Make laughter a part of your household. Laugh at the silly things, and celebrate the small victories.

Don't expect life to be perfect all the time. Children might do well for years but then hit bumps in the road that cause stress in the household. Families might experience difficult events that impact their ability to manage stress. Even when life is running smoothly, you and your family need to keep up supportive relationships and to practice good self-care.

#### **Question 4: What can children who have had foster caregivers teach parents who are fostering or adopting about how to make the family welcoming and safe for everyone?**

Most children who have entered a home for foster care do not want to be there. They might believe that what happened to break up their family was their fault. The child welfare system often makes life-changing decisions without consulting the child, which takes away the child's sense of control. Many adults who are fostering or adopting a child try to make the child feel happy, even when the child's life has been turned upside down. Some children might put on a happy face to please the adult. However, asking a child to be or to act in a way different than the child's actual feelings will lessen the child's trust in you. It will not meet the child's needs.

From a practical standpoint, little things can make a big difference for children in the care of foster parents. For example, making sure that you have a child's favorite foods on hand can go a long way toward making the child feel welcome. Find out which brands of soap, shampoo and toothpaste the child likes. Allow the child to have a private space that the child can decorate as they chose. Let the child know it's okay to put up family photos and to display special mementos. Asking how the child would like to be introduced to others also is important. Being introduced as a "foster child" can make children feel uncomfortable and upset that private information about themselves has been exposed. Planning with children how they would like to be introduced can help to protect their feelings and privacy.

Some children have said that they need a balanced approach from their foster parents. They want "**emotional space**," which can be described as feeling free to be themselves without having to meet others' expectations. At the same time, they want to build relationships with their fostering families and caregivers. Keep in mind that maintaining this balance can involve a

delicate dance. Be sure to keep an open, welcoming attitude toward the child. Be available for the child to come to you on the child's own terms. Provide opportunities to talk with each other, but do not force conversation if the child is not ready. When the child is ready, have the conversation in a welcoming, nonjudgmental place where the child can feel safe to express fears, grief and feelings about the child's birth family. Use a gentle, reassuring voice. Allow the child to let tears flow, to let anger out, or both. Understand that even if the child shows anger toward you, that anger is not about *you* but rather about what the child has experienced and is still carrying in memory.

**Question 5: What are concrete actions parents who are fostering or adopting can take to prepare children already in the home for the new child coming to live with them?**

Depending on their age, include children in conversations about your plans to foster or to adopt. Although children should not have veto power over this decision, they will be far more accepting of the changes that come with bringing a child into the home if they know what is happening and feel a part of the process. Never convey to children already in your home that they can ask for another child to leave. Listen to each child's thoughts and challenges about the family fostering or adopting a child; then work with each child to address those issues.

Just like adults, children can get training and information about what it means to foster or to adopt. Use words and examples that the children can understand to share the reasons why some children leave their families and come to live with foster families. Explain that sometimes prior experiences in life can shape how these children behave or act around others. For example, a child who moves into your home might do or say things that don't always make sense or that the child doesn't really mean. Talk with your children about how your expectations of them might be different than your expectations of the new child in matters of behavior and discipline (based on the needs of each child).

Explain why the new child might need more attention from you while adjusting to your home. Reassure your children that this does not mean you care any less about their own needs. Find ways to give each child individual attention. Always give your children opportunities to ask questions and to express their opinions and challenges they are facing.

Take practical steps to make the transition smoother for children already in your home:

- Establish clear boundaries for privacy and personal space.
- Try to continue regular routines and activities after the new child moves into the home.
- Don't expect children already in your home to become caregivers for the new child, even if the child you are fostering or adopting is younger than they are.
- Find ways for children already in the family and the new child to develop relationships with one another.

**Question 6: Why is birth order important, and how can changes to the birth order cause challenges in a home?**

**Birth order** refers to the order in which children were born into a family, such as first born, second born and so forth (from eldest to youngest). Birth order is important because it significantly impacts the roles that a child takes in a family. For example, a firstborn child might take on the role of helper by assisting parents with the care of younger brothers or sisters. Birth order can be disrupted when a child who moves into your home is older than the children already there. Some people believe it is best not to disrupt birth order or to add a child of the same age as another child already in the family. However, children's personalities vary. The ways they react to changes in birth order will vary as well. Think carefully about your children's personalities and roles in the family; this can help you decide whether to expect challenges arising from a change in the birth order. Fostering or adopting a child whose age is not in your family's natural birth order can be successful with extra preparation, commitment, support and flexibility.

You need to consider many matters concerning the age of a child who might fit best within your home. First, think about the needs, interests and compatibility of the children already in your family and the children you are thinking of fostering or adopting. Be honest with yourself about your ability to meet the needs of all children that you will be parenting. Remember that children who have lived in previous foster families sometimes have missed important developmental steps. That can mean that an older child might act more like a child of a younger age. Such differences could mean that two children of the same age in your home might not be at the same developmental stage. Do not compare children with one another. Always parent "to the stage, not the age." Base your expectations on each child's abilities and maturity level.

Second, consider the "identity" of each child within the family. A child who has been happy as the "baby of the family" might become unsettled, resentful or even combative if a younger child is brought into the family. Knowing how each child perceives that child's own place in the family will help you prepare better to support each child through the adjustment.

Last, think carefully about why you want to foster or to adopt a child of a certain age. Looking for a playmate of the same age for a child already in your home is not a good idea. Nor is it wise to look for an older child who can act as a role model or babysitter for your younger children. These reasons tend to backfire. They set certain expectations; and when those expectations are not met, stress and disappointment can result. It is not appropriate to expect a child coming into your home to meet your needs or to fill certain roles.

Allow enough time for all family members to adjust to their new roles and to find their places in the family. During this adjustment period, you may find that you or your children are more irritable than usual. Be realistic about how long it will take for new relationships to develop. Understand that you may experience periods when family members do not get along very well. Do not insist that the children in your family "act like brothers and sisters" if they are not ready

to do so. Instead, find opportunities to show the children you are parenting how to use communication and other skills to build good relationships.

**Question 7: How can you incorporate the culture of a child that you are fostering or adopting into your home?**

Children are born into their birth family's culture, and this will be an important part of each child's identity. Often a child's cultural identity and values may differ from those of the parent who is fostering or adopting. The child's culture may include different customs related to religious practices, food preferences, holiday celebrations, etc. You will need to recognize and to support the child's cultural identity and beliefs.

Additional matters that may be important for you to acknowledge and to incorporate into your family life are the cultural ties, traditions and beliefs related to the race, ethnicity, sexual identity and religion of the child you are fostering or adopting. Be open to learning from the child. Seek additional resources and supports as needed to increase your understanding of the child's important cultural ties, values and traditions. Learn how to support the child in maintaining those ties and honoring those values and traditions.

**Question 8: What steps can you take to prevent or to respond to allegations of child abuse made against you as a fostering parent?**

Being falsely accused of child abuse can be very stressful. You can prevent the likelihood of a false allegation by doing several things:

- Keep communication open between your family and the child's case manager and team.
- Keep a daily log in which you record notes about the child's progress and any challenges coming to your attention. This log can serve as a document of your consistent care and attention. Having these records also can help during your conversations with the case manager.
- Keep communication open with the child.
- Let the child know that you plan to keep everyone in the family safe.
- Establish clear rules to protect the privacy and personal space of everyone in the family.
- Do not use any form of physical punishment on the child you are fostering. Physical discipline is not allowed, and it does not work with children who have experienced trauma.
- Record in your log any accidents or injuries the child experiences. Report injuries to the case manager right away.
- Limit situations in which one person is alone with the child, especially at the beginning of the placement.

Children who have experienced trauma can be at an increased risk of exhibiting sexualized behaviors. Children who are **sexually reactive** might act out sexually or in ways meant to provoke or to excite others. A child who is sexually reactive should not be left alone with an adult. For example, a child who has a history of being sexually abused by a male caregiver should not be left alone with a man in the house. This will help to protect everyone. In addition, a safety plan may be needed for a child who is sexually reactive in order to protect other children in the home. A mental health professional with expertise in this area can help you to develop one. (See the “Right-Time Sexual Trauma Questions and Answers” document for additional helpful information about successfully parenting a child with a history of sexual trauma. The Resources section of the Right-Time Sexual Trauma document also has examples of sexual safety plans.)

It is the child welfare agency’s job to investigate all allegations of abuse. If a child you are fostering accuses you of abuse, cooperate with the investigation. Provide information that might be helpful, such as your daily logs and notes from meetings with the child’s team. If a child accuses someone else in your household of abuse, make sure that this person and the child are not alone together again until the investigation is finished. As a fostering parent, you need to be aware of your state’s laws concerning child abuse and the procedures that you must follow if there is an allegation of abuse. This preparation will help you know what to expect if you or someone in your household is accused. Rely on your support networks during the investigation. Support groups for foster parents are great places to find support and to ease stress during an investigation. After the investigation is complete, make sure to follow all the recommendations made by the child welfare agency.

### **Question 9: Why don’t the children I am fostering or adopting seem more grateful?**

Parents who are fostering or adopting often raise the subject of expecting gratitude from the children in their care. Family members and friends also sometimes express these expectations due to an underlying perception that children who have been adopted or placed in foster care should be grateful for their new environment and for the parents who are caring for them. For example, a family member might say, “I really hope [Name of the child] sees all that you are doing for him”; or a friend might say, “[Name of child] does not realize how lucky she is that you were willing to take her into your home.”

Here are three reasons why you should **not** expect children whom you are fostering or adopting to be grateful:

- 1) The truth is that most children do not express gratitude for the “good” home in which they live, even if they are lucky to have been born into a caring, safe and nurturing home that meets all of their needs. Children usually don’t express any type of gratitude for their parents or homes until an age when they have developed the mental capacity to recognize the benefits that they have been afforded. This type of gratitude is more



likely to develop when teenagers start to experience the world as adults and to gain a more mature perspective to evaluate their early lives.

- 2) By the time that children arrive in your home through foster care or adoption, they have experienced one of the most difficult separations possible: the loss of their parents. This often is compounded by the additional losses of siblings, pets, friends, home, school and everything else that they knew. This combination of losses likely consumes most of the children's thoughts and dominates the emotions that they may feel. These feelings of loss can lessen over time; but they never go away and certainly can't be eliminated by giving the children such benefits as more opportunities, a nicer room, nice clothes or even another family who loves them.
- 3) Gratitude is a complex emotion. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect or both may not have the capacity to feel or to express gratitude. Acquiring this skill set takes time. It can be done only through the development of relationships with consistent, trustworthy and caring adults. Children have to develop their own sense of self-worth and to reach the realization that they deserve good things before they can be grateful for what others provide to them.

As difficult as this may be for you to accept, you need to remember that for all three of these reasons, comments or expressions that you or others make about expecting gratitude can be harmful to the children and can impede development of the relationship that is essential between you and the children that you are fostering or adopting.