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To: scott@afamilyforeverychild.org
Subject: Helping your child transition into your family



Dear ,

Making the transition from a foster child to an adopted child can be difficult at any age. Oftentimes, children who are in foster homes have been placed multiple times before they are adopted. In a lot of cases, the child already has a disrupted attachment style, and may have a hard time attaching and connecting to others, especially adults. All of this can be very disruptive and hard on a child. Being placed into a new environment-even if it is permanent-can be just as hard. It is an unfamiliar new place, and they will need to adjust again. As their new parents, there are a few ways that you can help make the transition smooth for your child. They are: talking with your child about the changes; doing activities to help your child understand their history and background; helping your child adjust to losses; and helping your child transfer attachments.

Talking with your child about the changes

When you are talking with your child about the changes that will occur with adoption, it is important to listen to what they have to say, and to the questions that they will ask. Your child is an important part of the process, and his/her opinion should be valued. Be honest when you answer your child's questions, even if it is difficult and painful to say and hear. Helping your child through the grieving process is very important in helping them move forward and to establish a sense of permanency in your family. The following are some suggestions on how you can discuss these changes with your child:

- **Plan the discussion.** Talk to your child either on your own or with the child's caseworker present. Together, you can talk to your child about the transitions and changes they will experience going from a foster child to an adopted child. The child's caseworker can also reinforce your discussion later on with the child. Your child may have a lot of questions, so you need to be prepared to give them honest answers.
- **Help the child use his/her own words to talk about the differences.** Ask your child open-ended questions, such as "What do you think will be the biggest difference when you are adopted?" Asking these questions will help you gauge how your child is perceiving their adoption and the changes that will follow. It will also allow you to try and make the transition as smooth as possible, while allowing your child to validate their thoughts and experiences.
- **Help the child draw comparisons.** Help your child draw comparisons to a similar event or experience in their life. This technique is very beneficial for younger children, and it will help make the transition easier to comprehend.

Your child may also have questions about the changes in their legal status, their name, and parenting differences. There is a good chance that the child has been through other legal proceedings before (for example, TPR), so they will want to know how this is different. Older children may have questions about financial differences, and the adoption assistance you may be receiving from the state. Make sure to be honest and compassionate when discussing financial differences, and let the child know the money is going to making sure they receive the best services to help them heal. Finally, a child will want to know how you parenting styles differ from those of their foster parent. Explaining to your child the rules of your home will give them a guideline of what to expect. During this discussion a child make want to know if this will be a permanent placement, so be prepared to discuss that as well.

Talking with your child about all their "parents"

Children will have questions about how all their "parents" play a role in their life (birth, foster, and you-their adoptive parents). Discussing their roles is an important part of the process. The following are ways that to explain how all a child's parents have played a role in their life:

- **Birth parents-** gave the child life, their appearance, gender, personality, talents and temperament.
- **Foster parents-** provided the child with safety, security and a home while an adoptive family was sought.
- **Adoptive (parenting) parents-** provide the child with love, food, discipline, permanency, security, life skills, assistance, and more.

Helping your child understand their history

Helping your child understand their past experiences is an important part of the transition process and it can give them clarity to help them integrate into your family. This will help the child understand where they fit in your family, society, and give them an overall sense of

self-understanding. The following are some questions your child may ask in regards to permanency:

- Who am I?
- What happened to me?
- Where am I going?
- How will I get there?
- When will I know I belong?

Using life books, eco-maps, and life-maps/life-paths are useful tools in helping answer your child's questions.

- A **life book** is an account of the child's life, in words and pictures. You can work with the child's foster parent to add pictures of the child participating in favorite activities or trips. It is also important to include any pictures of people who are significant in the child's life. This will help them understand where they came from and who they are.
- An **eco-map** is a visual representation of the child and the important people and events in their life. An eco-map can be used to explain how the child became part of your family. Typically an eco-map will have a picture of the child in the center with lines coming out of it to other circles and pictures showing the child's family, siblings, their foster family, school, favorite activities, etc.
- A **life-map** or **life-path** is a visual representation of the paths the child has taken in their life and the different points or milestones along the way. A life-map can show where the child was at a certain age, what they were doing, and the important people that were present.

It is important to include any information surrounding the child's birth, their entry into foster care, and the decisions made along the way. If possible, include a picture of the child's birth parents or have them draw one of what they think their parents looked like. These tools will help the child work through any feelings of grief and loss.

Helping the child adjust to losses

Use the five-step integration process to help your child adjust to the losses they have experienced, understand them, and integrate them into their life:

- **Reconstruct an accurate timeline of the child's entire placement history.** You can use a life book, eco-map or life-map to do this.
- **Identify any attachment figures that were important to the child.** Gather as much information as possible from the child's foster parents, caseworker, and therapist, who all may have heard the child mention these people before. Past/present foster parents, relatives, friends, birth parents, or siblings could all be attachment figures.
- **Work with the most significant attachment figures available.** If possible, work with the more significant attachment figures in the child's life to help ease the transition into adoption.
- **Ask the attachment figure(s) to give their permission.** Hearing from their attachment figure(s) that it is okay to accept and love a new family is really important for all children to hear. This message can come via a phone call, letter, or in person. Hearing this message is very beneficial for children, especially young children, who may still feel loyal to their biological or foster parents. Receiving permission from this person will help the child transition into your family.

Helping the child transfer attachments

There are many ways you can show the child that they are now part of your family. Examples include:

- **Calling you "mom" and "dad".** Leave this up to the child. It may take them awhile to adjust to the idea of having a new set of parents, and they may still be attached to their biological or foster parents, and are grappling with that loss. Give your child the option of calling you "mom" and "dad", and let them know they can decide when they are comfortable calling you that. It may be easier for a younger child to quickly accept these terms, but it may take a little longer for an older child.
- **Setting out pictures of the child.** Ask the foster parent for recent school photos, or use any photos you have taken with your child. This will show the child that you consider them to be part of the family which will help the transition, especially if you already have children.
- **Involving the child in family reunions or other activities with extended family.** Be very careful when bringing extended family into the mix. A child may be overwhelmed with the idea of meeting new people on top of adjusting to their new life in your home. Start out by showing the child pictures and explaining who people are. Then, start slowly introducing your child to your extended family. Start small by having your parent(s) or an aunt or uncle over for dinner. Don't rush into things by having your child meet twenty people all at once. Remember that your child will still be trying to attach to you, so introduce extended family members after your child has bonded significantly with you.
- **Including the child in family traditions.** Including the child in any family traditions

will help them feel like they belong. In addition, make sure to incorporate any traditions the child may have partaken in with their biological or foster family, as those past traditions may hold significant meaning.

- **Including the child in faith-based rituals.** Base this off the child's age, faith, and comfort level.
- **Taking the time to explain the rules in a supportive way.** Tell the child, "in our family, we do it this way". By making that statement, it will let the child know that you are in charge, while simultaneously letting them know the rules of the house without overwhelming them, or making them feel stupid for not knowing what the rules are.
- **Sending out announcements of the adoption.** Send out announcement cards to your family and friends letting them know that you adopted will show the child that you are excited that they are part of your family and that you want everyone to know!

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