



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Children In Transition

by Devon Rubin

For foster children, a move between foster homes, to concurrent homes, or back to their birth families is a pretty common occurrence. It is something that can be done well or in a manner that is damaging to them. Whenever possible, children need to move in a gradual and planned way, with a great deal of support from the adults in their lives.

Children are shocked, frightened and traumatized by fast removals and subsequent placements with people they may have only met once, if at all. Their first removal from birth family is usually, by necessity, a quick one, an event that children often experience as similar to an abduction, even when they have been frightened or hurt in that environment. We do not want to recreate this trauma when we move them again.

Children may look like they are fine during a sudden move, but they are actually in shock. Often they are obedient and quiet, as obedient as they might be in a natural disaster, following instructions from adults. It is not, however, natural for children to move without protest. If you think about how your birth or adopted at- or very-near-birth children would react if they were unexpectedly picked up and moved from your home, you would expect them to cry and resist.

In a hasty move, children haven't had time to express their feelings or to understand why they are leaving. It's common for them to believe that they did something wrong, that they are somehow at fault. Many times they do not get the chance to say goodbye to other children who might be in the home and to process their feelings about the loss of foster sisters or brothers. They may also develop fears that they will have to move again or might somehow disappear from their next home, even if it planned as a permanent placement. The child may have been looking forward to a future event at the previous home, a birthday party or a family trip, and may feel a great deal of disappointment if they are not able to be part of it.

A poorly planned transition can sabotage a concurrent or new placement and increases the risks of disruption. Coming out of shock (otherwise known as the "honeymoon phase"), children can and often do begin to act up, as they become overwhelmed with their own feelings of grief and loss.

Foster and adoptive parents have an important role to play in supporting children in transition. They are the "container" that keeps them safe as they try to make sense of big, strange events in their lives—events that would likely floor us as adults. Imagine if we were suddenly removed from our families and sent to live with strangers, without making the choice for ourselves. Even when adults are in unhappy relationships that eventually disrupt, they usually need time to disengage and often stay connected to the previous partner because despite the pain, they care about the person with whom they have been intimate. Children are not so different. They need to receive validation that it is normal for them to cry and question these kinds of big changes, and abnormal for them to be "cheerful little troopers." When birth or foster parents are willing to meet with the new family and accompany the child on a visit to the new home they can serve to reassure the child by endorsing the new family as safe and good for them.

When birth or foster parents are not available to ease the transition, adoptive parents can help by giving children room to express grief over the loss of connections. Be explicit with children, reminding them that it is okay with you if they love or miss previous caregivers. Get pictures if possible that you and the child can look at together. Encourage them to remember things: "How did you do this at your old house?" or "Did you have a tradition before that we could incorporate into our family?" If you pray in your family, include previous caregivers, even those who might have hurt your child, with acknowledgments such as: "Take care of his birth mother [insert name here] or foster mother, who may not have always done what he needed, but without whom he would not have been given life and thus be here with us in our family..."

Allowing the child to express his or her feelings is a bigger gift than you may ever imagine. Helping children face experiences that children would never have to handle in a perfect world is the most important work foster parents and social workers can do.

Devon Rubin is a licensed clinical social worker who has been in the field of adoption since 1985. She currently works in adoption and foster care licensing for Contra Costa County. For many years Devon was the social work supervisor for Bay Area Adoption Services, an international adoption agency. She also works with birthparents as an Adoption Service Provider for the State of California.