

Adopting Your Foster Child: What Every Parent Needs to Know

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Mr. and Mrs. Chandler couldn't wait to become a "forever family" to their two foster children, brother and sister – Demetri and LaShawn, who came into care when they were 8 and 6. The Chandlers were their first and only foster family. They deeply loved these children and there was never a doubt about their commitment to them. However, if you ask the Chandlers, becoming a "forever family" meant learning to "wait forever" to have their dream come true. It took **four** years for these foster parents to be allowed to adopt Demetri and LaShawn.

The Chandlers' story, is not unique. Despite the mandate to move children from foster care into permanency, the reality is that a good amount of time can pass while child welfare workers pursue the concurrent plan of reunification or adoption. The legal process often involves decisions that extend the period of time to work toward possible reunification, and may also involve time-consuming appeals by birth parents to overturn decisions that terminate their parental rights.

One can only imagine how difficult it was for the Chandlers to overcome their fear of losing these children. However, overcome it, they did. While they "waited forever", the Chandlers continued to be good foster parents, as they had to many other children. They faithfully brought the boys to monthly visits with their birth family, comforted their children on those occasions when the birth parents didn't show, honored their birth parents on birthdays, Mother's Day, holidays and other significant events. As a result of their kindness, love, and sense of inclusion, Demetri and LaShawn were protected from the not uncommon "loyalty struggles."

Sometimes it is the foster parents themselves who delay finalization. They may worry about losing the support of the social workers and services they have come to rely on that are part of foster care. The special challenges of raising children who have faced trauma, who may come from compromised beginnings, who are grieving losses including birth family, may make the adoption finalization quite scary. As one parent said, it has been comforting to know that the social worker, "has my back."

Regardless of the circumstances or time period for finalization to take place, it is extremely important that foster families resist the pull to “drift into adoption.” Having had a child in their home for many years, they may not see adoption as a big change either for themselves or their children. As one parent, Jane said, “Nothing’s changed. We are adopting her because we love her and we will go on with our lives as usual.” With this belief, parents may not see the need for adoption education, and then be blindsided when their child begins to express feelings or exhibit behavior that is unusual and distressing, as Jane’s daughter, Sally did. For Sally, while being thrilled about being adopted by Jane, adoption ALSO meant losing her beloved social worker who had been there for her through 4 placements, in addition to losing the long-established ritual of seeing her birth siblings at the agency. Sally, 11, said, “All I know is foster care, and now it’s just going to be us.” In addition, Sally had many other questions/concerns that her mother could not possibly have anticipated such as, “Should I change my last name? Will the school lose my records if I change my name? How will my birth siblings feel if I change my name? How do I tell my classmates about being adopted?”

Thus, whether feeling euphoric, extremely relieved, or ambivalent about adoption, it is important for foster families to be prepared for what adoption means, just like any new family adopting a child who has not first been their foster child. The many changes that come with adoption finalization should be carefully considered and explored by the foster/soon- to-be adoptive parents.

Parents need preparation to understand both their own emotional reactions to the changes adoption brings as well as their children’s reactions so that they may meet the emotional needs of their now adopted children. One area for exploration is the changes that adoption will mean for birth family contact/relationships. Regardless of open adoption agreements, parents are now in charge of the circumstances around which these relationships will continue. This can again be a welcome change or a scary one. Changes in the frequency of contact likely will impact the children, as will feelings around grief and loyalty that may not have surfaced before. As Maris Blechner and Helene Gershowitz write in *The Coalition Voice*, Fall 2000, “A child can live in a foster home for years and never touch the issues deep down inside, as long as that child can hold on to the belief that someday he or she is going back to their birth family. However, once the decision is made by foster parents to adopt, a child has to look at all of those buried issues, in order to decide to be their child.”

Some children we see at C.A.S.E. share their most intimate stories about their neglect, abuse and other trauma only AFTER they are adopted and claimed by a family. They want and need the security of forever parents who will accept and listen lovingly to their secrets and worst fears. They need to be securely anchored. Like adults, children will only grieve with people they trust to be there for them. And because so many foster children have had multiple moves, they need to experience that feeling of permanency in their adoptive family before they can address the trauma they have experienced.



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Acting out behavior related to grief can also involve a child's attempt to test the child's adoption commitment – sometimes shortly before and often after finalization. A recurrence of old problematic behavior can reoccur as if to say, “You really want me? Let's see...if I am really bad, will you STILL want me?” One 9-year-old boy admitted that he felt deep shame for “his part” in getting into foster care and believed he was a bad, disloyal child. Luckily his adoptive parents were prepared for his challenging behavior and could respond tenderly.

One way to mark the important distinction between foster care and adoption is use of rituals that serve to celebrate this important and desired change, despite all its complicating emotions. Many jurisdictions require a court appearance for the adoptive family where pictures are taken – even with the judge! Extended family and friends often attend to witness the signing of the legal documents. Whether you throw a party or have a quiet family special activity, mark the day of finalization. Many families continue to celebrate Adoption Day as a special anniversary. After all, “waiting forever” families certainly are entitled to have a day of appreciation to honor all their hard work and accomplishments. Children frequently tell us that they remember their adoption day. The celebration has great significance for them as they end their journey in foster care and become part of a permanent family. Celebrate this happiness!