

# Talking With Children About Placement

## Tell the Child About the Separation

- Give the child prompt, accurate information about what has happened.
  - “Your mom has been having a lot of grown-up worries lately. She needs time to figure out how to take care of herself and you. She will be going to a hospital for help with a drug abuse problem, and she needs us to find someone else for you to live with while she figures things out.”
- Don’t try to soften the pain and shock by skipping past the difficult truths and rushing to the anticipated benefits.
  - “This is really hard, I know. I will help you with this and so will other people.”
- Tell the child as soon as possible.
  - Children are sensitive to tension and parental anxiety. Telling a child about an impending change allows them to prepare for what lies ahead, rather than being caught off guard.
- When the loss is sudden, like in the case of an emergency placement, sometimes it is impossible to prepare the child. Your task, then, is to help them through the experience as it happens.

## Tell the Child About the Placement

- Give the child as much information as possible about where they will be placed. If the child is going to a place that is completely unfamiliar, give them as many details as possible about the family, neighborhood, schools, etc. Respond to their concerns and interests about the home.

## Help The Child Cope with Their Feelings

- Help alleviate some of the intense anxiety that accompanies abrupt separations by encouraging them to talk about their feelings with comments such as, “Most kids are really scared when they move into a new home.”
- Children need permission to express their feelings, and acceptance of those feelings, no matter what they are. Avoid the tendency to minimize children’s feelings with statements such as, “Don’t be sad.” They do not help. The child’s pain does not go away just because adults are uncomfortable with it or ignore it.

## Address Children’s Concerns

- Allow children to ask all sorts of questions as they process the information that has been given them.
- Answer questions clearly and directly.
- Be honest. Don’t gloss over the situation by telling the child that everything is going to be fine.

# **Talking With Children About Placement (continued)**

- Don't be afraid to admit if you don't know the answer to a child's question. For example, if a child asks you when she can go home, answer truthfully. "That will depend on when we can find your mom."

## **Help Children to Prepare to Leave**

- Giving the child a chance to say goodbye to people, places, or even their family house allows them to review and acknowledge what will be lost, and also allows them to express their feelings to others that may be involved. This process can greatly diminish the grief that follows the loss.
- Reassure the child that he will have frequent contact with you and will be informed about the plans being made for his future.

## **Specific Approaches for Talking to Children at Different Ages**

- When talking with children, tailor the style of communication to fit the child's age and developmental stage. What might make perfect sense to a nine-year-old may be incomprehensible to a child who is five years old.

## **Non-verbal Children**

- From about 18 months, children can understand and process simple discussions.
- Children can understand more language than they can produce.
- They pick up on tone of voice and non-verbal behavior of adults.
- If transporting a non-verbal child, continue to speak to the child in a soothing voice. Like verbal children, they may be terrified during the transition, and talking to them in a soothing voice can help calm the terror.
- Remember that children under the age of three are unlikely to talk with adults who are strangers, unless they are in a familiar environment and/or have a known adult close by.

## **Young School-Age Children**

Children in the magical thinking stage personalize everything and tend to believe that their thoughts, wishes, and actions are responsible for whatever happens to them. They also lack the ability to discriminate reality from fantasy.

- Avoid using "you" messages. Children at this age focus on the "you" part of any message. Avoid misunderstanding by saying, "Your mommy can't take care of any child right now."

## Talking With Children About Placement (continued)

- Avoid using euphemisms or figures of speech. Statements such as, “We lost your grandmother,” is likely to be taken literally. (“Where did you lose her and why aren’t you looking for her?”) Instead, say, “Your grandmother died.”
- Appropriate things to say to a child about loss at this stage include:
  - “Someone (name) will take care of you. I will stay with you until (name) is here to keep you safe.”
  - “This didn’t happen because you were bad... You didn’t do anything wrong”
  - “You can take as much time as you need to figure things out and to explore your feelings. You do not have to pretend that you don’t feel the way you do.”
- Help children learn to grasp concepts by connecting information to a sensory experience, and by helping them to identify emotions that they may be experiencing. “Today, when Aunt Alice came to pick you up from school, did you guess that something bad had happened? Were you worried and scared?” This also assures them of their ability to observe and understand significant events in their life.
- Tip: School-age children may talk more freely when they are traveling in cars.
- Tip: Don’t take a sleeping child from his home. Always wake him up before leaving, because the shock and trauma of waking up in a strange environment outweighs the benefits to the transporter of not having to deal with a crying child.

