

Preparing the Child for Placement

Adequately preparing the child for placement serves important purposes:

- **Provides support and alleviates many of the child's anxieties thereby greatly reducing the child's stress.**
- **The preparation period allows time 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 Child Welfare Professional establish a supportive relationship with the child, which can help the child during the placement and the early adjustment phase.**

Strategies for preparing the child:

INFANCY (Birth to 18 months)

- ❖ There is very little direct preparation of the child. Instead, the Child Welfare Professional should prepare the environment to receive the child and 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 pre-placement visits with the birth parent present, if at all possible.
- ❖ Very frequent contact with the parent is necessary to maintain the parent/child relationship, which is critical if reunification is planned.

PRESCHOOL (2 - 5 Years)

- ❖ The preschool child will become frightened and anxious when he perceives that the parent is upset. The Child Welfare Professional, 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.
- ❖ The Child Welfare Professional can use play techniques to communicate information about the move.
- ❖ The child can be encouraged to make decisions for himself about the belongings she will take with her, where she wants to sit in the car, and what she wants the new mom to give her for lunch.

SCHOOL AGE (6 - 9 Years)

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

PREADOLESCENT (10 - 12 Years)

- ❖ The reasons for the placement should be fully explained, including the family problems that led to placement and the child's own need for safe care. The child should be encouraged to ask questions and express his 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 Child Welfare Professional should provide a detailed description of the placement setting prior to taking the child for pre-placement visits.
- ❖ The child may feel conflicts about loyalty. He needs a consistent message from all persons involved that he does not have to choose between his parents and his foster caregivers.

EARLY AND MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE (13 - 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 anxiety and distress regarding the move. The Child Welfare Professional should explain all aspects of the placement and acknowledge how most children feel about moving, "just in case the information might be of interest."