

Session Seven

Continuing Family Relationships

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Competencies and Objectives

Competencies

Prospective foster parents and adoptive parents:

- Understand the importance of respecting children's connections to their birth families and previous foster families and/or adoptive families.
- Know that regular visits and other types of contact can strengthen relationships between children and their birth families.
- Know the importance of respecting and supporting children's connections to their siblings appropriate to each sibling situation.
- Understand the concept of permanence for children and why children in family foster care are at risk for not being connected to lifetime relationships.
- Understand that reunification is a primary child welfare goal, and know the circumstances that would contribute to the selection of each permanency goal.
- Understand the reunification process and how children, their parents, and foster families may experience a child's transition from a foster family to the birth family.
- Know how the professional team can support the reunification process.
- Understand the process and impact of a child's transition from a foster family to an adoptive family.
- Understand the implications for their own family in making a lifetime commitment to a child
- Know the implications of adoption for children at different stages of their development and can provide appropriate information and support.
- Know how the professional team can support a positive transition for children and adoptive families.
- Understand the rationale for planned, long-term family foster care, and know the supports and services the agency can provide throughout the placement.

- Understand the reasons why children and youth in family foster care may be at risk for learning and practicing skills for young adult life, and know the types of services and supports available to support a youth's transition from family foster care to independent living.
- Know the importance of promoting a child's sense of identity, history, culture, and values to help develop self-esteem.
- Understand cultural, spiritual, social and economic similarities and differences between a child's birth family and foster family or adoptive family.
- Know the process involved in conducting an adoption search.
- Understand the family's role and tasks in the adoption process and the impact this has on one's family.
- Understand why children and youth leave family foster care without a plan or advanced planning; know how the child welfare team can work together to prevent unplanned changes and placement disruptions; know the importance of supporting children and all members of the foster family when disruptions occur.

In-Session Learning Objectives

As a result of their participation in this training program, prospective foster parents and adoptive parents will be able to:

1. Identify reasons why lifetime connections are important.
2. Identify why the child's sense of time must be taken into consideration when making permanent plans.
3. Describe the effects of multiple transitions on children in need of family foster care and adoption.
4. List key provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.
5. Describe concurrent planning practice.
6. Identify the circumstances that would contribute to the selection of each permanency goal.
7. Identify the activities of foster parents and concurrent planning families that support the reunification process.

8. Identify reactions that the foster family or concurrent planning family might have when a child is being reunified with the birth family.
9. List the differences between foster care and adoption.
10. List the activities that are initiated when adoption is the plan for a child in family foster care.
11. Identify the two ways in which parents have their parental rights terminated.
12. Identify ways in which foster parents and adoptive parents can support a positive transition for children when they are moving to an adoptive family.
13. Explain why adoption creates a new kinship network that includes the birth family.
14. Identify questions that children will have about adoption at various stages of childhood and adolescence.
15. Identify normal crises in adoptive family life.
16. Explain the importance of allowing the adopted child to maintain connections to birth family and to culture.
17. Explain the range of openness in adoption.
18. Identify issues related to adoption search.
19. Explain why children may leave family foster care without a plan or advanced planning.
20. Identify ways the child welfare team can work together to prevent disruptions and unplanned changes.
21. Identify the needs of youth leaving foster family care for independent living.
22. Describe how transracial placements impact the child.
23. Identify strategies to help children in transracial placements develop a positive cultural identity.

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At-Home Learning Objectives

Through reviewing, at home, the information in their PRIDEbooks, prospective foster parents and adoptive parents will be able to:

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1. Explain what is meant by the term "adoption search."
2. Describe the process and impact of searching.
3. Explain how teamwork is essential to successfully achieving permanency goals.
4. Define the permanency planning goals established by the agency, and the criteria used to select each goal.
5. Identify issues affecting their ability and willingness to work effectively with birth parents, based on the information obtained from this session's A Birth Parent's Perspective.

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Agenda

Part I: Welcome and Connecting with PRIDE

- A. Welcome and Review of Competencies, Objectives, and Agenda
- B. Making Connections from Session Six
- C. Making Connections with Assessment, Licensing, and Certification

Part II: Understanding the Framework for Connecting Children to Lifetime Relationships

- A. Understanding the Importance of Lifetime Relationships for Children
- B. Options for Lifetime Connections

Part III: Understanding the Job of Connecting Children to Lifetime Relationships

- A. The Role of Foster Parents and Concurrent Planning Families
- B. Considering Adoption as a Lifetime Connection
- C. Permanency Needs of Older Youth in Family Foster Care
- D. Managing Unplanned Changes
- E. Cultural Issues in Permanency Planning

Part IV: Closing Remarks

- A. Key Points and You Need to Know!
- B. A Birth Parent's Perspective
- C. PRIDE Connections
- D. Preview of Session Eight
- E. Making a Difference!
- F. End Session

Important Provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act

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The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 was passed to improve the safety of children, to promote adoption and other permanent plans for children who need them, and to support families. Some of the law's provisions that will affect permanency planning include the following:

1. Reasonable efforts must be made to preserve families before children can be placed in foster care, and to reunify families and make it possible for children to return home safely. Children's health and safety must be the paramount concern throughout this process.
2. Agencies do not have to make reasonable efforts to reunify families under certain specific circumstances when the child or a sibling has been severely abused or the parent has previously had parental rights terminated. In these cases, a permanency hearing must be held within 30 days and the state must make reasonable efforts to place children permanently in families.
3. Permanency planning hearings must be held within 12 months of children's entry into care. At the hearing, a permanent plan must be determined. The plan may be reunification, adoption, guardianship or other planned permanent living arrangement.
4. A petition to terminate parental rights must be filed on behalf of any child, regardless of age, who has been in foster care 15 out of the last 22 months. Exceptions can be made if the child is cared for by a relative or there is a compelling reason why filing is not in the best interest of the child.
5. States are permitted to place children for adoption or in other permanent placements concurrently with the efforts to reunify the child with his or her family.
6. Foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, or relatives caring for children must be given notice of and opportunity to testify at any reviews or hearings involving those children.

NOTE: Indian Child Welfare Act requirements will always supersede ASFA which can mean longer time frames for determining the permanency outcome for Indian children.

Key Components of Concurrent Planning

1. The primary goal for every child is **early permanence**, which places priority on children's developmental needs.
2. **Honesty, or full disclosure**, with the birth parent is a key component of concurrent planning. The social worker informs the birth parents that the goal is early permanence through reunification if possible, but if not, through an alternative permanent plan. The social worker also educates parents about how temporary placement is damaging to their children.
3. Early in the history of the case, the agency makes a **diligent effort to locate absent fathers or any relatives** who can take care of children.
4. The agency **initiates intensive services for the birth family early in the case** to assist them toward reunification.
5. **Emphasis is placed on frequent visits** between the parent and child because this helps them maintain their attachments to each other.
6. The agency works on **reunification and establishes an alternative permanent plan concurrently**, that is, at the same time. These are sometimes called "Plan A" and "Plan B." When the possibility of reunification seems good, Plan B is usually considered a back-up plan that will only be implemented if the situation deteriorates. However, in cases where the agency considers successful reunification unlikely, Plan B may be implemented immediately upon placement, such as when children are placed with permanency planning families who will work toward reunification but also make a long-term commitment to the child.

Options for Lifetime Relationships

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Return Home

- Children return to the care of their birth parents with the same family-member status that they had before placement.
- The agency may stay involved to support families and to make sure that children are protected and nurtured.
- The birth parents resume all parental responsibilities.

Permanent Placement with Kin

- This option allows children to remain in their extended family with relatives who assume responsibility for their care.
- Birth parents' rights are not terminated by this action.
- The child's name usually does not change.

Adoption

- Adoption may be by the foster parents, kin, or a new family.
- Adoption transfers custody from the agency to the adoptive parents and transfers all parental rights permanently to the new parents.
- The birth parents' rights are terminated.
- The adoptive parents are financially and legally responsible for the children they adopt, although adoption subsidies may be available.
- Usually, but not always, the child's name is changed to that of the adoptive family.
- Children have the same status as if they were born into the family.

Guardianship

- Guardianship transfers custody from the agency to the guardian and transfers most parental rights and responsibilities to the guardians.
- Foster parents, kin, or a new family may assume guardianship.
- Birth parents' rights are not permanently terminated by the guardianship.
- Usually, the child's name is not changed.
- The birth parents or others can contest guardianships, and the guardian can ask for revocation of the guardianship.

Planned Alternative Permanent Living Arrangement

- Children remain in the custody of the agency.
- Foster parents or kinship caregivers make personal commitments to maintain the relationships until children reach independence, even if difficulties arise. It is hoped that the relationships will continue after the child becomes an adult. When children require residential, group, or hospital care, efforts are made to provide continuity of care with the least disruption possible.
- Foster parents or kinship caregivers are not legally and financially responsible.
- Usually, the child's name is not changed.
- Birth parents' rights are not terminated by this action.

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Job Description for
Permanency Planning Team Members

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Help Wanted

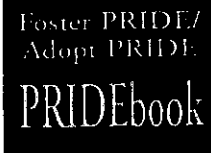
Permanency Planning Team Members

Able to work with social workers, birth parents and other team members. May be a foster family, an adoptive family, a concurrent planning family, or a kinship family.

Must be able to:

- Help Children Understand the Permanency Plan
- Plan Help Children Manage Loss
- Help Children Make Permanent Attachments
- Help Children Cope with Change and Transitions
- Help Children Maintain their Connections

Tasks Related to Carrying Out an Adoption Plan



Determining that adoption is the best plan for the child

This may happen after attempts at reunification have failed. Under concurrent planning, adoption may have been one of the concurrent plans that was developed. This decision is usually made by the agency in meetings where the progress of the case and the needs of the child are carefully considered.

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Foster parent decision

The social worker will consult with the foster parents about their interest in adopting the child. They will assess together the foster parents' ability and willingness to make a lifetime commitment to care for the child. If the foster parents are interested in adopting, additional training or certification may be required.

Legal action to terminate parental rights

The parents will either voluntarily relinquish rights to the child, or the agency's attorneys will ask the court for involuntary termination of parental rights (TPR). If the child needs to be placed in a new family to be adopted, the agency may decide to place the child prior to termination of parental rights or the agency may wait until the child is free for adoption.

Placement in a new family

If the foster parents decide, for whatever reason, that they are not interested in adopting, they must be willing to facilitate the child's placement with another family. The worker assigned to carry out the adoption plan will identify potential families for the child through local, state, and national efforts. Once a family is identified, a pre-placement visiting plan will be developed to help the child and family with the transition. The foster parents play an important role in welcoming and supporting the new family, giving them information about the child, and giving the child permission to move and become attached to new parents.

Legalization of the adoption

Legalization occurs through a court order granting the petition of the adoptive parents to adopt the child. In order for legalization to occur, the birth parents' rights must be terminated or they must consent to the adoption. Laws regulating adoption may require the child to reside in the home for a certain period of time before the adoption can be finalized.

Adoption Is...

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Adoption is a means of meeting the developmental needs of a child by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibilities for that child from the birth parents to adoptive parents, recognizing that in the process a new kinship network is created that forever links those two families together through the child that is shared by both.*

* Reitz, M. & Watson, K. W. (1992). Adoption and the Family System. New York: The Guilford Press.

Key Points

The Framework for Connecting Children to Lifetime Relationships

The child welfare system has a “dual mandate,” or two main jobs.

The first job is to protect children who are at risk of abuse or neglect. The child welfare system intervenes in families where the risk of abuse or neglect exists and attempts to provide services that will ensure that children are protected.

The second job of the child welfare system is to ensure that children have permanent families. When the safety of children cannot be ensured at home and children are placed in family foster care, they may have gained protection, but separation from their families can threaten their sense of connection and continuity: their sense of permanence. There is an urgent need for professionals and foster parents to work as a team to make sure that children have permanent families as soon as possible.

Permanence means:

- Having a sense of one’s past.
- Having a legal and social status that comes from being a family member.
- Having safe, nurturing relationships meant to last a lifetime.

There are two components of permanence: connections and continuity. “Connections” refers to the relationships that will give children a sense of belonging and security, and “continuity” refers to the ability of children to keep connections to people from their past and to know that the connections that sustain them today will be there for them in the future.

Connections and permanence are very important. The experience of belonging to a family gives children a sense of security. Most of the time, they do not have to worry about who will take care of them. Not worrying about who will take care of them gives children a sense of trust and allows them the freedom to develop to their fullest potential. They can concentrate on school or doing things they enjoy. Worrying about who will take care of them takes a lot of emotional energy and can interfere with developmental tasks. The need to have permanent connections doesn’t go away with childhood. Most of us are connected to people whom we feel we can rely on to help us. This is a basic human need.

An important value of permanency practice is that it should be determined by the “child’s clock” because the child’s sense of time is different than an adult’s. A week, month or year that flies by for an adult may seem like an eternity to

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a child. Not only is time experienced differently, but the same time frame in an adult's life has a very different meaning in terms of development than it does for a child. For example, in a year in the life of an adult, the adult's development for the most part stays at the same level. Each year of childhood represents a tremendous amount of new learning and development. For example, in the first year of life children are:

- forming important attachments.
- experiencing the world for the first time.
- learning to walk.
- learning language.
- learning to trust.

Between the ages of six and seven children may be:

- going to school all day for the first time.
- learning to ride a two wheeler.
- learning other physical skills.
- learning to read.
- learning to get along with other kids.

The year after they turn sixteen, adolescents will be:

- learning about social relationships.
- learning academic subjects.
- learning skills that might be helpful in a job.
- learning social skills.
- learning how to make good choices.
- learning to drive a car.

Permanence must be driven by the child's clock, because a lack of attachment and security can delay important developmental tasks that children must accomplish in any year of their childhood. As tragic as this seems, sometimes permanence is delayed for children in family foster care for four years, five years, or even longer, and some children "age out" of the system without ever having a permanent family. When this happens, the effects are very detrimental. This illustrates the importance of the team working together to make sure that permanence is achieved quickly so that the child can feel secure and get back to the business of being a child again.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act and Concurrent Planning

In 1997, the federal government passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) to address some of the problems that caused delays in permanence. The intent of the law was to promote safety and timely permanence for children.

ASFA encourages concurrent planning as a way of practicing permanency planning. Not all agencies are practicing concurrent planning yet. However, most agencies are beginning to incorporate some, if not all, of the components of concurrent planning into their practice.

In concurrent planning, the primary goal for every child is “early permanence.” In the past, reunification with the family was seen as the primary goal. Social workers focused on the parent’s problems and directed services toward solving those problems. They were reluctant to change the goal if the parent showed any signs of improvement. Meanwhile, the child’s clock was ticking. Changing the goal to “early permanence” is a more child-centered focus that puts priority on the child’s developmental needs.

One of the keys to concurrent planning is honest communication with the parents. In the past, the social worker might not have been direct with the parent about the consequences of not making changes. Often when the agency changed the goal to adoption, it came as a shock to the birth parent. Parents, who held onto the hope of reunification, often closed their eyes to the pain involved for the child.

In concurrent planning, the social worker educates the parent about the harm to the child that results from temporary placement and explains that the agency intends to work toward early permanence—either through reunification, kinship placement, guardianship, or adoption. The parents are encouraged to work with the agency to achieve permanence.

In the past, the agency may not have searched for relatives and absent fathers until the goal was changed to adoption. This meant that children had to move from families with whom they had become attached in order to live with relatives.

In concurrent planning, efforts are made to locate absent fathers and relatives even before placement is being considered so that children can be placed with them right away if necessary. However, if that isn’t possible, a search is made immediately upon removal from the birth family. Children can then be placed with relatives without a long wait in foster care.

In concurrent planning, every effort is made to avoid delays by offering necessary services right away. Parents are told what changes they must make, and by when, to have their child returned.

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Concurrent planning is based on an understanding of how important attachment is to children's development. Studies of children in placement indicate that reunification is more likely if there is frequent visiting between the child and parent. In concurrent planning, the intense work with the family also includes frequent visiting between the child and family.

Child welfare agencies that practice concurrent planning develop two plans when the child comes into family foster care. This means that the agency works on "Plan A" (efforts to reunify the family), and at the same time identifies "Plan B" (another permanent home for the child in case reunification is not successful).

The birth parent is included in this planning. The worker may say, "We want to help you reunite your family, but if that isn't possible we want you to participate in planning for your child. Can you tell us who you would like to raise your child if he can't go home?"

In some cases "Plan B" will be identified, but the child will not be placed with a new permanent family until it is clear that reunification is not possible. In other cases, especially when the probability of reunification doesn't seem high, the concurrent plan may be implemented immediately when the child comes into placement while the agency is still working toward reunification. For example, the child might be placed with a relative who would provide a permanent family if the child could not return to the birth parent.

In some cases, agencies are identifying concurrent planning families. Families who have children placed with them by child welfare agencies have generally been divided into foster families, adoptive families, and kinship families. In traditional permanency planning, children often moved from foster families to adoptive families when the plan changed. Remember that the goal in concurrent planning is "early permanence." Therefore a new category of family has been identified.

A concurrent planning family is one that can commit to providing a permanent home while being able to support reunification. The concurrent planning family must be committed to the goal of permanence for the child, whether that means supporting the child's return to the birth parent, adopting, or otherwise making a permanent commitment to the child themselves. As you can imagine, this is a role that presents many challenges.

NOTE: Indian Child Welfare Act requirements will always supersede ASFA which can mean longer time frames for determining the permanency outcome for Indian children.

The Role of Foster Parents When Children Return Home

An important role of foster parents is to support children who are returning home to their birth families. In this role, foster parents must do the following.

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1. Help children understand the permanency plan

Children in family foster care have experienced disruption moving into care and may have been confused about why they were placed. Now they will be making another move, and they need help understanding what is happening.

Foster parents can help children understand why they came into care and what has changed to allow them to return to their family. Children should be given ongoing information about what the agency or court is planning so that the news does not come as a surprise. A Lifebook might be helpful.

This role might be a challenge if the foster parents do not agree with the plan. As a result, they may have difficulty explaining it. Likewise the child may be anxious or sad about the move and it may be difficult to discuss. The foster parent should use the support of other team members, such as the social worker or therapist, to help.

2. Help children manage loss

Children will be separating from their foster families and others, including their teachers, classmates, and neighbors. They will need support to deal with these losses.

Foster parents can acknowledge the losses and listen to children if they express sadness. Foster parents can make sure that all family members and other people who have been important to the child have a chance to say good-bye.

It may be painful to face children's feelings. Foster parents will be experiencing losses as well. Foster parents should be aware of their own feelings and get support from others.

3. Help children make permanent attachments

Children must renew their attachments to their birth families.

Foster parents can help children keep attachments by supporting visits with the birth parent, allowing children to have pictures of the family, and talking about the family between visits. Foster parents can communicate that they want children to be attached to their families.

Foster parents may be ambivalent about birth families or may be attached to children themselves and find it difficult to encourage them to be attached to their families.

Foster parents should be aware of their feelings. Support from workers or other foster parents may be helpful.

4. Help children cope with changes and transitions

Children will be experiencing changes in routines from one family to the other.

Foster parents can discuss with birth families children's routines and how they have handled behavior issues. They can allow visits in their home or supervise visits in another location to help birth families learn new skills or ways of handling behavior. Foster parents can encourage good visiting plans that will help children make gradual transitions back home.

If they don't feel comfortable in a mentoring role, they can tell the worker about techniques for managing behavior that they have found helpful, and assist in developing a plan so that this information can be conveyed to the birth family. Some foster parents may be unsure that the birth family will be able to provide a safe, nurturing home. If so, the foster parents should discuss any concerns they have with the worker.

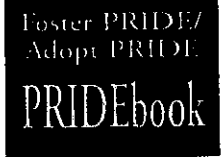
5. Help children keep their connections

Children have formed attachments with the foster families, and it is usually beneficial for children to maintain these connections so that they don't feel abandoned or rejected.

Foster parents can discuss future contact with the worker and the birth family. Foster parents can reassure birth families that they do not want to interfere with their relationship with their children. They can give children pictures or memory books of their stays with the foster family.

Foster parents may feel ambivalent about future contact or concerned about the extent to which they can make a commitment to a longer-term relationship. Some birth families may reject contact because they feel threatened by their children's relationship with the foster family. Foster families can discuss the best plan for contact with the worker and work out a feasible plan together.

Considering Adoption as a Lifetime Connection



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Prevention of placement and reunification are the primary goals for children whenever their safety can be ensured with their family. However, there are times when the child's family, even with support and services, remains unable or unwilling to resume care for the child. In these situations, the agency must find another lifetime connection for the child.

Adoption is an important permanency goal. It provides the greatest legal security and by adopting, the adoptive parents are making a lifetime commitment to the child. Because the child has the same status as a child born into the family, adoption has the potential to provide a true sense of belonging.

Adoption has legal implications that differentiate it from foster care.

Differences between Foster Care and Adoption		
	Foster Care	Adoption
Child in the custody of the agency	Yes	No
Birth parents rights are terminated	No	Yes
Caregiver can make major decisions for the Child	No	Yes
Caregivers are financially responsible	No	Yes *
Child can have the last name of the family	No	Yes
Child have inheritance rights	No	Yes
Child is covered by family's insurance	No	Yes

* However, an adoption subsidy may be available.

Supporting Children When They Are Moving to New Adoptive Families

Children may be adopted by their foster parents or by another family. When children are moving to a new adoptive home, the foster parents and adoptive parents must both work together to support the child during the transition.

Foster parents must help children understand why they aren't going home and why the foster parents won't be adopting them. They can help children understand that foster parents care for children until they return home or find permanent homes. They can help complete Lifebooks to reinforce these messages.

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Children will be experiencing the loss of their foster families and their hope of returning to their birth families. They might express this through behavior, including regressing to behaviors that the foster parents worked hard to overcome. Foster parents need to tolerate behavioral regression, while helping children express their feelings verbally.

Foster parents have an important role in helping children make attachments to the adoptive family by giving their blessing to the adoption. They can let children know that they approve of their new families and convey the message that they are happy that children will have families of their own.

In order to help make the transition easier, they can share information about children with the adoptive families. They can invite the adoptive family to their home to get to know children in familiar surroundings. They can encourage good visiting plans that will allow children to make gradual adjustments.

Foster parents can offer to stay in touch. They can express their support of adoption so that adoptive families won't feel threatened about ongoing contact.

Adoptive families can learn about children's stories and let them know it is okay to talk about the past. They can talk with them about birth families and read Lifebooks with their children. They can help them understand what adoption means by explaining that they want to take care of them until they grow up.

Adoptive parents need to be sensitive to the losses that children are experiencing and acknowledge those losses, which may include their foster families, friends, neighbors, classmates, and their hopes of returning to the birth family.

Adoptive families can begin to develop a relationship with their new sons or daughters by spending time with them, getting to know them, and beginning to do things together. Acknowledging their past and helping them deal with grief will help develop a relationship of trust.

Adoptive families need to be sensitive to the stress that children are under when making a transition to their home. They can learn about their likes and dislikes and the routines of their foster families so that they can incorporate some of them into their own routines. They can cooperate with a gradual transition, even though they may be eager to move forward with the adoption.

Adoptive parents need to learn about their new children's attachments and make sure they know that it is okay to be attached to other people. Adoptive parents need to plan how they will enable their children to keep important connections to their birth families and their foster families.

The Lifelong Issues of Adoption

For the adoptive family, the transition of a child into their family is only the beginning of a lifetime commitment. Similarly, foster parents who are adopting need to understand the lifelong adoption issues that they will have to manage.

Our understanding of adoption has changed over the years. Previously adoption was seen as an event—legalization of the adoption was viewed as a new beginning for the child and family when they could erase the past and create a family that would have the same issues as all other families. Adoptive parents were advised that all they needed to do was love the child and everything would be all right.

We now know that adoption is unique, and that the experiences of adopted children and their families are different from those of families created by birth. Understanding what it means to be adopted and integrating that knowledge into their identity is a lifelong process for adoptees and adoptive parents.

A shared link between the adoptive family and the birth family is what makes adoption different from biological parenting, and it impacts the emotional development of children who have been adopted. Children who have been adopted are aware that they are linked to another family, and they struggle to understand the meaning of the separation from that family.

As they grow older, adoptive children will have many questions about the meaning of adoption for them, such as:

- Who are my birth parents? Do I have brothers and sisters? Who are they?
- What do I have in common with my birth family (appearance, genetic background, talents, behaviors, good and bad traits)?
- Why didn't I grow up with my birth family like most other kids?
- Am I secure in this family or will my birth family come someday and take me back?
- Will I ever be able to meet my birth family?

The job of adoptive families is to help children answer these questions as they are growing up. Parents must understand that children at different stages of development will have different questions that need to be answered as they try to make sense of adoption.

Adoptive parents usually introduce the idea of adoption when the child is a baby or toddler by reading books or talking about the “day you were adopted.” However for most preschoolers this is only a nice story.

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It isn't until children reach school age that they begin to understand that adoption means that they had birth parents who could not take care of them. Then they may become preoccupied with questions such as, "Who are my birth parents?" and "Why can't I live with them?" Most children will answer this question by blaming themselves. Children are not capable of understanding the reasons why adults might make an adoption plan. Usually they believe that they must have done something wrong or that they must have been unacceptable. This feeling of rejection can become incorporated into their sense of identity.

In adolescence, all teenagers are struggling with two important issues: separating from the family to become independent and finding an identity. As they separate, they may naturally begin to wonder about the birth family. In a sense, they have to first understand, and then separate from that family too, in order to achieve an identity. Many adolescents become preoccupied with questions about their birth parents. Confusion leads to anger and frustration, and as with all adolescents, the easiest target for all their negative feelings are the parents who have been caring for them on a day-to-day basis. Adolescence can be a time of real turmoil for adoptive families.

When providing information and helping the child answer these questions, the parents need to keep in mind that the child usually experiences the fact that he or she was separated from the birth family as painful and sad. This sense of loss exists even if the child who has been adopted has never lived with the birth family.

Adoptive parents cannot shield their children from these sad feelings, which are normal and do not reflect on their attachment and love for the adoptive parents. The role of the adoptive family is to understand and acknowledge that their child may be feeling a loss at times and to provide support around this loss.

Adoptive parents, in making lifetime commitments to children, are affording them the best opportunity to make permanent attachments. However, the experience of older children may make it difficult for them to trust enough to easily form attachments. This may be challenging and frustrating for adoptive parents at times.

Some adoptive parents, in their eagerness to have the child become attached, begin to feel threatened by the child's attachments to his or her birth family or foster family. Some adoptive parents may begin to discourage prior attachments or be uncomfortable when the child brings up the subject of people from his or her past. It is important to remember that instead of promoting attachment, this results in children who do not trust and have more difficulty becoming attached.

Imagine that you have lost someone you love, such as a spouse or good friend. Would you feel closer to someone who wanted to develop a new relationship if you could talk about the past? How would you feel if the person

refused to acknowledge your loss and made you feel uncomfortable if you brought it up? Adoptive parents need to remind themselves that one of the best ways to develop strong attachments with children is to let them know you accept them, their past, and their feelings for people in their past. Adoptive parents may hope that after the placement and legalization all the changes and transitions are over. If we think about raising children in general, we know that this isn't the case.

Adoptive parents need information about the normal "crises" in adoption. For example, the time when a child moves into an adoptive home is a period of crisis.

Many parents are surprised to find out that even for children who are eagerly awaiting adoption, the legalization of the adoption can create a crisis. Legalization represents not only a happy time, but also a time when the child is experiencing a final separation from their birth family. Issues of grief surface and are often unexpected.

Other times of crisis can be any time or event that reminds children of previous losses or the times that lead them to think about the birth family.

For older children, this might be the time of year when they were separated from their birth family or holidays that bring back memories of the birth family. Children who have no real memories of the birth family may nevertheless think about them on their birthdays or Mother's Day or Father's Day.

Any time of transition might bring up feelings of loss that escalate into an emotional crisis. Typical times of transition are:

- Separating from parents to enter elementary school.
- Moving to a new house.
- Ending the school year and saying good-bye to a favorite teacher.
- Graduating from high school.
- Going away to college.
- Leaving home to live independently.
- Getting married.
- Having their first child.

All of these are times when the adoptive parents must support the child's efforts to deal with change and transition. By understanding that these crises are normal for children who have been adopted, parents will be less likely to panic and more likely to offer helpful support that will allow the child to weather the crisis.

Making decisions about how best to acknowledge and support the child's connection with the birth family is one of the biggest challenges of adoptive parenting. Some ways to support connections are:

- Providing information about the birth family.
- Talking with the child about his or her memories.

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- Rituals that acknowledge the child's connections.
- Lifebooks.
- Visits.
- Phone calls.
- Letters.
- Pictures.
- Videos.

Likewise, families who are adopting transracially will need to help children keep connections to their culture.

Adoptions that include contact of any kind between the birth family and the adoptive family are termed "open adoptions." Openness is continuum. The contact can range from yearly letters or the exchange of pictures to regular visits between the child and the birth parent, birth siblings, and other members of the extended family.

The relationships in an open adoption can be very complicated. It is important for the adoptive parent and the birth parent to understand completely what the arrangements will be regarding contact. It is especially important for birth parents to understand that their relationship with the child has changed, and it is the adoptive parents who will have the parental role. In addition, it is important for adoptive parents not to feel coerced to enter into any agreements with which they are uncomfortable. It is often helpful to get the advice of someone knowledgeable about open adoptions before entering into any agreement.

Questions about their birth families are something that adopted children think about throughout their childhood. As they become older, they may want to renew their connections with their birth families to have their questions answered. This is normal for adoptees and does not reflect any problems in the relationship with the adoptive family. In fact, when the relationships between children and their adoptive parents are close, children are more likely to share their questions and their desire to search with their adoptive parents. If an adolescent or younger child wishes to search, the adoptive family may want to seek counseling to determine if searching is a good idea. When adult adoptees want to search, they find it enormously helpful to have the support and blessing of their adoptive families. Families considering adoption should think ahead about the likelihood that their children will want information about their birth families and may want to meet them. The more information adoptive parents have about the birth family, the more helpful they can be. Adoptive parents should also get information about the laws and regulations regarding searching in their state, such as when and if adoption records and birth certificates will be available to the adoptee.

Permanency Needs of Older Youth in Family Foster Care

Sometime between age 18 and 21, youth in care are “emancipated” from the agency that has provided financial support. They no longer receive money for rent, food, clothes, health insurance, or school expenses. Foster parents have an important role to play in helping young people make the transition to independent living.

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Foster parents will need to help youth understand:

- Specifics about time frames when they will be emancipated.
- What resources they will need in order to live independently.
- The supports that are available to help them learn the skills and obtain the resources they will need.
- How they can be included in determining the plan.

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Youth are separating from the support of the agency and the foster parents. In addition, this may be a time when the cumulative losses associated with separation from the birth family and others, including former foster parents and social workers, resurface. Foster parents need to be sensitive to the loss issues and may have to tolerate behavior related to loss, such as anger and depression.

Youth in family foster care who are nearing independence lack the family connections that other young people take for granted. They struggle with questions their peers barely consider: How will I support myself? Will I have health insurance? Who will I live with? Who can I call when I have a problem? Who will be there for me?

Most people are not entirely independent at age 18. Like other youth, young people in family foster care need adults who will support them after they are emancipated. The permanency team should never give up on establishing some type of permanent connection for children in care, even if they are adolescents.

If foster parents cannot provide long-term support for the child, they can help by advocating for permanence. Many young people have connections with adults that they have made themselves, such as school teachers or football coaches. In addition, they may have strong connections with people from their past, such as relatives or former foster parents. Sometimes these people are willing to help support the young person after family foster care. Because foster parents are aware of the young person’s contacts, they can help workers identify people who might be willing to act as a mentor or long-term support after the youth leaves family foster care.

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Obviously, the move to independent living is a major change, and youth will need support to manage this transition. They will need to develop skills that will enable them to:

- Find a job.
- Manage money.
- Pursue higher education.
- Find housing.
- Have social relationships.
- Manage a household.
- Access medical services.

It is important for foster parents to know about independent living programs that provide youth with the skills they will need.

Finally, foster parents can help youth who move on to independence by maintaining connections with them. These young people are at high risk of being alone in the world. They may not have someone with whom to celebrate the holidays or share their everyday problems or successes. Foster parents can show that they continue to care by maintaining connections whenever possible.

Cultural Issues in Permanency Planning

Strategies for helping children in transracial placements develop a positive sense of identity include the following:

- Be able to provide children with information about their family and heritage to help “fill in the blanks.”
- Learn the language the child speaks and promote the ongoing development of the child’s language.
- Be aware that you will need to teach children about racism and discrimination. This is especially important with Black males who are often a target of discrimination and need to develop survival strategies.
- Value the child’s culture and reflect this in everyday living.
- Teach your family members to be a multi-cultural family—how to handle racism, respond to questions, etc.
- Expose children to their culture at every opportunity.

- Don't wait until the child is in the home to develop cultural competence—the process should have already started, or you need to prepare to start now.
- Be aware that as an adult, you may have to incorporate changes into your lifestyle—you can't always expect the child to change.
- Examine your motivation to foster or adopt a child of a different race or culture. Motivation that focuses on "saving" children may give them a sense that there is something wrong with who they are.
- Be prepared to deal with identity issues at every stage and as an ongoing part of development.
- Connect with and cultivate relationships with people from the child's community or culture of origin. Use them as resources to help you and the child develop culturally sound community connections.

In the best interest of your family and of the many children who need culturally competent families, you are encouraged to closely examine your motivation to foster or adopt a child of another culture, your level of understanding of different cultures, your willingness to learn about a child's culture, and how your extended family and community would respond to a child of a different culture or race.

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Teamwork with Unplanned Changes

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Sometimes children and youth leave foster families under unusual circumstances, and advance planning just isn't possible:

- They decide to run away.
- There is a court order.
- There is abuse of the child in the foster family.
- There is a need for the child's immediate psychiatric hospitalization.
- There is illness or some other emergency in the foster family.
- The foster family requests that the child be moved immediately because of the child's behavior.

The risks to children include:

- The experience may bring back memories of the reasons for coming into foster care.
- The reason for the unplanned change and the change itself causes another loss for the child.
- The resources to get the child into another safe setting may be compromised.

Some illnesses, emergencies, and unusual circumstances are unavoidable. But there are ways both foster families and adoptive families can work as part of a team to prevent unplanned changes and placement disruptions.

Foster families, adoptive families, and the agency can prevent unplanned changes by:

- Making an informed decision about working together.
- Making an informed decision about placing and accepting a child into a family.
- Being realistic and honest about expectations of children, themselves, and each other.

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- Informing each other when there are unmet expectations.
 - Providing immediate support when problems are identified, no matter how small.
 - Assessing and planning for the ongoing relationship between the child and family.
 - Planning how to support the child in transition.
 - Planning how to inform and involve the birth family appropriately.
 - Planning for the ongoing working relationship between the agency and the foster family or adoptive family.

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You Need to Know!

Permanency Planning Goals

(to be added by agency)

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Permanency Planning Goals

All Child Welfare Services should be delivered in a planned manner. Because of the disruption foster care causes in the lives of families and children, it is imperative that foster care be delivered for a specific purpose and for a planned period of time.

A written case plan is an essential tool in the effort to make foster care services time-limited and goal-oriented. The case plan is a written document that is a discrete part of the case record between the family and the Division of Children and Family Services that outlines a plan of services. It addresses the family's needs, building on the family's strengths, and outlines the roles and responsibilities of all involved parties.

Developing case plans is a problem-solving approach, based on the completion of a thorough intake, evaluation and assessment of presenting needs and strengths. The family shall be the primary source of information. However, the case plan shall be developed with the involvement of family, the age appropriate children, the foster parents and the attorney ad litem (if there is court involvement), the Family Service Worker and any other involved parties. It shall adequately address the goals of services and the family's service needs, and when, where and how services will be made available to meet these needs, and shall otherwise comply with state law and policy.

Consideration of the health and safety of a child must be included in case planning and case reviews for children in out-of-home placement.

No child in Out-of-Home Placement shall have a case plan goal of reunification for longer than twelve months, unless otherwise ordered by the court.

With proper utilization of the case plan, everyone involved becomes accountable and chances for achieving permanence for the child are increased; and communication is improved.

The goal of the case plan is the desired end results that shall be precisely stated. Acceptable permanency goals are:

- Adoption
- APPLA
- Emancipation
- Guardianship
- Maintain Children in Own Home
- Relative Placement
- Return to Parent/Reunification

“Objectives” are accomplishments that must be attained by the completion of related tasks in order to achieve the goal. A realistic time frame for the achievement of each objective and task must be indicated with planned beginning and ending dates. Objectives should meet the following criteria:

- Be related to identified problems
- Be measurable
- Specify an acceptable level of performance
- Establish a realistic time frame for accomplishment
- Be realistic and attainable

The case plan shall be developed promptly. State law requires that a written case plan shall be prepared within thirty (30) days of the date of placement. An initial staffing shall be convened within the first thirty (30) days during which the case plan shall be completed.

The case plan should be updated at the second staffing held ninety days from the case opening and at subsequent staffing(s) held on an as needed basis but at a minimum of every three months for out-of-home placement. The staffing should include the child, if age appropriate, the parents, the foster parents, the Family Service Worker, the Family Service Worker Supervisor, the child’s Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), if applicable, and all parties’ attorneys. These individuals should work together to update the case plan if necessary to reflect progress made, new factual circumstances, and new goals.

You Need to Know!

The Process of Searching*

Foster PRIDE/
Adopt PRIDE

PRIDEbook

Searching is the process by which:

- Individuals who were adopted search for biological parents.
- Birth parents search for children they relinquished.
- Siblings separated by adoption search for one another.

Adoptive records have historically been sealed to:

- Protect the confidentiality of all parties.
- Allow children to attach more securely to their adoptive parents.
- Allow adoptive parents more freedom to raise children they adopt as their own.
- Help birth parents make a clean break with the children they relinquished.

It is normal for parties involved in an adoption to want:

- Information about missing pieces of their lives.
- Contact with those to whom they are biologically related.
- Outside help in conducting their search.

Emotional impact of searching:

- Internal struggle and ambivalence preceding the decision to search.
- Hesitancy to intrude and interfere in the unknown life of the other party.
- Fear that the search will be too difficult and perhaps unsuccessful, or if successful, may open up a Pandora's box of unforeseen problems.
- Fear that the search will provoke anger from the adoptive parents.
- Guilt by adoptee about feeling disloyal to the adoptive family.
- Guilt by birth parent related to discussing the original decision to relinquish.

Impact of successful searching:

- Search and reunion are healing experiences.
- Parties are more at peace after the unknown has become known.
- Birth parents are helped to come to terms with their earlier decision to relinquish.
- Knowing the truth is better than living with a fantasy.
- Less than 2% are sorry that they searched.

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* Gonyo, B. & Watson, K.W. (1988). Searching in adoption. Public Welfare, 14-22.

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You Need to Know!**Simple Gifts and Talismans:
Collecting Memories**

Youth who have been in more than one foster care placement often lose the treasured debris of their past. In moving their cartons, paper bags, and suitcases, they may be forced to leave behind the trinkets and collections of their earlier lives. Many of these objects are part of the youth's identity. They have the capacity to trigger memories of an earlier time. In leaving them behind, youth may feel they are avoiding pain. Yet youth who have not saved their memorabilia can become internally impoverished.

A therapist who works with depressed and suicidal adopted adolescents describes their situation as "a deficiency disease, not based on guilt or self-hatred but on a lack of hope for their lives." The remedy she prescribes is "an inner treasury that generates hopefulness . . . odds and ends resembling the hodge-podge that every latency-age child stores in a carton under the bed; souvenirs, bottle caps, trophies, photographs, baseball cards, sea shells, and coin collections. . . ."* The inner treasury of resources from the past becomes the basis on which to build hope for the future.

At the point of leaving home again, when adolescents are most vulnerable to fears of the future, and when they often experience an inexplicable sense of loss, they need foster parents to help them take their memories with them. It is not always easy to help a youth collect objects. If a youth's losses have been severe, or if he or she has experienced too many placements, we may find distorted relationships with objects. Some youth may hoard, clinging to piles of what appears to be worthless trash. Others may not connect emotionally with any object, ruthlessly disposing of souvenirs, snapshots, and even gifts. Those who are very angry may even purposefully destroy the most meaningful objects.

Rituals have been used in every culture as a way of handling transitions. The symbolism and significance of a ritual eases the pain of loss and moves the participants forward. It is interesting to note the sentimental importance of objects associated with a treasured symbol of good fortune. At weddings, unmarried women scramble to catch the bouquet, signifying who will marry next. In the ritual of a funeral, such objects as flowers, programs, or a photo of the deceased take on new meaning. In the ritual of graduation, the tassel of the mortar board, and the diploma itself, signify the honored accomplishment.

When we help youth who are leaving home again, we need to develop new rituals and to give them objects which we endow with our hope, care, and wishes of good fortune for their future. These rituals and objects need not be

* McFadden, Emily Jean. (1988). *Leaving Home Again*. Ypsilanti, MI: PUSH for Youth GOALS curriculum.

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elaborate or expensive. Rituals can be as simple as baking a youth's favorite chocolate cake and taking a photograph of the cake being eaten. It can be as elaborate as a family candle-lighting ceremony in which the youth is given a special candle symbolizing the family's love. What is important is that the youth receives an object that carries the blessing of the family.

It is helpful to reflect on the messages we want to give youth, and the memories of our homes that we hope they will carry with them. Photographs are crystallized memories. Jewelry lasts. Tools or certain types of clothing prepare a youth for work. Stationery or a phone say, "Please keep in touch." Books can represent advice, spiritual values, or a host of other meanings. Food represents nurturing. Flowers represent beauty. If we develop a farewell ritual to help youth leave, we should be aware that the gift or talisman conveys a lasting meaning. What memories do we want youth to carry with them?

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You Need to Know!

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)*

Why ICWA Was Passed

"ICWA" stands for the Indian Child welfare Act, which is a federal law passed in 1978. It was passed in response to the alarmingly high number of Indian children being separated from their families by both public and private agencies. The intent of congress under ICWA was to protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families (25U.S.C.-1902). ICWA sets federal requirements that apply to state child custody proceedings involving an Indian child who is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe.

How ICWA Protects American Indian/Alaskan Native Children and Their Families

When ICWA applies to a child's case, the child's tribe and family will have an opportunity to be involved in decisions affecting services for the Indian child. A tribe or a parent can also petition to transfer jurisdiction of the case to their own tribal court. ICWA sets out federal requirements regarding removal and placement of Indian children in foster or adoptive homes and allows the child's tribe to intervene in the case.

Children Covered by ICWA

Indian children involved in state child custody proceedings are covered by ICWA. A person may define his or her identity as Indian but in order for ICWA to apply, the involved child must be an "Indian child" as defined by the law. ICWA defines an "Indian child" as "any unmarried person who is under age eighteen and is either (a) a member of an Indian tribe or (b) is eligible for membership in an Indian tribe and is the biological child of a member of an Indian tribe" (25 U.S.C.-1903). Under federal law, individual tribes have the right to determine eligibility, membership, or both. However, in order for ICWA to apply, the child must be a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe. ICWA does not apply to divorce proceedings, intra-family disputes, juvenile delinquency proceedings, or cases under tribal court jurisdiction.

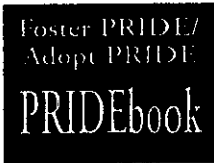
Determining if a Child Is Eligible for Membership in a Tribe

All tribes have the right to determine who is a member of their tribe, and different tribes have different requirements for eligibility. In order to understand these requirements for the particular tribe in question, contact the child's tribe.

* SOURCE: "The Indian Child Welfare Act: A Family's Guide; Answers to Your Questions about the Federal Law." National Indian Child Welfare Association

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For more information on how to contact the child's tribe, visit the National Indian Child Welfare Association's (NICWA) website at www.nicwa.org. Click on the *Resources* tab and then click on *Tribal Directory*.



When a Child Is Indian but Is Not a Member of a Federally Recognized Tribe

If a child does not meet the definition of "Indian child" outlined in the act, ICWA would not apply to the child's case. Other federal and state laws, however, may provide other protections, including relative placement provisions and the opportunity to be heard in a case review hearing.

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Considerations that Should be Made in an ICWA Case

Workers must make several considerations when handling an ICWA case, including:

- Providing active efforts to the family (see paragraph below on "active efforts");
- Identifying a placement that fits under ICWA preference provisions;
- Notifying the child's tribe and the child's parents of the child custody proceeding; and
- Working actively to involve the child's tribe and the child's parents in the proceedings.

The worker should be able to explain your rights under ICWA and any other case actions in a manner that is easy for you to understand.

Who to Contact if It Is Believed that Your Rights Under ICWA Are Being Ignored

If it is believed that ICWA is not being applied correctly in the child's case contact the following people as soon as possible:

- An attorney (Indian law experience preferred)
- Legal services
- The child's tribe

The court may order different services or a different placement if it is determined that ICWA is not being applied correctly.

Active Efforts

States are required to provide active efforts to families, and the court will be asked to determine whether active efforts have been made. The definition of "active efforts" is left open in the Indian Child Welfare Act to accommodate

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individual case decisions. However, federal guidelines do exist (Federal Register, Vol.44, No.228, Monday, November 26, 1979):

ICWA mandates the states to make active efforts in every ICWA case in two areas:

1. to provide services to the family to prevent removal of an Indian child from his or her parent or Indian custodian
2. to reunify an Indian child with his or her parent or Indian custodian after removal

A cornerstone in the application of active efforts is active and early participation and consultation with the child's tribe in all case planning decisions. Additionally, active efforts are more intensive than "reasonable efforts." For example, reasonable efforts would be to arrange for the best-fitting services and help families engage in those activities. The federal guidelines referenced above apply whether or not the child's tribe is involved in the custody proceedings.

About the National Indian Child Welfare Association

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of Indian children and their families. NICWA accomplishes this goal by offering training and technical assistance related to Indian child welfare services; making available information regarding the needs and problems of Indian children; helping to improve community-based services; and working to promote improved public policies for Indian children.

A Birth Parent's Perspective "Letter to a Child"

I'm not much good at writing, but I guess I wasn't much good at being your mother either. I'm going to try this anyway, because they tell me it's important to let you know from my mouth why all this happened to you and me. Maybe it will help you have a better life than me, although we did have us some good times. I know I didn't do real well by you when you was little but I did the best I knew how, like my momma did. It seems that even when I was trying hard nothing ever seemed to go right for very long.

Momma and Uncle Steve turned me on to stuff when I was 12, maybe 13 I really don't always remember. You probably never knew that. You were born when I was 19. I really did try to take care of you, but it was always so hard. Seemed like we were always needing something and I never had enough money to buy us food, clothes and my stuff. That's why we always had "uncles" around because they helped with things we needed. I didn't know then that some of them treated you rough, I really am sorry about that. After they took you away from me the first time and I got clean and you came back. That was probably the best time for us.

I hope you remember some of those times instead of some of the others. I guess I just couldn't get myself away until it was too late. I thought it wouldn't be so hard, although they told me at the drug place it would and to watch who I hung with. I thought I could do it myself, that I was stronger, and having you around would make me stay clean. Somehow, I always got back in trouble again. After they took you away when you got caught buying my stuff I felt real bad. When rehab took me back I know I was lucky and getting right again seemed so important so I could have you back. I really wanted to make it work this time. They found out I had AIDS and it was pretty bad already. It just figures, I guess. My luck has never been real good.

Being able to see you regular has been hard and good at the same time. I don't know if that makes any sense. Sometimes I get so mad that someone else is raising you and will see you grow up, and I won't. But then I guess I feel better because they seem like nice people and they've been good to you and me. I want you to remember that if it feels hard sometime to not have your momma around I loved you and only wanted the best for you even if it didn't work out the way I wanted. I'm not sure what else to say, I don't even know when you'll see this letter, but I hope it does help you like they say it will. I wish I had done better, but I know you will be ok and that makes it better.

Love,

Your Momma

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PRIDE Connection

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Name: _____

Date: _____

Family Development Specialist: _____

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Your Role as a Permanency Planning Team Member

In Session 7, you learned that the job of a Permanency Planning Team member is very similar, whether the member is:

- a **foster family** helping a child transition to a permanent home through reunification or adoption.
- a **concurrent planning family** who can foster a child but is also willing to adopt if the child cannot return home.
- an **adoptive family**.

Which of these roles do you think best matches the strengths and needs of your family?

Describe the child whose needs you could best meet based on your assessment of your strengths and needs (age, sex, developmental needs, history of abuse or neglect):

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Please answer the following questions if you want to become a **foster parent** or **concurrent planning family**. Imagine that a child in your care is going to be reunited with his or her birth family. Jot down your ideas about how you would help with the transition.

1. How would you help the child understand why he or she is returning home?

2. How would you help the child manage the loss of moving from your family?

3. What would you do to help the child become attached or renew attachment to his or her family?

4. What could you do to help a child cope with this transition?

5. What could you do to help a child maintain connections that he or she developed while in your care?

6. Which of the above tasks (questions 1–5)
a. could your family most comfortably fulfill?

b. would be most challenging for your family?

7. What supports do you think you would need from the team to be successful with the above tasks?

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Answer the following questions if you wish to become an adoptive parent.
Jot down your ideas about how you would perform these necessary tasks.

1. What do you think you might say to the child to explain why he or she was adopted?
2. What losses do you think a child placed with you might have, and how would you plan to support the child?
3. What would you do to help the child form attachments?
4. How would you help a child cope with changes and transitions as he or she moves from the foster family to your family?
5. What would you do to help a child maintain connections from his or her past?
6. Which of the above tasks (questions 1–5)
 - a. could your family most comfortably fulfill?
 - b. would be most challenging for your family?
7. What supports do you think you would need from the team to be successful with the above tasks?

Making a Difference!

We never intended to adopt. We began fostering when our two oldest children were toddlers, because it seemed like something worthwhile to do while being home with them. Paul and Buddy weren't the first children we fostered, but they came to us early on. Paul was four and Buddy was a year old when they were placed, and they were with us for two years. We had become very attached to them, so when the social worker approached us about adopting, we really struggled with the decision.

It was very hard to think about not having them with us, but there were other things to think about, too. Paul and our son were the same calendar age, but there were marked differences in their developmental ages. It wasn't that Paul was lacking in any way, but that our son was an exceptional child. We worried that if they grew up together, Paul might feel he didn't "measure up." He was a wonderful child and deserved a family situation where he could be cherished for what he was, without a built-in comparison to what he wasn't. I'd just learned I was pregnant again. Our house would be stretched to bursting with yet another child, and we were certain that the brothers shouldn't be separated by adoption. And, we lived right inside the city, where there simply wasn't the space, inside or outside, for the kind of activities Paul seemed to thrive on.

The decision not to adopt Paul and Buddy was extremely difficult for us, and I remember feeling very grateful that the social worker accepted it without being judgmental at all. She looked statewide, and actually discussed several potential adoptive family situations with us to help her determine which would be best for meeting the boys' needs. It felt good to be included in that way.

The adoptive parents lived at the other end of the state, so they would come for the weekend to have pre-placement visits in our home, and we got to know each other. When we realized that the adoption would be finalized right before Christmas, we were anxious about how the holiday would be. All of us considered what would work best for the kids, and the holiday wasn't a problem. We thought that the way the adoptive parents handled Christmas was a good omen for the kids' future. We stayed in touch with occasional phone calls and annual Christmas cards.

Ten years after the adoption, we had vacation plans in their area which would take us near their home. We wrote them and were invited to visit on Mother's Day! Paul and Buddy took us on a tour of their farm, introduced us to all their pets and showed us their many sports trophies. Then we had a wonderful picnic with the family. Paul made me a corsage to wear! Shy in the beginning, later Paul wanted to talk about the time he was with us. He remembers his mother being pregnant, and thought he might have another brother or sister somewhere. I assured him that I was the "pregnant mother" he remembered. It seemed that question had needed answering for a long time, and I was glad

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I could do so. The boys are part of a fine family. The wisdom and commitment of the social worker who did the adoption planning successfully brought the family together.

We were part of a team that included the social worker, and the adoptive parents, all working together in trying to do the very best thing for the boys in the very best way. When we think of Paul and Buddy, as we often do, we feel proud of being a part of that.

Pam and Tom O'Grady
Foster Parents
Illinois

Making a Difference!

A few years before we made the decision to adopt, I went to a conference where a speaker said that adopted children would not be the same as children we had given birth to—that their genes would be different; not “bad,” just different. I didn't pay much attention to her statement at the time, but I've thought about it since. I think she missed the point!

John and I have two adopted children, four birth children, and are still fostering after 24 years. I don't discount the importance of genetic heritage, but I believe that all children are unique individuals. Our birth children are different from each other, and different from us, although they share the same genes. And, our adopted children share the same genes, yet they are different from each other, too. All of them have individual needs, talents, and interests, and are motivated by different things.

At our house, if you come in past curfew, the next time you go out, you have to “pay back” the time you were late by being home that much time earlier. We've had that curfew for all of the children and it's worked; but, everyone has responded to it in their own way. It's been the same with other things we've done in parenting.

What is different and important to pay attention to is that our birth children never had concerns about their place as a permanent part of our family. For our adopted children, we do try to assert the permanent place they have in our family, and also to respond to questions they sometimes have had about their birth family. But, those questions and concerns are in their hearts, not their genes!

Sally Humphreys
Foster Parent; Adoptive Parent
Illinois