

ADOPTING YOUR FOSTER CHILD: WHAT EVERY PARENT NEEDS TO KNOW

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Mr. and Mrs. Chandler were dedicated foster parents to their two sibling foster children, Demetri and LaShawn, who came into care when they were eight and six. The Chandlers were the children's first and only foster family. From taking them to monthly visits with their birth family to comforting the children on occasions when their birth parents didn't show, the Chandlers lovingly cared for Demetri and LaShawn. When the plan changed from reunification to adoption, the Chandlers embraced the commitment to adopt the children and become a forever family. However, becoming that forever family required patience and strength during the four long years that it took to finalize the process.

The Road to Finalization

The Chandlers' story is not unique. Despite laws enacted to provide permanency, the reality is that a substantial amount of time can pass as child welfare workers pursue the concurrent plan of reunification or adoption. The legal process often involves decisions that can extend the time period for working toward reunification. Time-consuming appeals often occur, whereby birth parents attempt to overturn decisions that terminate their parental rights.

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 or 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."

Preparing for the Transition

Regardless of the circumstances or time period for finalization to take place, it is imperative for foster families to resist the pull to "drift into adoption." Having had a child in their home for many years, foster parents may not see adoption as a big change either for themselves or their children. With this belief, parents may not see the need for adoption education, and may then be blindsided when their child begins to express feelings or exhibit behavior that is unusual and distressing "Nothing's changed," said Jane, an adoptive parent. "I am adopting Sally, because I love her, and we will go on with our lives as usual."

For Sally, however, while happy about being adopted by Jane, adoption ALSO involved feelings of loss and change. It meant losing her beloved social worker who had been there for her through four placements, as well as changes in the visitation schedule with her birth siblings. "All I know is foster care, and now it's just going to be us," said Sally.

Additionally, Sally's list of questions about the adoption surprised Jane:

- 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 that I've been adopted?

Whether the child and the parents feel euphoric, relieved, or ambivalent about adoption, it is important for foster families to be prepared for what adoption really means for all those involved. The many changes that come with adoption finalization should be carefully considered and explored by the foster/soon-to-be adoptive parents.

Parents must understand both their own emotional reactions to all of the changes adoption brings as well as be prepared to address their children's reactions. One area for exploration is the changes that adoption will mean for birth family contact and relationships. Regardless of open adoption agreements, parents are now in charge of the circumstances around which these relationships will continue. This can 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 wrote 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 must look at all those buried issues, in order to decide to be their child."

Many children seen at C.A.S.E. share their most intimate stories about the neglect, abuse and other trauma they experienced with their birth family only AFTER they are adopted and claimed by a family. They want and need the security of forever parents who will accept them unconditionally and listen 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.

Acting out behavior related to grief can also involve a child's attempt to test the parent's adoption commitment, sometimes shortly before and often after finalization. A recurrence of old problematic behavior can reoccur as the child may be thinking, "You really want me? If I am bad, will you STILL want me?"

One 9-year-old boy admitted while in therapy with his parents that he felt deep shame for what he perceived as his part in entering foster care. He believed he was a bad, disloyal child. Luckily his adoptive parents were prepared for his challenging behavior and knew how to help him.

Celebrating the Transition to Adoption

One way to mark the important distinction between foster care and adoption is the use of rituals that serve to celebrate this 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, showing support for the adoption. Whether you throw a party or celebrate quietly with close family members, it is important to mark the day of finalization. Many families continue to celebrate Adoption Day as a special anniversary to recognize becoming a family. 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.

If your child or your family is experiencing the common challenges involved in the transition to adoption, remember that it takes a village and we recommend seeking adoption-competent professional assistance.