Section 4. Preparing Children for Adoption

A. Preparing Children for Adoption

The child’s caseworker cannot change a child’s past, but can impact the way a child views the past, the power the past has over the child, and the child’s ability to become a member of a new family. When adoption becomes the plan for a child, prepare the child for adoption and for the process of moving and joining an adoptive family. Children may not be able to move to the next level of understanding and acceptance without caring adults who acknowledge that their questions and feelings are normal and acceptable, including those for which adults may not have answers.

Basic tenets to preparing a child for adoption

- Thoughtful and thorough adoption preparation is important to maximizing the potential for a successful and enduring adoptive placement. Consider the following principles when working with the child:
  1. The child’s self esteem can be built during the preparation process.
  2. Children should have an active part in planning for adoption, appropriate to the child’s age, developmental level and resources available.
  3. The child can be given a sense of participation without giving them inappropriate control over the adoption process.
  4. Encourage the child to express feelings, worries, and desires.
  5. Validate and normalize the child’s experiences and feelings. It maybe helpful to provide words or pictures to encourage a child to express feelings for which they do not have a vocabulary.
  6. “Telling” the child about adoption and a new family does not happen just once or twice. Check with the child to see what they are hearing. Consider using play techniques, books, drawings, and handouts.

- Design the preparation activities with the child’s developmental ability to understand in mind. The child’s understanding of adoption changes as they grow and develop, and this understanding continues evolving throughout the child’s life.
When to start preparing a child for adoption

Procedure

- Determine when the child is ready to begin preparation for transition to adoption. Considerations for the timing of adoption preparation include:
  1. Age of the child.
  2. Developmental level of the child.
  3. Special needs of the child.
  4. Current attachment figure’s ability to contribute to preparation.
  5. Available adoptive resources for the child.
  6. The status of the case plan and the determination that the child may soon be freed for adoption.

- Take the time to build a relationship with the child prior to beginning adoption preparation work, especially if the child does not know you well.

Identification and preparation of the team that will help the child transition to an adoptive placement

Procedure

- Identify individuals who will help prepare the child for transition into an adoptive placement. Team members may include: foster parents, relatives, counselors, school staff and others.

- Convene a meeting of team members to coordinate each person’s work with the child or meet with team members individually to discuss their role in preparing a child for adoption.
Review evaluations prior to adoption

A child may have behaviors, feelings, academic or learning problems, safety issues, social difficulties, medical problems, or developmental delays that warrant new or updated information for adoption planning. These evaluations can be used to assess a child’s readiness for adoption preparation work and the types of activities suited to the child.

Procedure

- Review all previous evaluations to determine if any new or up-dated information is needed.
- Review the recommendations from previous evaluations to determine if any follow up actions are necessary.

Counseling referral to help a child prepare for adoption

Procedure

- Determine if counseling, mental health therapy, or group preparation classes will be beneficial to the child, and make a referral if appropriate.
- When selecting a therapist for the child, discuss with the therapist the child’s need for adoption preparation work and the therapist’s experience in providing adoption preparation work before sending a child into treatment. The Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center (ORPARC) is a good source of material for therapists working with children in various stages of adoption. ORPARC can be reached at http://www.orparc.org or 1-800-764-8367.
- Stay involved with a therapist as they work with a child preparing for adoption. Participate in the development and implementation of a treatment plan for a child in therapy.
- Provide the therapist with up-to-date information on the child’s behavior in placement, and any changes that are taking place while the child is in treatment.
- Keep the therapist informed of progress on, or any changes in, the adoption plan.
Foster parent’s role in preparing a child for adoption

Foster parents may need education and support if they have not had experience in successfully transitioning a child to an adoptive home. The caseworker continues to have face-to-face contact with the child and the foster parent at a minimum of every 30 days during the period when the child is preparing for adoption.

Procedure

• Inform the foster parent of:

  1. The adoption selection process, including their role at adoption committee.
  2. The process for preparing the child for adoption.
  3. The counselor’s role in the process.
  4. How the transition to a new family will most likely occur.

• Discuss with the foster parent their responsibilities in the preparation process. Encourage the foster parent to:

  1. Think of themselves as part of a team that is preparing the child for adoptive placement.
  2. Talk to the child about other foster children in the home who are in the process of adoption.
  3. Read to the child books related to families and adoption.
  4. Help the child identify and manage their feelings.
  5. Talk to the caseworker and therapist about the child’s progress in preparation.
  6. Provide material to the caseworker to keep the Child’s Life Story Book up to date.
  7. Remind the child they will always care about the child, that the child is worthwhile, capable and lovable, and that they want the child to be successful in their new family and learn to love them deeply.

• Monitor the ongoing safety plan. If the caseworker cannot confirm safety and well-being of the child or young adult in the home of the relative caregiver or foster parent, the caseworker must assess child safety immediately and determine if there is a safety threat as described in OAR 413-015-0420(1)(f)(A)(i) and (ii) [http://www.dhs.state.or.us/policy/childwelfare/manual_1/i-ab4.pdf]. If a safety threat is identified, immediately:
1. Consult with the caseworker’s supervisor to determine any immediate protective action required to assure the child’s safety or any action required to assure the safety of the child. – AND –

2. Contact a CPS screener and report the identified safety threat to the child.

3. Document the behaviors, conditions, or circumstances observed in the home and any immediate protective actions in FACIS.

- Inform the foster parent on the progress of the adoption plan and assess the foster parent’s ability to support the child as they prepare for adoption.

- Staff the placement with the supervisor when there are concerns about the ability of the foster parent to support the adoptive plan. Determine if the foster family needs additional support services, or if the placement is appropriate for the child.

- Be aware of the foster parent’s grief from the anticipated loss of the child, and the effects of the anticipated loss of the child among the other children in the home. Also ask the foster family about how the other children are anticipating the departure of the child to a new family. Evaluate whether the foster parent could benefit from additional support from other foster parents, friends, and Child Welfare staff.

**Preparation of the child for child specific public recruitment**

Finding the best available adoptive home for a child may require more intensive types of public recruitment. This may include newspapers, television, adoption newsletters, fliers, the Heart Gallery, or internet recruitment. Preparation of the child is important if they are developmentally able to be aware of the recruitment and if they are participating in the recruitment, such as posing for photos for the Heart Gallery. For more information, refer to Appendix 5.17 about Preparing Children for Child Specific Public Recruitment.

**Procedure**

- Determine what form of public recruitment is appropriate given the child’s needs and circumstances.

- Determine whether adverse reactions may result from public recruitment and staff as needed with the supervisor.
The caseworker and supervisor discuss cases in which there may be areas where a highly visible form of recruitment may not be appropriate due to the potentially negative reactions of those who know the child. For instance, older children may not want to be shown in the local paper where their peers may see them and comment. For children who are legal risk status, some parents may react negatively to seeing local newspaper recruitment. Workers and supervisors can discuss necessary limits on public recruitment, if relevant.

The Supervisor’s Role

- Provide support and guidance for the caseworker as they prepare a child for adoption.
- Review any safety concerns regarding a child’s out-of-home placement and determine an appropriate response that assures the child’s safety.
- If the caseworker is concerned that a foster parent is not as supportive of an adoptive plan as needed, the supervisor assists the caseworker to evaluate the placement, and if appropriate develop a plan to work with the foster parent.
- Staff with the caseworker whether child specific public recruitment is needed and, if so, what form of public recruitment is appropriate.

Forms and References

Child Welfare Policy

- I-E.3, Placement Expectations - Policy
- I-F.3, Initiating Adoption Planning
  
  http://www.dhs.state.or.us/policy/childwelfare/manual_1/i-f3.pdf
B. Life Story Books for Children

The Life Story Book is a tool to help a child understand their history from birth to their adoption in a clear and detailed record. It contains a narrative, photos, memorabilia and other information. A Life Story Book accurately preserves the child’s history so that they can accurately understand their history, why they came into foster care, and why they cannot be with their birth parents.

The child’s caseworker gathers information for the Life Story Book and it is best practice to provide a Life Story Book to a child moving into adoption. If this is not possible, the caseworker should gather the materials for the Life Story Book and provide it to the adoptive family so they can do the last steps of assembly.

Procedure

Writing the Life Story Book narrative and important messages to convey to the child

The narrative is considered to be one of the most important aspects of the Life Story Book and it distinguishes the Life Story Book from being a traditional scrap book. Give the child accurate information in the Life Story Book narrative about the child. If you do not know certain aspects of the child’s history, it is fine to say so.

- For more information on talking with children about feelings and to coach foster parents to talk with children about feelings, see the professional article, “Enhancing Emotional Vocabulary in Young Children” (by Gail E. Joseph, Ph.D. & Phillip S. Strain, Ph.D, Center on Evidence Based Practices for Early Learning University of Colorado at Denver) at [http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/Manual/Folder8FeelingVocabulary/FileA%20EnhancingEmotVoc.pdf](http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/Manual/Folder8FeelingVocabulary/FileA%20EnhancingEmotVoc.pdf)

Items to include and gather for the Life Story Book

In addition to the narrative, a Life Story Book should contain documents that can relate to the child what their life was like prior to adoption. These other items could include:

- A copy of the child’s birth certificate, hospital memorabilia, and hand and foot prints that may be available.

- Letters from significant people in the child’s life.

- Photographs.

- School reports, papers, or pictures.

- Any other items the worker believes will help tell the child’s story.
Physical aspects of the Life Story Book

Create a “book” that is strong enough to stand the tests of time. Use acid free paper when possible to preserve photos over time.

Who can help the caseworker with the Life Story Book

- Because this is intended to tell the child’s entire life story, consider including parents and birth family in the creation of the story and even the book when appropriate. When possible, include a genogram of the family.
- Gather documents and photos from family, foster parents and prior caseworkers.
- Include where the child has lived, the child’s artwork, information about schooling, special awards the child has received. When the child is old enough and it is important to do so, include the child in the story writing and assembly of the book.

Using the Life Story Book to present the child to the prospective adoptive family

Create the Life Story Book prior to committee so it can be presented to the family that is chosen for the child. When that can’t be done, provide the selected adoptive family with a packet of Life Story Book materials including the narrative so they can assemble the Life Story Book for the child.

Sharing the Life Story Book with the child

The Life Story Book should be shared with the child when it is appropriate and could assist the child transitioning into adoption.

- The child’s therapist and foster parent should be included in the plan to share the book with the child.
- Consult with the supervisor for direction on how to introduce the child to their life story.

The Supervisor’s Role

- Consult with the caseworker to make sure that the worker is assembling the child’s Life Story Book material when the child moves onto the adoption track. The supervisor should remind the caseworker to have the Life Story Book ready for the adoption committee.
• With the caseworker, consider the best way to introduce the Life Story Book to the child.

• For training purposes, consider using unit meeting time to assemble the Life Story Books.

Forms and References

Child Welfare Policy

• I-G.1.5, Adoption Placement Selection
  http://www.dhs.state.or.us/policy/childwelfare/manual_1/i-g15.pdf

Appendices

• 5.18, “Questions to Answer in Developing Life Story Books” Adapted by Rennee Linscott.
• 5.19, “Life Story Book Questions for Children Who Have Entered Substitute Care” Adapted by Rennee Linscott used by Miriam Parker.
• 5.20, Birth Parent Letter Sample.
• 5.21, “Feelings and Faces”
• 5.22, “Books to Help Children Talk About Their Feelings”
C. Goodbye Visits with Birth Parents

Procedure

- Assess the birth parents’ ability and the child’s needs before making a decision whether a goodbye visit will help the child transition into an adoptive placement. Before arriving at a decision, discuss the pros and cons of a parental visit with all the important people concerned with the child’s welfare, including the supervisor. If the decision is to not have a goodbye visit, document in the case record why this decision was made and who was consulted prior to making this decision.

- Arrange a final visit between the birth parent and the child if this is determined to be in the child’s best interests.

- Meet with the foster parent to explain the advantages of a goodbye visit, answer their questions and encourage their support.

- Meet with the child prior to a goodbye visit to prepare for a final contact with the birth parent. Children approaching adoption have many questions about why their birth parents cannot care for them. In an age appropriate way, help the child frame their questions and approach their feelings about a visit.

- Meet with the birth parents prior to a goodbye visit to help them prepare. Assist the parent to understand the value of a visit, and how their participation will increase the likelihood of a successful adoptive placement for their child. If the parent is incapable or unwilling to have a face-to-face visit with their child, encourage them to prepare a goodbye letter. See sample goodbye letter in the appendix.

- Meet with the child and the child’s foster parent after the goodbye visit to debrief the visit. Assess the child’s response to the visit and determine if further follow-up work is necessary to help the child process the experience.

- If the caseworker does not conduct the goodbye visit, the caseworker coordinates with the person who will conduct the visit to prepare the child, the child’s substitute caregiver, and the parent.

The Supervisor’s Role

- Review the caseworker’s plan for a goodbye visit between a child entering adoptive care and their birth parent.

- Review and approve a decision not to have a goodbye visit when this decision is appropriate.
Chapter V - Adoption, Guardianship, and Other Permanency Plans

D. Significant Relationship Staffing

When there is no current caretaker wishing to adopt a child, and no relatives are available to be considered as adoptive resources, recruitment is required unless there are exceptional circumstances that mitigate against recruitment. When the child has a significant relationship with an individual who wishes to adopt the child, and the caseworker and supervisor believe it is in the child’s best interest for this family alone to be considered, a significant relationship staffing must be convened.

Procedure

• Verify that there is no relative and no current caretaker who is interested in adopting the child. A significant relationship staffing will not be conducted if there is a relative or current caretaker to be considered.

• Along with the supervisor, determine if it would be in the child’s best interests if this resource was considered alone and that there be no other recruitment.

• Contact the legal assistance specialist (LAS) and adoption placement specialist (APS) in Central Office’s Adoption Services Unit, and request a significant relationship staffing.

1. Provide the following information in the request for the staffing: name and date of birth of the child; name of the family with whom the child has a significant relationship; name and location of the certifier or adoption worker, if one is connected to the family; possible dates/times that the worker (and certifier/adoption worker, if applicable) are available for the staffing.

• Prepare for the staffing.

1. Read the materials that are e-mailed to the worker and be ready to discuss the topics that are listed in the reading materials.

   a. Appendix 5.23 entitled, “Significant Relationship of a Child for Whom Adoption is the Plan with a Prospective Adoptive Resource and the Child’s Eligibility for AA,” and Appendix 5.24, the similarly titled, “Staffing Sheet,” are the materials that are e-mailed to the worker.
Chapter V - Adoption, Guardianship, and Other Permanency Plans

• Participate in the staffing by phone.

• After the staffing notes are emailed from the LAS or APS, print the notes and save them in the separate file of confidential adoption materials.

• If no further recruitment is necessary, and the person with the significant relationship is subsequently selected as the adoptive resource at an adoption committee, attach a copy of the notes to the adoption assistance application materials when submitted.

• If further recruitment is necessary, refer to Section 6 on Recruitment for Children.

The Supervisor’s Role

• Meet with the caseworker to determine whether it is in the child’s best interests to forego recruitment for adoptive families and instead consider a family with a significant relationship to a child.

• If, after discussing the situation, the decision is that recruitment is most appropriate, support the worker in their discussion with the family who wishes to adopt the child.

Forms and References

Legal References

Child Welfare Policy

• I-E.1.1, Working with Relatives Toward Placement of Children
  [http://www.dhs.state.or.us/policy/childwelfare/manual_1/i-e11.pdf]

• I-G.1.1, Current Caretaker Adoption Planning
  [http://www.dhs.state.or.us/policy/childwelfare/manual_1/i-g11.pdf]