

Steps For Preparing A Child For Adoption

Think of the road to adoption as a journey for a child. He or she is often in the process of grieving, mourning, and ending one family even as he begins another. That complicates the process, and sometimes the uncertainty and changing goals of the child protective systems makes it even harder to make the journey smooth. Here are some things to think about as you prepare a child for adoption:

1. **KNOW WHERE YOU ARE IN THE PLAN FOR PERMANENCY.** Don't make a promise you may not be able to keep. A child should never be told that he will be adopted by your family, if the case plan is still for reunification with the birth family or if the search for relatives has not yet been completed.
2. If the plan turns to adoption by a relative or by your family, you can **INTRODUCE THE IDEA OF ADOPTION USING AGE APPROPRIATE EXPLANATIONS AND WORDS.** Choose the right in the process. Don't let the idea first come from the home study writer who talks to the child!
 - Always be truthful. Speak the truth in love, gentleness and in a way they can hear it. Be age appropriate -- older children will need more information. Just because children may not be talking about it or actively asking questions, doesn't mean they aren't thinking about it. Remember that this is not a one-time conversation. Kids may not always understand or be able to accept what you say, so you will need to have repeat opportunities to talk about adoption or have the conversation in several different ways. Watch for clues, kids will often test the waters to see if this is a safe conversation to have with you.
 - Gently talk about the process so kids understand how they got to this point. "Do you understand why you are in foster care?" Ask child to explain it to you. "Mom and Dad worked hard to learn how to keep you safe and take care of you. If they can learn you'll go back home. If they can't, you will stay with us. We will be your forever family."
 - For older children, acknowledge the fact that changing families can be hard and scary. Validate their feelings. Allow them the freedom to love and talk about their birth family, and that they can love both their birth family and their adoptive family. Tell them to ask questions and that you will be open tell them what is going on every step of the way. A lot of their fear and anxiety stems from not knowing what is going to happen.
 - Schedule a meeting with caseworker to explain the reunification plan.
 - Movies can be a non-threatening way to open up discussions. Some suggestions include: *Like Mike*, *Lilo and Stitch*, *Secret Garden*, *Matilda*, *Yours, Mine, and Ours*, *Blind Side*, *Angels in the Outfield*, *Meet the Robinsons*, and many of the superhero films like *Spiderman* and *Ninja Turtles*
3. **USE BOOKS AND RESOURCE TO HELP YOU FIND THE WORDS** and the ways to talk to children about some of the hard issues around adoption such as why a child won't be returning home, what adoption means, and what a forever family is. Try to give children a way to talk about what they are feeling. Remember, acceptance of adoption is a process for

children. Included in your materials is an extensive list of books that can help start conversations with children.

- 4. IF A CHILD IS SEEING A THERAPIST, WORK WITH THAT PERSON** to help the child understand the process. Children will need this information repeated often and given a chance to think about it. It might be easier for a child to talk with someone other than the adoptive parent about his fears, questions and misgivings.
- 5. EXPECT A WIDE RANGE OF FEELINGS**, from confusion, to denial to anger to hope. Adoption is a huge event for children, but part of that is grieving the loss of his family while he is trying to adjust to a new one. Often the time right before finalization is a time when many children act out.
- 6. IF A CHILD DOESN'T ALREADY HAVE A LIFEBOOK, START ONE FOR HIM.** A lifebook is really the story of a child's life, and it offers a way to help a child what has happened to him and why. Children need an understanding of their story, and that story must include information about birth parents and the reasons why children became available for adoption by your family.

Beth O'Malley talks about the idea of "front loading", that the work you do now with your child in terms of helping them understand their story, will help when the issues of adolescence, including the issue of identity, comes up. Children that understand where they came from and feel understood will weather those identity issues better.

RESOURCES TO USE:

Lifebooks: Creating A Treasure for the Adopted Child By Beth O'Malley, M.Ed.

Beth O'Malley also has a website filled with lots of good materials on lifebooks. Find it at <http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com/>

Also available on <http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com/> and through the Office of Children's Services Regional Adoption Specialists, two lifebook templates for children including

When I Am Famous: A Teen Foster/Adoption Lifebook and **My Foster Care Journey.**

And the Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association site has over 70 free lifebook pages that families can download.

http://www.ifapa.org/publications/IFAPA_Lifebook_Pages.asp

- 7. THINK ABOUT A CHILD'S EXTENDED FAMILY AND THEIR PLACE AFTER THE ADOPTION.** Does the child have siblings? Grandparents or aunts and uncles? Where will these people fit in a child's life after becoming part of your family? Children will have these questions too. Adoptive parents need to make the final decisions about appropriate contact, but remember that children have other important bonds and ties than just those to their birth parents. Is there room for them in his new family?
- 8. WORK ON BUILDING ATTACHMENT AND BONDING WITH YOUR CHILD** if adoption is the plan. An important part of the process of growing into a family includes building a sense of belonging, attachment and claiming. Following is a list of activities that you can use to work on building attachment with your child. Remember to go slow and have realistic expectations of a child's adjustment.