Foster Parent Adoptions: Talking with Children about the Difference Between Foster Care and Adoption

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Special Issues in Foster Parent Adoptions
When children are adopted by the foster parents who have provided them a "temporary" home for an extended period of time, new dynamics develop. Most importantly, there is a shift in roles and role perceptions in the foster/adoptive family. Research indicates that the differences are felt more by the foster parents than by the child. In fact, children who are adopted by their foster parents often cannot discern the difference between foster care and adoption.1

Foster/adoptive parents know there are legal differences because they no longer share legal liability with the agency and court. They know the financial differences; they personally are responsible for the financial obligations and even with subsidy payments, they are fiscally liable for their adopted child. Foster/adoptive parents know the decision-making differences; they no longer share parental decision-making responsibilities with the agency and birth parents. They know there are now attachment differences; they are no longer working with the agency to reunify the child with the birth family.

For the adopted child, however, the distinctions are not so clear. In their minds, there is little, if any, difference, even when the foster parents and social workers have talked with them. For example, a child may say, "My mom and dad are still getting paid to keep me." (They perceive the foster care reimbursement and subsidy as being the same.) Another child may say, "I don't remember anything special the last time I went to court." (Children who have experienced foster care have experienced many court events. An adoption legalization hearing may feel no different than the myriad court hearings that occurred in earlier days.) Yet another example is, "We still have a social worker." (Most foster parents who adopt through foster care continue to foster other children.2 Consequently, there continue to be social workers in their lives and in the life of the newly adopted child.)

Because of the inherent confusions for children who are adopted by their foster parents, this article outlines several methods for helping children understand the differences between foster care and adoption. Besides providing suggestions for specific techniques, this article suggests ideas for planning the discussions, helping the child verbalize perceived differences and helping the child draw analogies.

Talking with Children about the Differences Between Foster Care and Adoption
Direct conversations in a comfortable setting can be very effective, especially if the adult and child are engaging in a fun activity together, like cooking, playing with toys or walking in the park. Reviewing or updating the Life Book (the written and pictorial story of the child's life) can provide another opportunity for the discussion of differences. Some foster/adoptive parents help children draw large posters symbolizing the differences. Older children, especially adolescents'
write poetry and share their poems with important adults. Using a variety of techniques and repeating the discussions in a variety of ways is important if children are to eventually understand the difference between the earlier fostering experience and the current adoption relationship.

To help a child disengage from the role of "foster child," and engage in the role of "adopted child," the following stages are suggested.²

**Stage 1: Plan the Discussions.**

Important but difficult discussions may not happen if they are not planned. Foster/adoptive parents must carefully plan how and when to talk with children about differences. It is most important for the agency worker to remember that a critical part of assuring a successful foster parent adoption is empowering the foster parents to become adoptive parents. The worker's responsibility is to lay out the important issues and to facilitate a planning session with the parents. The foster/adoptive parents can best decide if a meeting between the child and the social worker would be best. They may decide that the worker should meet individually with the child, reinforcing the ideas earlier presented by the parents in private conversations with the child. Whatever the strategy, the parents should take the lead in planning and they must plan for the messages that will be shared and reinforced with the child.

**Stage 2: Help the Child Verbalize Perceived Differences.**

Together, individually or separately, the foster/adoptive parents and the worker must help the child begin thinking about some of the differences. Ask the child to explain the differences between foster care and adoption. Use "open-ended" questions rather than "closed" questions. Open-ended questions allow the child to describe perceived differences. Closed questions are answered with a "yes" or "no." Following are some examples of open-ended questions:

- "Missy, how do you think adoption will be different from foster care?"
- "Kenny, what do you think will be the biggest difference, now that you are being adopted by your foster family?" (or, "by us?")

Reinforcing accurate perceptions serves to build esteem by helping the child feel capable to discern important differences. Starting with the child's perceptions gives the foster/adoptive parents and the worker base line data in the adoption process.

**Stage 3: Help the Child Draw Analogies and Develop Examples.**

Help the child draw analogies and develop practical examples. Use ideas which relate to the child's own life experiences. Following are examples of conversations a foster/adoptive parent might initiate to help a child understand legal, financial, parenting, and attachment differences:

**Helping Children Understand Legal Differences:** "Jamal, do you remember the last time we were in court for your adoption hearing? I want to talk with you about how that court hearing is different from all the other times we went to court Do you remember why we wanted to go to
your first court hearings with you, your worker, and your birth parents? We went all those times because we were working hard to help your birth parents solve enough of their problems so that they could have you live with them again. We were all very sad that their problems were so difficult that they would **not be able to solve them in time** for you to be able to live with them again. The judge decided that you should be able to live with the family that plans to always share their home with you. After the judge made that decision in court, we went to court again. That last court hearing was so that you could be adopted by us."

or

"A social worker I know compares adoption to a marriage. When two people meet and begin to love each other, they may decide to get married and become a family. They go to a place where people get married. What do you and other people call that place? Yes, it may be a church or a synagogue. A person performs a ceremony to marry them. What do you call that person? Yes, the person who performs the marriage ceremony is a minister, priest or rabbi. Everyone signs a piece of paper that makes the marriage legal. That piece of paper is a marriage license. Then the two people are a family.

"Adoption is like that. When you met us and lived with us for a while, we began to love one another. Since your birth parents were not able to live with you as a family, we decided that we wanted to be that kind of family for you, so we went to a place where they help children and adults become families. That place is the court. A person performed a ceremony. That person was the judge, and the ceremony was the hearing. Then, we all signed a piece of paper that made the adoption legal. That piece of paper is your adoption decree, and now we are a family." 

**Helping Children Understand Financial Differences:** "Janess, sometimes children who have been in foster care and then are adopted by their foster parents have trouble understanding the differences between foster care and adoption. I would like to talk with you about one of those differences.

"You know that before you were adopted, and when we were trying to help your family get back together, we received a check from the child welfare agency. That check was like an allowance. The agency knows that it costs money to be a family and so they help every foster family by paying them back for some of the costs of foster parenting. They know that we also spent much of our own money to make sure you had a place to stay while we worked with your family to help you get back home. We spent some of our own money because we care very much about you and about other children who can’t live with their families for a while."

"We love you and want to be your family, the family with whom you live. Your birth parents will always be your family who gave you life. Now we will be the family who takes care of you and makes important decisions with you. It is still expensive to be a family, so our state has decided to give adoptive families some money to help with family expenses. This money is called a 'subsidy payment.' It is like an insurance policy. Some parents buy insurance policies which would help with everyday expenses if something happens so that they cannot work and support their children. Our subsidy payment is like that' but different too. Our state has decided that the subsidy payment is like an insurance policy since your birth parents were not able to plan
The subsidy is money set aside to help us pay for future medical costs and education costs. That is the money we receive. It is a subsidy payment.

"When we received the foster care payment, we decided with the social worker how the money would be used. Now that we are receiving the subsidy payment, which is like insurance, it is our job as parents to decide how to use the money."

**Helping Children Understand Parenting Differences:** "Robert, I would like to talk with you about some of the differences between foster care and adoption. What are some of the things you didn't like about being in foster care?" (Children may mention having a social worker or judge make decisions for them or not being able to do what they want to do.)

"I remember hearing you talk about some of those things. Many children don't like having to ask a social worker for permission to do things like travel away from home. It is also tough knowing that a judge or a social worker can tell you where you will live and can move you wherever they think is best, even if you don't want to move. Sometimes children don't like the idea of a social worker being able to make them move to another school, away from their friends.

"When you were in foster care, all those things could happen. That is because, as foster parents, we were not your legal parents. The court and agency were legally responsible for you. Now that you are adopted, we are your legal parents. We want to be your legal parents forever, and, because the judge agreed that that should happen, we will be your legal parents. Now we can decide all by ourselves when we want to take a trip as a family. We won't have to get permission from the social worker or the judge. Now we will decide together where you live and where you will go to school. That is because we are your adoptive parents rather than your foster parents. Being adoptive parents means we are your legal parents as well as your caring parents."

**Helping Children Understand Attachment Differences:** "Megan, I would like to talk with you about the differences between foster care and adoption. Sometimes the differences are confusing. Do you remember when we used to talk about the differences between parents? We talked about your mom and dad who gave you life. They are your being parents and they will always be your birth parents. Your pretty eyes, your hair, and smile came from them.

"When you were in foster care, you had three sets of parents: your birth parents, who will always be your birth parents; your legal parents, who were the judge and the agency; and we were your foster parents (caring parents). When you were still in foster care, and we were your caring or foster parents, we decided to take care of you. We fed you, gave you clothes and a place to live. When you were in foster care, the judge asked the agency to be your legal parents, because your birth parents had problems and they couldn't do that, so, the agency decided where you would live and where you would go to school.

"Sometimes birth parents, caring parents, and legal parents are the same people. Sometimes they are not.

"Do you remember what the social worker and we tried to do during the time before you were
adopted? We worked very hard to try to help your birth parents solve their problems so that they could be your caring parents and your legal parents, too. We wanted that to happen very much because we want children to live with their birth parents if it is at all possible, but that was not possible for your parents.

"We have a new job now; we have adopted you. Instead of working with the social worker to help you live again with your birth parents, we are going to work very hard to be the best caring and legal parents we know how to be. We also will work hard to help you remember the good things you want to remember about your birth parents, because they will always be your birth parents."

Conclusion

Foster/adoptive parents and child welfare workers, in partnership, must carefully plan together to help children understand and talk about the differences between foster care and adoption. Helping children verbalize the differences is one step in the process of empowering the foster/adoptive family to be the family intended to provide a lifetime relationship for a child. There are many other important steps to assure a successful foster parent adoption. This article has outlined one of those steps, helping children understand the differences between foster care and adoption by:

- planning in partnership
- helping the child verbalize perceived differences
- helping the child draw analogies and develop examples from life

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1 Foster Parent Adoption: what Professionals Should Know (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse) page 3.
2 ibid.
3 ibid. page 4