

### *Conceptual Framework*

Adequate preparation of both adoptive families and children can mean the difference between a successful adoption and disruption. The adage "forewarned is forearmed" is the watchword of adoption practice. Helping adoptive families learn exactly what to expect, and helping them develop strategies to manage potential problems, greatly increase their capacity to manage the stresses associated with adoption. Similarly, constructive preparation can help children resolve emotional issues and better manage change.

Conversely, failure to fully address a child's concerns can contribute to placement instability and, potentially, disruption, dissolution, or displacement of the child. There are several issues that are likely to interfere with the adoption if they are not dealt with early in the process.

First, most children have unrealistic expectations for adoption. Their fantasies about adoptive families range from Daddy Warbucks to Ebenezer Scrooge. They are likely to be disappointed and disillusioned if not helped to develop realistic expectations for adoption early in the process.

Second, moving a child into an adoptive family without sufficient preparation will almost certainly precipitate a crisis for the child. This can exacerbate emotional and behavioral problems, and can greatly complicate the adjustment

process. Many children do not understand the difference between adoption and their earlier placements. They may perceive adoption as just another in a series of temporary placements. This can resurrect painful feelings of loss, rage, rejection, helplessness, abandonment, and grief from earlier separation experiences.

Third, unresolved concerns and issues can interfere with these children's ability to form attachments with an adoptive family. They may experience loyalty conflicts because of strong attachments to their biological family, extended family, or foster caregivers. They may have developmental and emotional problems resulting from previous abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse. They may feel anxious and threatened, particularly if they have a history of disrupted foster or adoptive placements. All these can significantly affect their behavioral and emotional responses to adoption.

Many of the strategies used to prepare children for adoptive placement are the same as those to prepare children for placement in foster care. (Please refer to Section VII-B, "The Effects of Traumatic Separation on Children," and VII-C, "Placement Strategies to Prevent Trauma," for extensive discussion of relevant issues and effective placement strategies.) In addition, several strategies that deal directly with adoption issues are discussed below.

### *Application*

#### Strategies to Prepare Children for Adoption

The preparation of a child for adoption should begin as soon as the decision is made to pursue permanent termination of the biological parents' rights. The emphasis of work with a child should then shift from reunification to securing a permanent home.

Certain skills are necessary for a caseworker to prepare a child for adoption.

They include the following:

- The caseworker must have a thorough knowledge of normal child development, and the impact of abuse and neglect on development. This is essential, if the worker is to develop a preparation program that is appropriate for the child's age and developmental level. (Refer to Chapter V, *The Effects of Abuse and Neglect on Child Development*.)
- The caseworker must have a thorough understanding of the impact of separation on children of various ages. This will help in assessing the impact of past losses on the child's current behavior; in predicting the child's potential reaction to the impending move into adoption; and in designing placement strategies that minimize the traumatic effects of separation. (Please refer to Sections VII-B, "The Effects of Traumatic Separation on Children" and VII-C, "Placement Strategies to Prevent Trauma.")
- The caseworker must have skills to engage children into a trusting and supportive casework relationship, despite the difficulty some children have in establishing trust. The continuous presence of a trusted

caseworker during the adoption process can provide the child with considerable support, can help the child maintain continuity, and can help the child deal constructively with problems and issues as they arise.

- The caseworker must recognize the potential impact of cultural variables on the child's and the family's adjustment, and must be able to help prepare the adoptive family to respond constructively to cultural differences.

## Techniques and Methods of Preparation

Caseworkers can work with children individually or in groups to prepare them for adoption. Many adoption programs use a combination of both. Individual preparation allows the caseworker to identify and address each child's particular needs and concerns. Participation in a group helps children understand that their fears and concerns are quite normal, and are shared by others. Children can also be reassured through direct contact with children who have been successfully adopted.

While the child's caseworker generally has responsibility for preparing the child, many agencies also involve mental health professionals. Some children may need professional counseling to deal with issues related to prior maltreatment and separation. These mental health professionals must be proficient in the treatment of children, well-versed in issues related to separation and grief, and must fully understand the dynamics of adoption. Ideally, the caseworker, the foster parent and the mental health professional should work as a team to

prepare and support the child throughout the adoption. Foster caregivers should be trained to assess the child's needs, and to support the child by providing regular opportunities for the child to ask questions or express concerns and fears.

Casework with any child begins with the development of a trusting relationship. For some children, this is easier said than done. They may be frightened, suspicious, angry, or generally mistrustful of adults. The caseworker can facilitate relationship development with any child by doing the following:

- 1) Be honest. Dealing with difficult feelings or topics with unwavering support helps the child to develop trust in the caseworker.
- 2) Follow up and follow through. Trust and credibility must be earned. Children will trust adults who are consistent, reliable, and dependable. Even activities that may seem unimportant to the caseworker, such as phone calls or home visits, are often very important to the child.
- 3) Learn to listen. Children feel important and "heard" when adults listen carefully to what they say and respond honestly. The caseworker must learn to remain quiet and give the child sufficient time to talk. This often means resisting the temptation to give untimely advice. (Strategies to communicate with children can be found in Section IV-F, "The Casework Interview: Implementing the Helping Process.")
- 4) Be patient. Building a positive relationship with a child may take time. Some children may test the worker's commitment and perseverance by

refusing to talk, avoiding contact, or becoming defiant and argumentative. The caseworker must continue to be positive and encouraging, yet persistent.

Since establishing new relationships is difficult and time consuming for many children, the caseworker or therapist who has the strongest relationship with the child should generally do the adoption preparation. The child's emotional energies should be reserved for development of relationships with the adoptive parents, not with a new caseworker. If the adoptive family's assessment caseworker will work with the adoptive family during and after placement, the child can eventually develop a relationship with this caseworker. However, maintaining relationships with known sources of support is critical, until the child has settled into placement and has begun to transfer attachments to the new family. (See Section VII-C, "Placement Strategies to Prevent Trauma," for a discussion of the transitional model of placement.)

The caseworker can help the child develop a positive attitude about adoption by using language that is free of negative connotations, and by avoiding terms that subtly communicate inappropriate or destructive messages. The following are some examples of both positive and negative adoption-related terminology:

Negative: Terms like "real mother," "natural father," and "primary parent," when referring to the child's biological parents, subtly infer that the adoptive parent is somehow not "natural," not a real parent, and not the child's primary, or most important parent. This greatly interferes with the development of entitlement – the

understanding by the adoptive parent and child that the adoptive parent has the right and the responsibility to be that child's parent.

Positive: The child's parents should be referred to as "biological parents," or by their names ("Janice and Ted.") If the child was cared for by persons other than biological parents, they should be also referred to by the name the child is accustomed to calling them, such as "Aunt Helen," "Grandma," or "the Morrisons."

Negative: "Your parents gave you up for adoption," "You were put up for adoption," or, "You were put out for adoption." These imply a calculated act of rejection.

Positive: "An adoption plan was made for you." "You came to live with your permanent (forever) family." "You joined the Webb family."

Negative: "Their real kids" and "their adopted child." This creates a strong perception that the adopted child is substantially different from children born to the family, and perhaps less a member of the family.

Positive: "My brothers and sisters." "All of you Webb kids."

Workers and caregivers should choose language that communicates that adoption is a carefully planned event, one that completely integrates a child into a permanent family. This can help differentiate adoption from other temporary

placements, can help reduce the child's fear of rejection, and can strengthen the child's self-esteem.

### Communication Strategies with Children

Several tools can be used during individual sessions with children to help elicit and talk about important issues. Workers should receive additional training in the use of these and other therapeutic strategies to prepare children for adoptive placement. These strategies include:

- **The Life Map.** The life map is an art therapy technique. The child is asked to draw a "map" that depicts his placement history. The map can communicate where the child has lived, how long he lived there, the people who were important to him, why he had to move, and how he felt about it. The child should be allowed to draw his map in any way he likes. The primary purpose is to open discussion about the child's history, and give the caseworker the opportunity to discuss and clarify the child's misconceptions (particularly self-blame), to provide support for painful feelings, and to provide reassurance about the present move. The completion of the map may take several weeks. As the preparation process continues, the child can include the adoptive family in the map, and can add information about the family as he acquires it.
- **The Lifebook.** Lifebooks are scrapbooks, diaries, or logs that describe the child's life. The Lifebook should be begun as soon as a child enters placement, but it becomes essential when adoption planning is



initiated. The caseworker should help the child record the following:

- 1) information about the child's biological family and extended family;
- 2) the reasons the child needed placement;
- 3) the child's history in substitute care;
- 4) the child's educational and developmental background;
- 5) the child's medical information; and
- 6) information about the child's recreational and social activities.

Photographs should be included of biological and extended family members; siblings; prior foster or kinship caregivers; the child's friends; past homes; the child participating in favorite activities; pets; and schools, teachers, and classmates. Photos can be provided by relatives, and by previous and present caregivers.

The information in the Lifebook must be honest and accurate, yet tactful. Written descriptions of the biological parents should include their positive attributes, as well as their limitations. As with the life map, the Lifebook gives caseworkers the opportunity to involve the child in discussions about critical issues and concerns that, if not addressed, can interfere with the adoption. The Lifebook also provides a detailed and continuous personal history that the child can refer to throughout her life. This will be very important during certain developmental periods, such as identity formation during adolescence and young adulthood. (Refer to Section VII-C, "Placement Strategies to Prevent Trauma," for a more detailed discussion of Lifebooks, including "A Story About You.")

- **The "Family Tree."** This modification of the more common "family tree" (genogram) can help children organize all the people who have been an important part of their lives. The caseworker should help the child draw a tree and all its parts. The biological family members can be identified as the roots of the tree. These "roots" (the biological family) cannot be seen, but they anchor the tree, just as the biological family provided the child with a genetic heritage, and will always be part of her. The child's foster or kinship families can be represented on the trunk of the tree, as they have helped the child grow. The adoptive family may be represented on the upper trunk, branches, leaves, fruit, and flowers. Through this activity, the child learns she does not have to choose between families, and she can come to understand how each family played an important role in her growth and development.
- **Collages.** A collage is a collection of pictures that are glued together, either in sequence, or overlapping one another, on a large piece of poster board or cardboard. In adoption work, the pictures can be glued to a cutout of a body outline of a child. Collages are used to represent past, present, and future events. They serve a similar purpose as a Lifebook or life map. It is a fun and nonthreatening means of interaction with the child. The child is instructed to cut out pictures from magazines, or to draw pictures that, to him, represent important people or events, and that represent his wishes for the future. The child describes the pictures, and explains why he chose them. This can elicit discussion that helps the child develop realistic expectations for adoption, clears up misconceptions, or strengthens identity.

- **The "Goodbye" Visit or Letter.** The "goodbye" visit or letter allows children to reach closure regarding their past. When feasible, the caseworker arranges for the parent or a member of the child's extended family to write the child a goodbye letter, make an audio or videotape, or to participate in a goodbye visit. According to Kay Donley Ziegler [Donley 1990], the critical messages to be conveyed by the family are: "You are loved;" "You are wished well;" "You will be remembered;" "You may love another parent." While not all parents will be able to participate in this activity, some parents who recognize their limitations and are in agreement with the adoption plan can be helped to do so. When a goodbye visit or letter are not possible, the child can be encouraged to write a letter to his biological parents. There are no right or wrong words. The child may express grief, loyalty, anger, guilt, or hopelessness. The child may or may not mail the letter. The process of writing the letter may, itself, be cathartic for the child. Receiving validation for his feelings from his caseworker or foster caregivers is also therapeutic. The caseworker should note that if the child sends the letter, the biological parents may need support.

Many of these tools are also useful for group preparation. One benefit of group preparation is that the children are all awaiting adoptive placement, and they can validate and support each other by sharing their artwork and feelings. Peer validation often carries a high credibility among children.

Adoption preparation groups should include six to eight participants of similar ages. There should generally be at least two leaders. The groups may last

between six to eight weeks, and each weekly session should be an hour and a half to two hours in length. During the initial session, the leaders should help the children understand the purpose of the group, and establish ground rules. In the following weeks, the art therapy techniques described above can be used as large or small group activities to generate discussion. The children should be encouraged to share their individual projects with the group. Guest speakers, including older children who have been adopted, adoptive parents, and a biological parent whose child was adopted in the past, create stimulating discussion and provide the children with examples of actual adoption experiences. The children might also visit the court and talk with the judge, which helps to reduce the fear and mystery surrounding the legal aspects of adoption. The caseworker may also use stories, videotaped movies, or television programs about adoption to stimulate discussion by the children.

In selecting members for a group, the leaders should carefully consider the children's developmental level, their behavior, and their individual needs. Some diversity of backgrounds and experiences is valuable, as children can learn that despite apparent differences in their experiences, they often share the same fears and feelings. However, children with more severe emotional or behavioral problems can often divert the leaders' attention from adoption preparation to group management and control. Group leaders should be very experienced in adoption issues, knowledgeable about child development, skilled at group process, and able to constructively help children confront their misconceptions and fears.

### When Are Children Ready?

For most children, the following characteristics indicate that they are ready to pursue adoptive placement:

- The child understands and accepts the reasons for separation from his biological family, and the child knows that reunification is not possible. The child's level of understanding will be consistent with his age and developmental level. For example, a two-year-old child may understand only that his mother couldn't take care of him and keep him safe, while a 12 year old may be able to understand the impact his mother's crack addiction had on her ability to care for the family. The child should understand, and be able to verbalize, that the separation was not his fault.
- The child has psychologically disengaged from the biological family. This does not mean the child has forgotten her family, nor that they are unimportant to her. It does mean she knows the separation is permanent, she has begun to deal with feelings of loss, and she is willing to accept new parents. While the child may express a desire that things were different, she realizes that it is impossible, and has accepted that she will not be reunited with her family. In situations where an open adoption is planned, this may be less of an issue, since the child is not expected to sever these emotional ties. However, she must understand that the nature of her relationship with members of her biological family may change.
- The child is motivated to accept an adoptive family. This is critical for older children, who are capable of sabotaging an unwanted placement.

Children may demonstrate this by expressing their desire for an adoptive family, fantasizing about what the new family may be like, expressing curiosity about a new family, or agreeing to meet them.

Many children continue to exhibit ambivalence about adoption even after extensive preparation work. This is normal and to be expected, and the child's feelings should be accepted and validated. Children may be appropriately skeptical that this family will be different from previous families; they may still feel some blame and responsibility for past separations; they may be threatened by intimacy and attachment; or they may simply feel threatened about another move to a strange environment. For a well-prepared child, however, these feelings are more manageable, and the child has outlets to discuss and deal with them. The child's concerns are, therefore, less likely to interfere with the child's willingness to pursue adoption.

Similarly, while children may appear ready for adoption, it is not uncommon for them to regress after placement. Adoptive placement is itself stressful, particularly once the family is beyond the "honeymoon" period, and it can resurrect powerful feelings and concerns related to separation and attachment. For many children, past issues and concerns about permanence, security, attachment, and identity will not be fully confronted and resolved until they can test and deal with them within the adoptive family setting. Consequently, the child's caseworker and therapist will often need to continue the work begun during the preparation period throughout the postplacement adjustment period, and often, well into postlegalization.

The following describes two very different processes of preparing a child for adoption. The first example demonstrates the problems that occur when children are not properly prepared. The second example illustrates the use of both individual and group methods to effectively prepare the child.

### *Case Example*

#### Ricky, Age Seven

Ricky had lived with his foster family, the Espositos, for three years. He had been placed with them after he had been severely neglected. His mother was addicted to cocaine, and despite several attempts by her caseworker to involve her in drug treatment, she was unable to provide a safe home for Ricky, and there were no family members willing to care for him. Ricky's caseworker, Rachel Dunn, had pursued permanent custody and began adoption planning. She told the foster parents about the plan, but asked them not to discuss it within earshot of Ricky, since it could take many months before Ricky was legally freed for adoption, even if there was no appeal; and she felt knowing about it would heighten Ricky's anxiety.

The Espositos were experienced foster parents. They had two other foster children, ages 12 and nine, in the home. Two of their five biological children, both teenagers, also lived at home. While they were very attached to Ricky, they had repeatedly told the caseworker that they could not consider "starting a new family." Mr. Esposito was a few years from retirement, and the Espositos planned to travel, and enjoy their children and grandchildren.

Several months later, Rachel phoned the Espositos to inform them that the judge had awarded permanent custody of Ricky to the agency, and that Ricky was legally free for adoption. She asked, again, if the Espositos would be interested in adopting Ricky. Mrs. Esposito stated that she and her husband had talked it over, and that they did not feel they could make a commitment to adopt Ricky. Mrs. Esposito affirmed that they would help in any way they could, however, and would be happy to keep in contact with Ricky after his adoption, if he so desired.

Rachel told Mrs. Esposito that she would talk with the adoption department and locate a family for Ricky. She asked Mrs. Esposito to keep this information a secret from Ricky until something was more definite. "No sense getting him all upset for nothing," she said.

Two weeks later, Rachel phoned the Espositos to say that she believed a family had been identified for Ricky. Rachel said that she would come by on her way home from work to tell Ricky about his new family, since the first preplacement visit with the adoptive family had been scheduled for the following day.

Rachel came to the Esposito home about 4 p.m. and called Ricky out of the bedroom. She asked him to come and talk with her at the picnic table. Rachel told Ricky that she had some great news, "You'll be going to live with a new family that will be yours forever!!!!" Ricky was shocked. He said that he wanted to go live with his "real mom" or stay with the Espositos. Rachel told him that neither of those options was possible, and that he would meet his new forever family tomorrow.



Ricky screamed, "NO, NO, NO!" and ran from the table into the woods behind the house. Rachel went into the house and told the Espositos what had happened. She told them not to worry because, "Kids are more resilient than adults realize, and can bounce back quickly. He'll adjust fine."

### Jack, Age Seven

Jack was placed in foster care as a result of physical abuse and neglect. Both of his parents were substance abusers. The agency had developed a case plan for reunification, and had provided the family with extensive services. However, the parents never complied with the case plan, and the caseworker filed for permanent custody after Jack had been in foster care for a year and a half.

Jack's parents had visited him sporadically in the foster home, and each time they visited, they promised Jack that he could soon come home. Jack would become hopeful about reunification, only to be disappointed when his parents did not follow through. As happens with many children this age, Jack blamed both himself and the agency, rather than understanding that his parents' drug abuse made it impossible for them to care for him.

Jack had lived with the same foster family since he was removed from his family. The Wilsons were an older couple who lived on a sprawling farm. They had been foster parents for 17 years. They were the biological parents of four children, and had adopted three others. All the Wilson children were adults, and were living independently. In addition, several foster children had been

emancipated from their home, but still considered the Wilsons to be "Mom" and "Dad."

Carl Maldonado, Jack's caseworker, phoned Mrs. Wilson to inform her that he was filing for permanent custody of Jack. The agency had worked to reunite Jack's family, but it was clear they could not care for him, and Jack needed a permanent home. Carl asked Mrs. Wilson about the possibility of their adopting Jack. Mrs. Wilson said that she and her husband loved Jack, but were too old to make such a commitment. The Wilsons expressed strong interest in maintaining contact with Jack and his adoptive family.

Carl told the Wilsons he wanted to meet with them to develop a plan to prepare Jack, and to enlist their support and cooperation. Carl met with the Wilsons the following day while Jack was at school. Carl outlined his plan to work with Jack, and asked the Wilsons if they could help by putting together Jack's Lifebook. Carl also suggested they write a letter to Jack highlighting important events during his two years with them. The Wilsons discussed how hard it would be to tell Jack that he couldn't go back to his biological family, and that he was to be adopted. They anticipated his probable reactions, and together they developed possible supportive responses. They all agreed to tell Jack together, and the Wilsons would explain to Jack why they could not adopt him.

Carl scheduled an appointment for early the following week. Carl and the Wilsons sat with Jack at the kitchen table. Carl began by telling Jack that they had a lot of important things to talk about, that Jack could ask questions about anything he wanted, and he could say how he felt, no matter what. Carl then said that the agency had made a very hard decision. Carl told Jack that his

parents had not followed the case plan, and that their home was still an unsafe place for Jack to live. It didn't mean that his parents were bad, and it didn't mean they didn't love him. Carl told Jack that being a parent is a hard job, and parents have to make good decisions, or their children won't be safe. Carl reminded Jack of their previous discussions, when he had explained why Jack had to live in a foster home, and explained that his parents still could not make good, safe decisions for Jack. Carl explained to Jack that his parents hadn't learned to care for him, and still had many problems. Carl then told Jack he deserved a family where he would be safe and cared for, and where he wouldn't have to worry about being hurt. Carl said most children he knew felt sad and scared about this, and that Jack might too.

Jack began to cry. Mrs. Wilson asked him to come sit on her lap. She reassured him that she wanted him to have a forever family, and that he had done nothing wrong. In fact, he had done things just right, he was a wonderful boy, and his new family would love him a lot. Jack turned to her, and asked if he could stay with her. She hugged him, and gently told him that she and Mr. Wilson could still be his "grandma and grandpa," but they were too old to be his mom and dad. Carl then explained to Jack what would be happening in the next few months. He said Jack would be asked to help make lots of decisions. He asked Jack if he had any questions at this time. Jack said, "No." Carl told him to call the office, or talk with the Wilsons if he thought of anything later.

Carl called the following day to see how Jack was doing. Mrs. Wilson said that he had been quiet and withdrawn, and was following Mr. Wilson everywhere. Carl said he would visit again the beginning of the following week to begin work

on Jack's Lifebook. He asked Mrs. Wilson to gather anything that would be appropriate for the Lifebook before the home visit.

Carl spent the next several visits helping Jack and the Wilsons update Jack's Lifebook. During some of the visits, when they looked at old pictures, report cards or mementos, they all laughed and joked. At other times, when they discussed why Jack had to leave his family and how it felt, Jack would become upset and sometimes would cry, but he could explain, when asked, why he had to leave.

Carl was able to secure copies of photos of Jack's biological parents from the local high school yearbook. Jack told Carl how much he missed his family, and Carl said that most children who are adopted feel the same way, and that was okay. They spent a lot of time talking about Jack's biological parents, and wrote down information about them into Jack's Lifebook. Carl told Jack that the Lifebook could help him remember all about his biological family when he was older.

The Wilsons contributed many photographs, copies of Jack's school work, and other mementos for the Lifebook. Mr. Wilson took Jack on a photo expedition around town, taking pictures of all of Jack's favorite places and people.

One day Carl stopped by to invite Jack to a series of group meetings for children who were going to be adopted. He told Jack that the first meeting would be a get acquainted party, but that the second meeting would be "show and tell," using everyone's Lifebooks. Jack attended the meeting every Wednesday after school for eight weeks. Mrs. Wilson would pick him up and ask him what happened at

the meeting. On some days he told her about events in the group; on other days, he didn't talk much, because, "All we talked about were sad things."

During the sixth week, Jack said that he had met a girl his age who had already been adopted. He said, "She was scared and mad at first, but she got used to her new family. Now she loves them a lot!" Jack said he had met her adoptive parents, and they seemed nice, and everyone was happy about the adoption. He said her new family let her talk about her biological family anytime she wanted. Jack also told Mrs. Wilson the next week he was going on a field trip to the courthouse, and was going to meet the judge.

During the final week of the group sessions, Jack invited the Wilsons to the meeting. There was going to be a pizza party, and all the kids were going to share their artwork, and what they had learned about adoption. On the way home after the last meeting, Jack told the Wilsons that maybe being adopted wasn't so bad, but that he would still rather stay with them. The Wilsons reassured him that they would always love Jack, and that they would be happy to have him visit them often.

## Synopsis

In the first scenario, Ricky was not given any information until the last possible moment, and therefore, was deprived of the support and nurturance of his foster family and caseworker while he dealt with the reality of the adoption plans. His foster parents were asked to keep the adoption a secret, and were not able to participate in preparing Ricky, or themselves, for his separation from their

family. Ricky's caseworker lacked insight into his emotional needs, and failed to provide either an adequate explanation, or sufficient support to Ricky during this difficult transition. Unfortunately, many workers believe that children will adapt to new situations with little help. This type of preparation frequently leads to crisis and, potentially, disruption in adoptive placement.

By contrast, Carl began the preparation process prior to the permanent custody hearing, thus giving Jack adequate time to understand and adjust to the upcoming changes in his life. Carl used face-to-face contact effectively to assist in building a relationship with Jack. In addition, Carl fully engaged the foster parents in this process, as they had been the most trusted individuals in Jack's life. Together, Carl and the Wilsons used Jack's Lifebook as a tool to organize his life history, and to provide him a safe means to express his feelings. The adoption group further oriented Jack to the adoption process and validated his feelings. With supportive help from the adults he trusted, he acquired a positive, if still tentative, view of his impending adoption.