

Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption

If you are a foster parent adopting a child, children, or youth currently in your care, you have a pivotal role in helping them adjust to adoption. The adoption process is an ongoing journey that continues well past the day the adoption is finalized. There are several ways you can ease the transition and many supports available to help you in this important work.

This factsheet discusses common issues that come up for children and families during the foster-to-adoption process, how to support your child or youth through the transition, and resources available for help.

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT THE TRANSITION TO ADOPTION

The transition to adoption is a gradual process for all involved. The adjustment period can be a vulnerable time as your child begins to understand they are a permanent member of your family and will not return to live with their birth family. Some children may feel relief as

plans are finalized while others may feel a deep sense of loss. Listening carefully to your child throughout the adoption process and creating a safe environment for sharing feelings can help build trust and ease the transition.

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The adoption of a child in foster care by caregivers is very common. According to the most recent [Federal data](#), over half the children adopted from foster care during fiscal year 2016 (52 percent) were adopted by their foster parents.

It is important to share stories in a developmentally appropriate manner about your child's background and/or placement history and how he or she came to be adopted by you. Honor this as an important part of his or her identity. Adopted children and youth often have questions about their birth family and the reasons they are no longer able to live with them. It is essential to validate your child's experiences and feelings and tell the truth, even when difficult. There are several ways adoptive parents and siblings can help children or youth adjust to the adoption and feel more secure as a member of the family:

- You can help your child understand that adoption does not have to mean replacing or no longer loving the important people in his or her life. Instead, your child is growing the family that will be a source of love and support.
- Remain truthful as you share information. If your child was adopted at a very young age, perhaps you can let them know—if this was the case—that their birth mother was not able to provide care and asked you and your family to do so.
- Encourage open discussion about the people who matter to your child and find ways to stay in contact with them.
- Create traditions, activities, events, or anniversaries to recognize and acknowledge the adoption as a milestone for your family. Be sure to listen to and involve your child in planning these events. Many children feel very special on their "adoption day," while others have conflicting feelings of loyalty

and loss. It is normal for a child to have mixed feelings.

- Plan regular events and activities where the focus is not on adoption but on building family memories and relationships.
- Develop relationships with other families who may be fostering children or who have adopted children they fostered. It helps to see families that look similar and share common experiences. Sharing common experiences, challenges, and successes may ease the feeling of being isolated or "different."

Finding Help

The core issues of adoption—including loss, rejection, and identity—may surface at different points in your child's life, depending on events and his or her developmental stage. The transition to adoption is most successful when families can access a wide variety of support services. Child Welfare Information Gateway and others offer several resources related to adoption support and preservation:

- [Adoption From Foster Care](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted From Foster Care](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [National Foster Care & Adoption Directory](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [Support for Parents Who Adopt From Foster Care](#) (AdoptUSKids)

Children and youth learn best through repetition. Conversation about the differences between foster care and adoption may need to be introduced a number of times before a child fully understands. Integrating these conversations during moments of connection with your child can help foster bonding and attachment and help him or her explore feelings about adoption and you. Below are some ideas to encourage that process:

- Help your child talk about the perceived difference in his or her own words. Ask open-ended questions, such as, "How do you think being adopted is different from being in foster care?" or "What do you think the biggest difference is, now that you're adopted?"
- Help your child draw analogies to something in his or her life. For instance, you might say, "This is like the time when..."
- To help children understand one of the key differences between foster care and adoption, you might remind them that adoption makes them a "forever" member of your family and that they will always be your child, even when they are grown up. Reading a children's book like "[Love You Forever](#)" can be helpful.
- An older child may seek to understand his or her personal story and the reasons behind the foster care and adoption. Be honest if you don't have all the details or don't know what happened regarding your child's birth family. You can ask your child or youth about their understanding of the experience. Be aware of your reactions and make sure you are communicating safety and acceptance with whatever is shared.

Tailoring the Conversation to Your Child's Developmental Age

Your child's understanding of adoption will depend on his or her developmental stage. The following resources may help guide your conversations:

- [The Center for Adoption Support and Education](#) (C.A.S.E.) offers a series of resources on helping children adjust to adoption based on their developmental age.
- The digital magazine and website *Adoptive Families* has several [articles](#) about how to talk to your adopted child throughout the transition process.
- The video, [We Never Outgrow the Need for Family. "Just Ask Us: Talking with Older Youth About Adoption,"](#) presents how to have more effective and meaningful conversations with teenagers about permanency.

HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND AND COPE

When children or youth spend extended periods in out-of-home care, memories of significant events and people can be lost. Children may lose their sense of self: who they are, where they have lived, the people they have lived with, where they went to school, memories of favorite items (e.g., stuffed animals or blankets), and more. You can help your child review and understand previous life experiences to clarify what happened in the past and help integrate those experiences so your child will have greater self-understanding. Acknowledging your

child's past, addressing potential issues of trauma, grief, and loss, and recognizing and embracing cultural identity are all part of a healthy transition process.

Your child may experience a range of emotions and require additional support at different stages. Your child welfare agency, caseworker, or adoption specialist can help you identify appropriate and available services and supports. Many organizations specialize in working with families transitioning to adoption. If you seek counseling or mental health treatment, it is important to seek a therapist who is competent in adoption-related issues.

C.A.S.E. provides specialized mental health services for adoptive and foster families and offers an [Adoption Competence National Directory](#) of mental health therapists nationwide with formal training in adoption competence. Child Welfare Information Gateway's factsheet for families, [Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists](#), provides guidance on seeking professional help.

EASING THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

When possible and safe, seek to maintain connections with your child's birth family. Your child or youth comes with a unique story and identity that will always be a part of who they are regardless of how old they were when they first moved into your home. While children can be resilient and form new attachments to adults who are meeting their needs, recognizing and embracing their past can help them make sense of their personal story and identity and ease the integration process into your family. There are specific steps that can help children integrate existing

relationships with the important people in their lives while promoting connections with new family members. Integration can help children cope with the potentially painful realities of separation from their birth family.

Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and related trauma may have a harder time managing transitions. Child Welfare Information Gateway has several factsheets for families to help address some of these concerns:

- [Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma](#)
- [Parenting Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Abuse or Neglect](#)
- [Parenting a Child or Youth Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)

Both the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) and the [Child Trauma Academy](#) websites provide related resources.

Adoption expert Kathryn Donley was the first to describe the five-step integration process (1988):

1. **Create an accurate reconstruction of your child's placement history.** Creating a "lifebook" with your child can help them see and understand their own history. Lifebooks, scrapbooks, or memory books are tools used by foster and adoptive parents to help preserve a child's personal history, create a connection with their past, and engage them in a conversation about adoption. They help children and youth answer questions about how they

were separated from their birth family and where, ultimately, they belong. *Adoptive Families* features several [articles](#) with suggestions on creating lifebooks at different stages of development.

2. **Identify the important attachment figures in your child's life** by learning who these individuals are and by listening to your child talk about people from previous placements. These attachment figures might be parents, but may also be siblings, former foster parents, pastors, coaches, or extended family members who have a connection with your child. When adoptive parents choose not to talk about birth families, children or youth may sense that the adoptive parents are uncomfortable with their past and feel the loss more intensely (Wheeler, n.d.).
3. **Enlist the support of the most significant attachment figures available:** the birth parents, grandparents, relatives, or other important figures in your child's life (e.g., a coach, close family friend, etc.). Even if the birth family is not cooperative regarding a child's adoption permanency goal, there is likely one important person (a teacher, a former neighbor) who will be willing to work with you to make your child's transition a little smoother.
4. **Clarify "the permission message."** It is necessary for children to hear and feel from people who are important to them that it is okay to love another family. Every effort should be made to ensure those individuals give your adopted child that message.
5. **Communicate that permission to the child.** Whether the "permission to love your new family" comes in the form of a letter from a close family member or from the birth parent during visits, it is important that

children get the message that it is not their fault they are in foster care and that it is all right to love another family. This will go a long way toward helping them relax and serves to strengthen the bond with the new family. Help your child or youth understand that they are not replacing their birth family but rather "growing" their family and a support team that will help them through life.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PAST

The following questions may help your child frame past experiences and address current circumstances. The responses may help you figure out how to help your child overcome past traumas and feel more secure in your family (Henry, 2005):

- Who am I? (exploring identity)
- What happened to me? (exploring issues of loss and/or trauma)
- Where am I going? (new relationships)
- How will I get there? (questions related to relationships)
- When will I know I belong? (connection and safety)

You can help your child answer these questions and understand his or her unique history and current situation. Just because children don't bring up the past doesn't mean they aren't interested or aren't still affected by their experiences. What you can do (Wheeler, n.d):

- Pay attention to your child's nonverbal cues. If he or she seems quiet and withdrawn, consider what might be going on. You might want to ask if your child is thinking about or missing his or her biological or former foster parents or siblings. Regardless of

the answer, this will be a signal to your child that you are willing to explore those feelings.

- You might gently explain that children sometimes feel sad when separated from people they love, and let them know that you care deeply and they are not alone.
- Help your child understand that separation from his or her parents was not because they were bad people, but because they were not able to provide safe care. You can also help your child understand, if developmentally appropriate, that his or her family of origin deserves our compassion rather than judgment or scorn. This will demonstrate your empathy and contribute to your child's sense of safety.
- Pay attention to lead-ins for conversation about the past (e.g., a child comments about something they did with their birth family or a former foster family).

TRAUMA, GRIEF, AND LOSS

While it may be difficult to understand the past trauma and losses your child or youth encountered before adoption, all adopted children and youth experience some level of loss when separated from their family of origin. Even if the child has lived in your home for some time and the adoption process has been positive, the finality of the adoption may intensify feelings of loss (DeGarmo, 2017). Children in foster care often have traumatic histories that affect them in ways that may be difficult for them to put into words and may make it harder for them to form trusting relationships with new family members (Lefebvre, 2013). The trauma may be greater if the child has experienced multiple foster placements.

Your child may experience a feeling of loss from changes in language, culture, religion, or a separation from his or her siblings (Krebs, 2016). Some of the feelings of loss and grief may be vague—e.g., children know their birth parents and siblings still exist, but have no control over access to them. It is important to be sensitive to how these feelings can affect your child. Minimizing them may result in unresolved grief (Pickover & Brown, 2016).

The following resources may be helpful in addressing trauma, grief, and loss:

- The [Association for Training and Trauma on Attachment in Children](#) is an international coalition of professionals and families dedicated to promoting attachment and bonding by providing access to relevant resources and materials.
- The [Attachment and Trauma Network, Inc.](#) (ATN) is a national coalition founded by adoptive parents to support families of children who have experienced trauma. ATN maintains a database of attachment and trauma-related resources, attachment and developmental trauma therapists by location, professional organizations, and respite care providers. ATN hosts [private, online peer-to-peer support groups](#) that are moderated 24/7 by experienced therapeutic parents. ATN will place you in a group that best meets your needs based on the information you provide and the severity of a child's issues.
- [Understanding Trauma](#) is a webpage hosted by AdoptUSKids.

PROMOTING ATTACHMENT

Attachment is the deep and enduring bond that forms between a child and primary caregiver early in life when a parent is sensitive and responsive to an infant or young child's needs. When this occurs, the child feels valued and trusts the parent (Gray, 2012). A child who has experienced significant instability and unmet needs early in life often struggles with trust issues and may need to experience a safe, consistent, and unconditionally supportive environment in an adoptive home for some time before feeling safe. As your child's parent, you can promote attachment by confidently asserting your parental role and meeting your child's essential needs for nurturing, safety, and limits (C.A.S.E., 2016). You have made a lifelong commitment with all the rights and responsibilities of parenthood. More information about this process, called [entitlement and claiming](#), is available through C.A.S.E. In addition to assuming a loving, protective, and authoritative parenting role, you can help build your child's sense of belonging by actively seeking similarities between the two of you or other family members (mannerisms, interests, personality traits, or even physical traits).

If your child has experienced abuse and neglect, attachment and connection to your family may take extra time and effort (Keck & Kupecky, 2002, 2009). It is essential to validate your child's feelings at every age and developmental stage (Krebs, 2016). Remember that trust needs to be earned and cannot be rushed—patience is essential. C.A.S.E. offers many [resources](#) and a comprehensive reading list to address transition-related issues at different developmental stages.

INFANTS AND PRESCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

If you have adopted an infant or a young child, consistently offer the kind of physical closeness and attention that he or she may have missed during his or her earliest months and years. Helping your child feel safe, secure, and loved will promote healthy attachment and healing. What you can do:

- Spend as much time with your child as possible, taking leave from work when you can.
- Frequently remind your child how happy you are that he or she has become a part of your family (C.A.S.E., 2016).
- Be aware of your facial expressions. Your eyes are the pathway to connection. Make frequent eye contact and smile often (eye contact may be challenging for children with certain cultural backgrounds or for those who have mental health issues).
- Your child may need to go back to an earlier developmental stage before he or she can progress developmentally. If needed, rock your child, feed your child with a bottle, play peekaboo, etc. Nurturing your child in the safety of your home environment can help support needed development.
- Be emotionally and physically available to your child (offer frequent hugs, hold hands, cuddle while reading a book or watching TV), or talk affectionately with eye contact, smiles, and frequent praise.
- Play with your child (stacking hands, blowing bubbles, etc.). This lays the foundation for future social and emotional development.

- Use an object such as a stuffed animal when you need to be away. Speak to it in front of your child, saying something along the lines of, "Take good care of Spot while I'm away. I look forward to hearing about how well things go while I'm gone and can't wait until I get back!" (Pickover & Brown, 2016).
- Affirm your child's feelings (e.g., perhaps a desire to look more like you, particularly in a transracial adoption—acknowledge their wish, tell them their skin color is beautiful, and interact with families that share their heritage) (C.A.S.E., 2016).
- Retell your child's story when it feels appropriate, including how he or she came to you. Be aware of how your child is hearing the story and adjust its telling accordingly. Some children love to hear their story while others feel protective of the information and find it difficult to hear. Every child is different.
- Talk about future family milestones, including where your child will go to school, to assure him or her of a role in your future.
- Be the primary meal provider during the first six months to enhance the bonding process (Ostyn, 2017).
- Your child needs to know that he or she can rely on you. Do not worry about spoiling or overindulging your child (Ostyn, 2017).

For more information on this age group, see [Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler](#).

Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy

One very effective way to create a connection with a child is to utilize the ["PACE"](#) model of parenting. The PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy) parenting method emphasizes a way of connecting with young children to help build attachment and make them feel safe and understood. Playfulness, curiosity, and empathy help children develop well-being, and accepting their feelings and desires—rather than imposing your own—will help assure them they are safe in sharing ideas with you (this may require significant work on your part).

Accepting a child's feelings, wishes, and emotions is not the same as granting permission for unsafe or inappropriate behaviors. If your toddler wants a second cookie, for example, you can let them know you appreciate that craving while also being firm that this is not an option. Or, later on, if a teenager believes he or she should be allowed to use illegal substances, you can acknowledge the desire but point out that you have a responsibility to help them obey the law and stay safe. This way, your restrictions are on unsafe or inappropriate behaviors, not on your child's or youth's personal beliefs (Golding & Hughes, 2012).

SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

School-age children need routine and understanding. With its academic and social challenges, school can be overwhelming for some children. But school can also play an important role in how children perceive their adoption, especially when educators communicate that adoption is a good way to build families. With positive feedback from the school community, children have a better chance of feeling self-confident and positive about their status. Unfortunately, not all teachers have received training to prepare them to talk about adoption, resulting in silence on the topic (C.A.S.E., 2016). Your child may become aware that there are few if any children at their school who are adopted and may be uncomfortable when asked questions by peers or others. What you can do:

- Talk to your child's teachers and school administrators about adoption and provide them with adoption resources.
- Propose that your school forms a parent committee representing adoptive families and adopted students.
- Offer predictable routines and schedules.
- Affirm and show empathy for whatever your child is feeling.
- Make your home a safe spot for your child's emotions, both positive and negative.
- Help your child construct an adoption story they are comfortable sharing with peers. C.A.S.E. created the [W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook](#) to help children answer awkward questions from classmates and peers.
- Watch for signs that your child may need extra support.

- Look behind your child's behavior—it is a window to how they are feeling.
- Be aware of what your face may be communicating and how your child is responding.
- Play board games or engage in activities that put you eye-to-eye with your child.
- Don't force a child to make eye contact before he or she is ready.
- Provide nurturing physical contact.
- Speak positively about past caregivers and birth parents so your child is not shamed.
- Include your child in planning family activities to reassure them that their feelings matter.
- Encourage self-esteem by providing activities that reflect the child's interests and assign age-appropriate household responsibilities.
- Offer frequent encouragement and praise (e.g., put a note in a lunchbox).

The following are positive signs that attachment is underway:

- Your child is increasing the frequency of eye contact.
- Your child comes to you when distressed.
- How you feel matters to your child.
- Your child looks to you for praise.
- Your child is happy to cuddle—even for a moment.
- Your child prefers you over strangers.

Consult Information Gateway's factsheet [Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child](#) for more information.

YOUTH

Because they have likely had multiple disappointments in their lives, older children may take longer to form deep and enduring attachments. The older your child is at the time of adoption, the more likely it is that he or she has experienced not only rejection but also insecurity related to multiple foster care placements and temporary relationships. He or she may feel unlovable or dispensable as a result and question your commitment and the permanence of the adoption (Matloff, 2014). This can cause your child to actively resist your affection or test you to make sure your love is real and permanent (Kupecky, 2014). This may come in the form of angry outbursts or withdrawal. It is important to recognize these behaviors as a process your child needs to work through and not take them personally.

As identity development and separation are a major part of adolescence, your child's interests and tastes may change frequently. These feelings have the potential to overwhelm your child, because his or her developing independence may feel like abandonment and rekindle old feelings associated with the initial separation from the birth family. It is important for your child to feel as though he or she can share these feelings with you or work with a therapist to get through this challenging period (C.A.S.E., 2016).

Promoting attachment may be as much about being physically and emotionally available as understanding when to offer space. Involvement with an adoptive parent support group can help you learn how to connect with your youth and "let go" at the same time (C.A.S.E., 2016). What you can do:

- Be available and predictable.
- Allow your youth to express emotions without being judged.
- Talk openly (on their terms) about things that are important to them.
- Help your youth make a lifebook if there is not one already.
- Point out similarities between the two of you.
- Understand that birth parents might be idealized and that issues of loyalty might surface (Krebs, 2016).
- Help your youth practice how to communicate his or her story with peers (Krebs, 2016).

There are certain steps you can take to help manage difficult behaviors or feelings as they arise (Skalnik, 2016):

- Identify when a situation is escalating for your child.
- Recognize what causes these behaviors and help your child understand these triggers and control their responses.
- Be ready with patience and empathy.
- Move to a private area, if possible, so your child can feel safe.
- Ask your child what he or she may need (do not assume you know).
- Remember this is about your child, not about you. Do not take problem behavior personally.
- Recognize when to give space.
- Seek peer support from other adoptive parents.
- Understand and support your child's growing need for autonomy (White, 2013).

If you are concerned about certain behaviors, remember that it is always a sign of strength to seek help. For more information, see Information Gateway's [Parenting Your Adopted Teenager](#).

CONCLUSION

While it may seem easy for a child or youth to transition from foster care to adoption within the same family, in reality, the internal process—for both the child and for families—is much more complicated. Allowing children to "drift" into adoption without actively acknowledging the significant changes up front may lead to difficulties at a later time. Just as your child will need help building attachments to you and your family, you may benefit from the support of adoption-competent therapists and peer counselors to ensure a healthy transition for you and your growing family. Connecting with the postadoption preservation and support network available in your State—both before and after the adoption has been finalized—will help you with the transition process and beyond.

Adoption is a big step for everyone involved. Keep realistic expectations about yourself, your family, and your child or youth transitioning from foster care. Lastly, recognize that transition can be a lifelong process and there are many organizations, adoption professionals, and supportive services available to help you succeed.

RESOURCES

- American Adoption Congress, an international organization promoting family connections, hosts a [webpage](#) with State-specific adoption support groups

- [Circle of Security International](#) offers resources and training programs to help parents and caregivers build attachment with infants, children, and youth
- The Families Rising website has several [recorded webinars](#) for adoptive parents
- [Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families](#) looks at State-specific laws addressing postadoption contact between adoptive and birth families

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