

Lessen Trauma Related to Transitions

One thing is certain, when children enter the child welfare system, there will be many changes or transitions along their journey to permanency. The first transition is their entry into care, which not only entails separation from their birth parents but separation from pillars in their life including friends, extended family members, schools, and communities. Once in care, children often face multiple transitions including placements, schools, friends, and workers. The impact of the transitions can compound—adding more trauma on top of what originally brought the children into care—and ultimately affect their well-being and trajectory to permanency.

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,² Stephen Covey describes four quadrants that explain the activities that consume our day. Covey states that people/systems can get stuck in quadrant I (crises, pressing problems, and deadlines) if they do not manage the other activities effectively. He encourages people/systems to identify activities that are high-leverage capacity-building activities that would ultimately decrease the amount of time spent on crises and increase overall effectiveness. Transitions are a high-leverage capacity-building activity. The amount of time and effort put into preparing for transitions and effectively managing them will impact the likelihood of future crisis. For example, if a foster parent provides notice that a child must be removed from his/her home, the case manager could take extra time to obtain information from the foster parent that will inform the new placement. This information could then be utilized to immediately put services in the home to lessen the chances of the same behaviors becoming problematic in the new placement. The worker could also take time to explain the move to the child and help frame it in a positive manner and answer any questions. These activities may not seem important when confronted with a change in placement; however, they help to ensure a smoother transition and possibly help to avoid a future transition from the new placement.

Although it is impossible to eliminate all transitions in child welfare, the manner in which they are conducted can be improved. Transitions that are not handled properly

have a lasting impact on children. Over time, these transitions can impact children's ability to effectively attach to caregivers and cope within a family setting, minimizing their opportunities for permanency (Harden Jones). When transitions must take place, careful planning and communication with all stakeholders in the process can help to minimize negative impacts.

This tip sheet provides practices and processes that can be implemented to effectively handle transitions when they must occur. The first section looks at transitions through the lens of the children and what the system can do to better prepare them. The second section looks at how to better prepare “launchers” so that they effectively manage transitions for the benefit of the children but also understand the impact it may have on them. The third section looks at how to prepare “receivers” so that they effectively manage transitions and ensure that children receive the support they need during these vulnerable times.

Prepare Children and Youth Before, During and After Transitions

Understand How Children Think and What Helps Them in Crisis Situations. Children perceive things differently than adults. Planning and carrying out transitions needs to begin with this understanding. Regardless of maltreatment or neglect, children are attached to and emotionally dependent upon the caregivers with whom they have been living. When Rosalind Folman interviewed children removed from the care of their parents, she learned that they were not comforted by an adult's general reassurances that they were being removed from danger and being taken to a better or safer place (Folman, 1998). She cites research that says children need three things to help them cope in crisis:

1. Adequate information about what is happening
2. An adequate support system
3. Coping mechanisms to deal with fear and anxiety (Folman, 1998).



Give Children Adequate Information about What is Happening. It is possible to handle unexpected events in ways that are less traumatic for children. Folman describes a well-handled foster care placement in which parents tell the children why they will be temporarily placed in foster care. She also discusses giving children accurate information regarding when they will see their parents again and validating their fears, concerns and grief (Folman, 1998). Adults often want to make children “feel better” and sometimes provide incorrect or incomplete information in a



misguided belief that children cannot deal with upsetting events. Many questions are not answerable when children enter the child welfare system. It is best to let children know when the answers to their questions are not yet available

and an approximate time frame as to when additional information will be available if possible. Children can handle difficult news, especially when their feelings are respected and they are given an opportunity to ask questions.

Provide Children With an Adequate Support System. Even in challenging environments or homes with limited nurturing, children have learned to rely on their parents, their siblings and other adults or older children for protection and guidance. Respecting these relationships and maintaining them to whatever degree is safe can give children essential support, especially during the initial days following placement. Children need to know when they can expect to see their parents and siblings for a visit. Telephone contact can also provide reassurance and alleviate the fear some children have that their parents or siblings have been harmed or taken from them permanently.

One of the first tasks after entry into foster care is to expand the support system available for children. Child welfare professionals and foster parents need training on how trauma, instability and loss affect children’s behavior so they can be effective resources. Birth parents need assistance and coaching on how they can support their children and continue to reaffirm their love without making the situation even more traumatic for the children. Birth parents may require additional support for themselves so they are able to focus on the needs of their children. All the adults with whom children interact need to emphasize that children are not the cause of the abuse or neglect they experienced and that they did not cause the separation from their parents (Harden Jones).

Children’s needs for professional therapy should be thoroughly assessed upon entry into the child welfare system. Child welfare providers must develop a network of trauma-informed therapists who have experience working with children in foster care.

Help Children Utilize or Develop Coping Mechanisms to Deal with Fear and Anxiety. Children are resilient and have significant capacity for surviving difficulties. Professionals and foster/adoptive families will learn the strengths children already possess as well as the skills they need to increase once they establish trust with the children. The fears children express need to be respectfully addressed because they are the children’s reality. Children can learn to utilize physical calming methods such as deep breathing and exercise to deal with anxiety. Establishing healthy sleep patterns and comforting bedtime rituals help children relax. Therapists and pediatricians can help assess more severe anxiety and depression and recommend additional interventions if needed (Harden Jones).

Prepare Launchers Before, During and After Transitions

Launchers may be birth parents, professionals and foster/adoptive parents as well as therapists and other individuals important in the lives of children. Due to personal, system, or natural causes, these individuals are “leaving” their role with the children. Launchers could include foster parents who are transitioning children to adoptive homes, case managers changing their jobs, or therapists ending their counseling sessions with the children. Upon entry into care, launchers can also include birth parents and extended family members, including older siblings who can offer children reassurance and support.

Provide Training. Preparation for guiding children through transitions begins with training. Because everybody involved in the child welfare system is likely to be considered launchers at some point, it is critical that all key stakeholders receive the following training on:

- impact of trauma on children of various ages.
- behavioral manifestations of stress, anxiety, and fear in children of various ages.
- children’s behavior when they experience loss and problems in emotional attachment.
- resiliency and how to help children utilize and strengthen their own healthy coping skills.
- engagement of birth parents to support children through transitions.
- the value of maintaining relationships with individuals significant to children (siblings, extended birth families, therapists and school personnel).

- vicarious traumatization or secondary trauma and effective ways to maintain personal well-being when working with abused children

Gather information. Launchers are responsible for gathering relevant information that will facilitate permanency and for sharing all the information they have about children with receivers. While this can be partially accomplished through case files and Lifebooks, it is critical for systems to encourage conversations between launchers and receivers to take place so information can be clarified and explained more thoroughly. This is critical to the well-being of the children but also assists with the trajectory toward permanency.

Offer consistency, information and reassurance.

Launchers should prepare children for transition by being upfront about the changes and explaining the reasons for changes. The information provided needs to be tailored to the children's developmental stage and must be as honest and complete as possible. When changes involve a loss, launchers need to emphasize that children have not done something "wrong." Even if children's behavior is contributing to a change in placement, launchers need to offer reassurance that they understand children are doing the best they can in challenging circumstances (American Academy of Pediatrics and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption).

Child welfare providers need to consider staffing structures that allow workers to remain in the lives of the children they serve as long as possible. Best practice involves minimal changes in the number of professionals with whom children have to establish trust. If launchers will be leaving after a transition, they need to explain the reasons for the change and help children deal with the loss (Bass, Shields, Behrman 2004).

Launchers should follow up with children and receivers after a transition to answer any lingering questions. Workers should also follow up with their supervisors to address their own feelings about transitions and to review situations for lessons that can be learned to improve future service. The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute and Community Partnerships for Protecting Children address issues of retaining both staff members and foster parents through quality supervision. They recommend more frequent and focused supervision for workers, who then receive guidance in how to better support foster parents. <http://www.cssp.org/publications/child-welfare/community-partnerships-for-the-protection-of-children/safekeeping-winter-2003.pdf>

Support families through transitions. Foster/adoptive families are on the front line of how children experience

transitions. They are often left to deal with the behavior of children who have experienced less than optimum transitions. As the child welfare system asks foster/adoptive families to fill multiple roles, it is essential that pre-service training be revised to equip families to parent traumatized children. This training needs to be complimented with ongoing support and training that is provided throughout their involvement with the child welfare system.

Florida Mental Health Institute's Child Focus program published a report in 2008, which addresses specific training needs of kinship caregivers. The curriculum aligns with needs described above. Training programs from Hawaii, Louisiana, Idaho, and Pennsylvania are cited as innovative examples.

<http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/Implementation/TrainingKinToBeFP.pdf>

Prepare Receivers Before, During and After Transitions

Receivers may be birth parents, professionals, and foster/adoptive parents as well as therapists and other individuals important in the lives of children. Due to personal, system, or natural causes, these individuals are entering the children's life and playing a key role. Receivers could include adoptive parents who are having children move into their homes, foster parents who are taking children directly from the birth parents' homes, or case managers who have just been assigned to the case.

Training and Support. Just as noted above, preparation for helping children adjust to transitions begins with training. Because everybody involved in the child welfare system is likely to be considered receivers at some point, it is critical that all key stakeholders receive this training. Joint training should involve professionals, birth parents, and foster/adoptive parents so that common understanding can be facilitated and relationships can be built that will add to the support children receive (Usher, Wildfire, Webster, Crampton, 2010).

Receivers should be prepared to help children deal with losses and feelings they experience as a result of the transition. Some helpful steps to prepare receivers include the following:

- Give receivers clear and complete information about the reasons for the transition so they can share that information with children as is appropriate.
- Give receivers case file information and Lifebooks and continued access to launchers so that the children's path to permanency is maintained. Receivers should be encouraged to ask questions and clarify information as needed.

- Train and provide supervisory support so receivers can be patient with establishing trust with the children. Given that the transition likely involves losses, children may need time to warm up to the receiver.
- Train and supervise foster/adoptive families on how they can welcome new children into their home. Special attention needs to be paid to other children in the home so that their questions are answered and their emotional needs are met.

Supervision practices recommended by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute and Community Partnerships for Protecting Children can help receivers in their efforts to manage transitions and help them support children in their care when they experience changes.

Thoughtful, well-planned transitions: Although it is critical to prevent multiple transitions whenever possible, child welfare systems also need to better prepare staff and foster/adoptive parents to handle transitions well. Some promising approaches are as follows:

- **Family to Family, Annie E. Casey Foundation:** Beginning in 1992, the Annie E. Casey Foundation began funding Family to Family programs. These programs have been consistently researched and evaluated and are very frequently mentioned as having some of the best outcomes for children in child welfare reform. This includes outcomes related to minimizing placement disruption and enhancing communication between launchers, receivers, birth families, and children.
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/promising-approaches>
- **The Permanency Obstacle Removal Team (PORT) from New Mexico:** According to excerpts from the project description, the Children, Youth and Families Department implemented a statewide committee to develop strategies to address systemic issues and barriers to permanency. The committee, Permanency Obstacle Removal Team (PORT), is composed of AART members, field staff, the Independent Living manager, legal staff, and director/deputy staff, and is chaired by a contractor with expertise in research, statistics, and child welfare issues. The committee meets monthly and deals with a variety of topics, such as recruitment issues, establishing and preserving connections, the use of psychotropic medications for foster children, placement stability, mediated open adoptions, the length of time to permanency, post-adoption services, and life skills and supports for adolescents. As concerns are resolved and processes are developed and improved, new issues are identified

and given concentrated attention until a resolution is reached.” <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/promising-approaches>

Integrated Assessment from Illinois: According to the project description, children and families requiring public-sponsored child welfare services receive an immediate, multi-faceted, and comprehensive assessment of strengths and needs following by an assessment review, inclusive service planning and family group decision making. This model employs interdisciplinary teams of certified clinical specialists and child welfare caseworkers employing a wide range of sophisticated assessment tools, multiple child and parent interviews and expansive family decision meetings, all within the first 30 days following the placement of a child.” <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/promising-approaches>

- Information on these and other promising practices can be retrieved from <http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/Implementation/TrainingKinToBeFP.pdf>

Summary

Transitions and changes are an inherent component of child welfare. Although they can't be completely avoided, they can be decreased and effectively managed to minimize the trauma and loss for the children. To do this, child welfare systems must enforce practices and policies that result in more methodological approaches being taken with transitions. As stated by Jackson and Thomas (1999), “too many children enter a system in which further damage is caused to their social, emotional, and cognitive development through its failure to provide a place where the children know they will remain for any length of time.”

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*National Resource Center for Adoption, Permanency Support and Preservation Model, 2014.
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