

Chapter 7: “Planning for Change”

Working as a Member of a Professional Team, includes planning for change. Agreeing to foster or adopt a child will bring many changes to your life and the life of the child. We have all experience change. Some people relish and seek change – they love to travel, to experience new tastes, sounds, and sights. Some people strive for consistency – they prefer order and predictability in their lives. Most of us are a mixture – we like routine things to be the same every day, but a little excitement makes life interesting. But to be a member of a professional team, we have to be able to plan for and manage change.

Bringing a new child into your family will mean change for you, for the children already in your family, the new child, and even your extended family or grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. As we talk about change, and reactions to change, you need to think about the family relationships and concepts of attachment and loss presented in the earlier sessions.

Discuss an everyday situation that brings about significant life change.

Let’s imagine that your son, who is away at college, calls to say the he has just become engaged to the wonderful young woman he started dating three months ago. You are happy your son is so in love, but you have a lot of concerns and questions.

*What would you want to know?

Is there something else you want to tell me?

Connect this example to the placement process in foster care or adoption.

Your questions are appropriate; however, your son probably will think he is being grilled by the CIA. The point is; however, that you care about your son and you know that marriage is a big decision. This will be a lifetime change. And even through you’ve never met the young woman with whom he is so in love, you already have some feelings about her. She may become part of your family. You want to save them heartache and you want them to be happy, so you ask questions.

As a prospective foster parent or adoptive parent, you also care about the children who are being considered for possible placement with you. You know that these children have experience the tragedies of abuse and/or neglect, and experience loss and multiple adjustments. You know that they should not be subjected to any more disruptions, so your decision is critical. You have to be ready to make a commitment. As a foster parent you are committing to be important in the life of a child; as an adoptive parent you are committing to be important for the life of the child.

Adding a new child or children to your family will have an enormous impact on you, your family, your friends, your income, and your job. When you asked your son all those questions, you were recognizing that bringing a new in-law into the family has implications for everyone.

When you ask questions about a child, you are showing your interest your careful concern for the decision you must make, and an ability to know the strengths and needs of your family.

Discuss the kinds of questions foster parents and adoptive parents need to ask when considering the placement of a child or sibling group.

Think about the general areas that would be important to explore before the placement of a child, for example, the child's health or school experience.

*What else would you want to know?

*Trainers Note: As participants offer suggestions, write answers on a flip chart sheet. As participants share their ideas, relate them to the categories listed below. Identify categories such as:

- Physical health
- Emotional health
- Education
- Abuse/neglect history
- Parental/sibling situation
- Legal status
- Behaviors
- Placement History

Discuss realistic expectations about the amount and kind of information that will be presented to them

Cover the following points:

- Foster parents have to be comfortable with some uncertainty; all the information you want will rarely be available when you want it. Children coming into care for emergency reasons hardly ever come with a lot of background information. It may be up to the foster parent, living with the child for a while, to work as a member of the team to fill in the missing jigsaw puzzle pieces.

- Adoptive parents also have to be comfortable with some unknown information. Generally, there is a lot more information available, but even then, there can be missing pieces.
- As a team member you should have access to most of the available information that will help you parent the abused and neglected child(ren).
- The past is an ingredient of the present, but not a recipe for future behavior.
 - What does this statement mean to you?
 - How does it relate to our prior discussion?
- A child who has never been aggressive may kick a child in your family. The child is in a new situation, and the dynamics in your family may be different from those he or she has experience in the past.

Discuss changes in family routines.

Change is difficult and disrupts normal, regular ways of doing things. Recall how you felt about small, silly, changes in your life. For example, think about a recent event that changed your family routine.

Will somebody share their experience?

Why was the change irritating for you and your family?

The change is irritating because it causes you to alter a pattern of behavior that, in the past, you did not even think about.

We reduce much of life to routines – we drive to the grocery store along the same route each time. We have a set morning routines that get us up and out every day. We tend to go to bed at the same time at night. Routines are not inherently good or bad, but different people will have different routines.

Families also establish routines. Some families routinely eat at 5 p.m. some at 7 p.m. some families gather in the dining room for conversation; others grab individual meals on the run. Routines become accepted, and save families from endless negotiations about how to run life on a day-to-day basis. Maybe you have said something like, “In our family, children bathe at night, adults shower in the morning. We only have one bathroom and that is how we do it.” It is not discussed every day, once the routine is set.

*What are some examples of your families’ daily routines?

Guide the discussion to cover the following points:

- Routines vary among families.

- It is easy to come to believe that my routine is “right,” and to forget that routines are behavior choices.
- Children will bring routines with them, and these could be routines that were established from all or any of the previous families with whom the children have lived.
- Routines can be changed.

Discuss changes in family traditions.

Families also value traditions. When two people marry, for example, they have to blend traditions. Will they open presents on Christmas morning, or Christmas Eve? Will Passover be celebrated? How will birthdays be celebrated? What about New Year’s Eve? Families make statements like: “In our family, the women always/never work outside the home.” Or “You are going to be the third generation policeman in this family.” Or “show respect for your mother. In my time, if I had spoken to my mother that way I wouldn’t be around to tell the tale.”

*What are some examples of traditions from your families?

Guide the discussion to cover the following points:

- Families build traditions from religious, ethnic, cultural, and personal experience.
- Families pass down traditions from generation to generation.
- Traditions connect people to the past, and help them to know what to expect from the future.
- Children will bring traditions with them, and these could be traditions from every or any family with whom they have lived.
- The traditions that children bring with them will reflect many of the aspects of their family or origin, or other families: their culture, size, income, neighborhood, or lifestyle, for example.

Discuss family patterns of behavior.

Families also develop patterns of behavior – things that all family members just assume. Patterns focus on communication, problem solving, and decision making. Patterns may sound like, “We talk things over as a family.” Or “I don’t know dear, wait until your father gets home.” Or, “Go to Mom if you want to talk; go to Dad if you want money.”

*What are some of the patterns of behavior that your families have?

Cover the following points:

- If it is hard for you to specify your family's patterns and traditions, it may be difficult for a new child to figure out your "unspoken" rules.
- Traditions represent your heritage and may differ substantially from the background of the child.
- Children have become familiar with the way their family behaved, even if that behavior was harmful.

Connect the discussions about routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior that are comfortable in your family. Now think about a child who comes to your household with a very different set of routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior.

You have identified the routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior that are comfortable in your family. Now think about a child who comes to your household with a very different set of routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior.

I am now going to ask you some questions and allow a short period of time between questions to think.

- Which routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior in your family could you change to accommodate a new child?
- Which routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior might a new child find unusual or hard to get used to in your home? Which routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior brought by a child would you find unusual or hard to get used to?
- If you had to change a routine, tradition, and pattern of behavior, would you resent the child for "causing" the change?
- How will other member of your family, especially your children, manage the stress of changes in family routines, traditions, and patterns of communication?
- Which routines, traditions, and patterns of behaviors are non-negotiable?

*Trainer's Note: The impact of fostering or adopting on birth children of foster parents and adoptive parents is an important issue. If any participants have birth children, you should focus predominantly on this issue.

The following information should be presented as a lecture:

- When new children join your family, it is important to think about the routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior they have experienced and find comfortable.
- As part of a team, foster parents and adoptive parents should consult with and get help families plan and manage changes in routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior affecting all members of the family.
- Children newly placed with foster families and with adoptive families cannot be expected to make all, or even most of these changes, at least not right away. It may be “easier” for the family to adapt to the child, at least temporarily, than for family to adapt to the child, at least temporarily, than for child to change to suit the family. The past lives of fragile children may have lacked stable routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior.

Discuss the importance of working as a team to plan for and support the transition of children and youth as they move from one family to another.

You now recognize that children will come to your family with a variety of backgrounds. Sometimes the behaviors that express the routines, traditions, and patterns of behavior will be uncomfortable for you. For example, “John uses swears words around the other children and I don’t like it.” Or, “she wants to watch TV all the time, and we restrict TV to one hour a day.” Or, “Mary talks back to the teachers, and I’m tired of getting phone calls every day telling me to do something about it.”

Sometimes foster parents and adoptive parents are accused of abusing the child or children in their care, and unfortunately sometimes the allegations are true. In many circumstances; however, the child or another person makes an accusation not based on fact. Knowledge, skills and teamwork are your best prevention and best defense. Working closely with the child’s worker, therapist, school teachers, and counselors assures that the child’s background is known, and everyone involved understands the needs and behavior patterns of the child.

We do not want to unnecessarily frighten you as prospective foster parents and adoptive parents, but you do have to be realistic regarding the risks and the supports. This is critical to your decision making process as you consider fostering or adopting children in the agency’s care. Let’s discuss some tips for avoiding abuse and neglect allegations and some possible house rules which complement those tips. Please look at the handout titled- Session Nine: “Tips for Foster Parents and Adoptive Parents to Avoid Misinterpretations.”

Let’s identify some of the strengths, skills, and supports that you may need in order to manage change.

Conduct an activity.

If group is large enough and time permits, divide participants into three groups (otherwise do this exercise as a large group):

- Strengths
- Skills
- Supports

Give participants 10 minutes to answer their assigned questions from the handout. Give the groups a two-minute warning before time is up.

Guide the discussion to cover the following points:

- Strengths can be:
 - Patience and humor
 - Honesty and hope
 - Commitment and warmth
 - Common sense and optimism
- Skills can be:
 - Understanding the history or purpose behind a child's behavior
 - Knowing when to ask for help
 - Using help
 - Knowing how to accept children as unique individuals
 - Knowing how to be happy about small gains
 - Understanding the importance of teamwork.
- Supports can be:
 - The child's social worker
 - Foster parent or adoptive parent associations
 - A child's birth family
 - Professional counselors
 - Family and friends
 - Religious organizations

