

Matching Assistance Program Newsletter



John



Michael



Aimee

John (10) is a high energy child who enjoys outside play, and sports as well as drawing and painting. He has participated in The Special Olympics playing baseball and basketball. He has a desire to please those around him. John is helpful to peers at school as well as teammates. His favorite food is pizza. He really enjoys helping and will readily do chores. John likes to have things neat and orderly.

Michael (16) is a polite and soft-spoken individual. He is easily liked and is a real people person. He has many friends and gets along with just about everyone. Michael is very active and likes to

Helping Children Explain Their Placement

By Kay Donley

Kay Donley is well known for having sensitivity to the child's point of view. This article reminds us all to help children answer some very difficult questions.

When children must live apart from their family of origin, whether in foster or adoption, they need to master the telling of *who* they are and *how* they came to be living apart from their families. Placement workers, beset by the complexities of locating willing substitute families, grappling with the logistics of moving child and belongings intact to a new family, faced with a veritable blizzard of paperwork to approve and finance the plan, may overlook this problem.

Before the dust has barely settled, the child will be called to explain his person, his presence, and his history to a long list of inquiries. New neighbors, teachers, playmates, and acquaintances will ask questions about him and his status. Sometimes the questions will be casually asked; sometimes he will be grilled like a suspect. The child left to fend for himself in these circumstances is usually forced to say too much or too little. Sometimes he embroiders the truth and gains a reputation as a liar. Sometimes he volunteers lurid detail and becomes an instant, exotic attraction.

An experienced placement worker knows this in advance and equips the child with a cover story. (Please note - a cover story, not a cover-up story! In the business world the cover letter is a generally phrased, all-purpose letter used to summarize more elaborate information provided elsewhere). In placement, the child can easily learn that his cover story, his short version of who he is, is an appropriate response when people ask him leading questions like:just where did you come from?.... but who are you? Without help in preparing the answers, the child flounders. With help, he can respond confidently, truthfully, and yet avoid trapping himself into betraying private matters.

The easiest way to prepare a cover story with a child is to imagine the potential questions, review what is appropriate information to share, and role play questions and answers. This technique works with children of all ages, as long as they have basic language skills and can learn appropriate social responses. Pre-schoolers, teenagers, retarded children, even disturbed children, can all benefit from such help, as can the families caring for them.

To provide the new family with background or current functioning information on a child to be placed and then leave the question of appropriate handling of that information entirely to their good judgment is foolish. Excitement, surprise, or sheer foolhardiness can lead families into sharing intimate information about a child with people who have no business knowing these things. Placement families must always be warned about that impulsive

participate in a variety of activities. He is enthusiastic about everything that he does and has a great passion for music. Michael enjoys singing for his school choir and hopes to one day audition for American Idol. Sports are another of Michael's passions. He is athletic and stays in shape by playing football.

Aimee (13) is an active person who enjoys sports and hanging out with friends. She is an avid reader and has read all of the Twilight series. Aimee also enjoys going to the movies. She enjoys social activities and makes friends easily. Aimee is athletic and participates in volleyball, track and gymnastics. She is described as being intelligent, articulate and out-going.

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Lyn is a Licensed Professional Counselor and has been working in the field of counseling for over 20 years.

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phone call to a best friend or close family member. The simple trigger of a question like Well? Tell me what the worker told you about him! can result in confidences shared which can never be retracted. The child is stripped and betrayed even before placement.

It becomes the job of the placement worker to help the child and his new family anticipate the difficulties and organize a three step defense:

1. Imagine the potential questions.

Actually make a list of the various possibilities and the persons who may ask the questions. This helps the child and family see the relevance of the abbreviated version of the story. In the excitement and fantasy surrounding the placement scenario, the everyday facts of living and forming new relationships may not loom large until it is too late, and the child or family may be caught unaware and without defenses.

- Imagine introducing the child to your neighbor.
- Envision the first day of school and questions asked by classmates and teachers.
- Picture the first family gathering and the remarks made by new grandparents, cousins, uncles...
- Consider the first day in the new neighborhood, playing with children who are understandably curious about the new child.

2. Review the appropriate information to be shared.

Children often have trouble understanding the right to privacy. They need help from adults to distinguish between what is *known* and what is *shared*. This is a good opportunity to help children learn how to be truthful but appropriate in giving answers to personal questions. It also protects them from disclosing information which might later be embarrassing to them or used against them in destructive or hostile ways.

Simple declaratory sentences are best: My name is Tony Johnson. I used to live in Cleveland. I'm gonna live here because my folks have problems... I have to live here until things get better at home...I'm being adopted...I got adopted because I couldn't live with my other family anymore...

Three basic responses are those most often needed:

The child's name (be consistent; use his legal name so he can make the same response at all times; using one name at home and another in school can be very difficult for the child.)

The child's origin (offer the basics only; most people who ask where the child comes from are satisfied with the name of the state or town, more detail is not necessary; children can be taught to deflect more probing by responding with a question of their own: ...and where are you from?)

The whereabouts or general circumstances of the child's biological family (the implication is usually clear, the questioner wants to know why the child is not with them; children can answer briefly and truthfully without providing details; if the questioner is persistent, the child should be comfortable in ending the

[Center for Family-Centered Practice & Permanency Planning](#)

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning and the Child Welfare League of America host a series of teleconferences for state program managers in foster care and adoption. These calls provide information on topics of interest in child welfare to state agencies.

A Family For Every Child

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conversation: ...hat's family business...I have to go now...my family would have to answer that...

3. Role play the questions and answers.

Be sure the child knows the three most common concerns (as above) and can comfortably respond to questions about them. The family should be able to respond in accord with the child.

Every child entering a new living situation needs this preparation. When it is a simple matter of a family moving to a new home, the answers to direct questions come easily. When the child moves because of family distress, the answers become more troublesome. Most children are not prepared to deal with the natural curiosity of children and adults they will meet. It becomes the responsibility of the placement worker to help the child and his new family respond to the situation.

The methods used can promote stronger ties between child and family and point the way toward resolving yet other problems. The child should also understand that he will not have to cut the ties he has now in order to have a permanent family. His friends will be able to write to him, and the foster parents will want to send birthday and Christmas cards. If there are siblings, he will be able to keep in touch. The child needs to meet adopted children, especially older ones who remember their placements. A potluck supper or family activity with an adoptive parents' group would be ideal.

There is always the fear in the worker's mind that the child will suffer more if he is prepared for adoption and no family is found, than if the whole topic of adoption is avoided. We are not being responsible if we deny the children families because of our fears. The risk is worth taking.

Publicity can be explained as a method to recruit lots of families interested in adoption. The family for the child may or may not be among them. The worker should be careful not to let the child feel that his forever family may not exist. Of course, they exist! Our job is to find them. Children who are unsure about adoption are the ones who most need an all-out effort to find them permanent families.

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With a 35 year career in Child Welfare, Kay Donley is a nationally recognized and honored adoption professional and educator. She has been on the staff at several agencies, including Michigan's Spaulding, the nation's first special needs adoption agency. As a Training Consultant for the National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoptions, she developed educational curricula and materials for adoptive parents. Ms. Donley is now enjoying retirement.