

Preparing the Child for Placement

Adequately preparing the child for the placement serves several important purposes:

- The worker can provide support and alleviate many of the child's anxieties, thereby greatly reducing the child's stress.
- The worker can use the preparation period to get to know the child and to assess the child's strengths and needs.
- Casework with the child during the preparation phase helps the worker establish a supportive relationship with the child, which can help the child during the placement and the early adjustment phase.

The child's level of development and cognitive maturity will affect the strategies used by the worker to prepare the child.

Infancy: (Birth to 24 months)

The worker should prepare the new environment and caregivers to receive the child and should maintain as much consistency and stability between environments as possible.

- An infant should have the opportunity to become accustomed to the foster caregiver prior to being moved, through preplacement visits with the birth parent present, if at all possible.
- The worker and foster caregiver should talk to the child in very simple language about the move and about the new parents. Pictures of the new family, audiotapes and videotapes can be used to familiarize the child with the new caregivers' faces and voices.
- Very frequent contact with the parent is necessary to maintain the parent/child relationship, which is critical if reunification is planned.

Preschool: (Two to Five Years)

- The preschool child will become frightened and anxious when he/she perceives that the parent is upset. The worker, assisted by the parent, should explain each step in the move for the child in simple, concrete language. Photographs, drawings and other visual aids can help the child understand what is happening.
- The child needs to feel security and support from the people around him/her.

- The worker can use play techniques to communicate information about the move.
- The child can be encouraged to make decisions for himself/herself about the belongings he/she will take with him/her, where he/she wants to sit in the car, and what he/she wants the new mom to give him/her for lunch.

School Age: (Six to Nine Years)

- The child will probably be able to recognize some of his/her feelings, including being sad, scared, mad, lonesome and worried. These feelings should be elicited and acknowledged by the worker and by caregivers.
- The worker should ensure that the "rules" in the new family are clarified for the child and that the child understands them.
- The caseworker should talk to the child about why he/she has to move. The child may think it is a punishment for something he/she did wrong, often the last misbehavior for which he/she was punished. The worker should reassure the child and explain the reasons for the placement in terms the child can understand.

Preadolescent: (10 to 12 Years)

- The reasons for the placement should be fully explained, including the family problems that led to placement and the child's need for safe care. The child should be encouraged to ask questions and express his/her feelings.
- The child should be encouraged to make as many decisions as possible about the placement. Making one's own choices increases one's feeling of control. The worker should provide a detailed description of the placement setting prior to taking the child for preplacement visits.
- The child may feel conflicts about loyalty. He/She needs a consistent message from all persons involved that he/she does not have to choose between his/her parents and his/her foster caregivers.

Early and Middle Adolescence: (13 to 17 years)

- Preparation of adolescents should focus on discussing the reasons for the move, description of the placement setting and plans for the future.
- Some adolescents retain considerable loyalty to their biological families; in these situations, foster care can be described as "a safe place to stay" rather than "a new family". This can help to prevent loyalty conflicts for the child.
- The adolescent should be encouraged to participate, to whatever degree possible, in choosing and planning the placement.

- The adolescent may try to hide his/her anxiety and distress regarding the move. The worker should explain all aspects of the placement and acknowledge how most children feel about moving, "just in case the information might be of interest".