

Exercises for Transitioning from Foster Care to Adoption

by Lissa Cowan and Jennifer Lee

The exercises outlined below are adapted from Tara's Guide to Adoptive Families are Families for Keeps—a CD by Lissa Cowan and Jennifer Lee that accompanies an activity book aimed at helping children transition from foster care to adoption. Lissa is the editorial director, and Jennifer is the editor and production manager at Groundwork Press in British Columbia. To learn more, visit www.groundworkpress.com.

Children who are placed in foster care often experience multiple separations, both from their birth parents and from foster parents. Because of this, many have a hard time trusting and building long-term, healthy relationships with their adoptive families. They may have trouble giving and receiving affection, may exhibit control issues, and may simply find it difficult to become attached and emotionally bonded to yet another set of parents—a common concern for adoptive families during the post-placement period.

In this article we will suggest exercises that foster parents, adoptive parents, and social workers can use to help children focus on some of the complex issues involved in foster care and adoption. Through the exercises adults can enable children to openly discuss adoption and the larger idea of family—concepts that children must address before they can find their place in a new family.

Exercise 1: Many children are adopted

Many foster children feel they are different from other children precisely because they are in foster care. Some might even view adoption with shame because they had hoped to rejoin their birth parents. When children understand that many other children are adopted and are still regular kids, they may feel less alone.

To help a child discover that many children are adopted and are more or less the same as children who are not adopted:

- Find a picture of a group of children. It could be a photograph from a book or magazine, a class picture, or an illustration.
- Ask the child how many children in the picture she thinks may be adopted.
- Ask her to point out (in the picture) which ones might be adopted.

It is of course impossible to know which children in a random picture are adopted, so you may want to invite the child to explore how and if adoption makes a child visibly different by asking, “What makes you think that child is adopted?” You can say that you too are unsure

which children are adopted, since you can't tell just by looking.

Next, ask the child if she knows other children (friends, classmates, or neighbors) who are adopted. If she does, ask more specific questions such as: What hobbies does that child have? What games does she like to play? If she does not know other adopted children, pull from your own experience or knowledge about all the people (including some very famous people) who are adopted.

Exercise 2: What is family?

Another adoption-related concept is the whole notion of family. What qualities make up a family? How many people make a family? Does a family include grandparents or aunts and uncles? Will it include the foster family or the birth family? What do families do together? Parents and workers can also use Exercise 2 to talk about things the child likes to do and is good at, where these talents come from, and how he may be able to pursue his interests and talents in a new family.

- Ask the child to draw two homes: one where his foster or birth parents live, and the one he is currently living in (or will live in) with his adoptive parents.
- Ask the child to point out differences between the two homes (“My foster parents have a white fence and my adoptive parents have a big hedge.”).

The purpose of this exercise is to help the child validate and accept his past history so he can move forward into a new situation. At the same time, because the child's understanding about families is based on interactions and experiences with past families, it is important to distinguish between different families to eventually make room for new beliefs and experiences.

After going over the physical differences between the families' homes, you might encourage the child to point out differences between the families themselves so he can eventually keep them each distinct in his mind. The ability to make these distinctions will

allow the child to accept a new relationship with the adoptive family, all the while knowing that former foster families and the birth family are different and separate.

This might also be an opportunity to explore with the child the meaning of adoption. You might want to engage the child in a discussion about what he would like from his adoptive family—such as a parent at home when he comes back from school, a family pet, a parent who will sing or read to him before bed. All of these things can translate into having a family that loves and cares for the child as he grows into an adult.

Assure the child that it is okay and normal to not feel an immediate connection to his adoptive parents. It takes time to become a family. Ask the child if she is experiencing feelings that are difficult to talk about. Ask, “Do you feel unsure or uncomfortable or scared? Are you happy with your adoptive family but don't know how to show it?” Assure the child that the adoptive family loves him and has made a firm commitment to be his everyday family, the ones who will provide consistent nurturing and discipline on which the child can rely.

This discussion will allow the child to speak freely about his feelings, something that is often difficult for children struggling with attachment issues, and to also feel the freedom to become an integral part of his adoptive family. Feeling love and affection may be scary for the child because he doesn't know what to expect in return, so assuring the child of his adoptive parents' predictability and stability is a good idea.

Exercise 3: Create a shadow box

A shadow box—usually an enclosed case with a see-through cover for displaying items—can help a child maintain a warm connection to her past. When filled with items connected to people in previous families (foster parents, siblings, or birth family members) the box can remind the child of her love for others and their love for her, and that it is okay to continue to love these people and create new family relationships.

- Ask the child to collect small mementos from her previous homes.
- Help her glue or simply place these items into a shadow box. Craft or art stores sell boxes in different sizes, or you can make a shadow box using a shoebox or smaller square box with the lid removed.
- Once it is arranged, place the box on a bedside table, desk, or another prominent place where the child can easily see it.

If the child has no small mementos from the past, work together to draw a picture or a representation of the previous relationships, events or places. Pictures, or the collection of mementoes will help the child feel safe and secure in her new home knowing that she can make new memories with the adoptive family that won't erase those of the past.

Exercise 4: Role-play to explore behaviors

Role-playing is an important learning tool to help children visualize future interactions with their new families, and a pro-active way of looking at challenging behaviors and teaching about possible consequences. Rather than waiting for the child to pick up on what is expected of him as a situation arises, role-playing allows him to know in advance what behaviors will not be tolerated and decide for himself how he will behave. Through this exercise, the child also learns that he should expect the adoptive parents to be consistent with disciplining.

- Ask the child to think of a challenging behavior to act out in charades so you can guess what the behavior is. For example, he might think of taking a sibling's possessions without asking, or not sharing his Halloween candy.
- After you guess the behavior, ask the child how his adoptive parents would react. Reinforce the idea that he can always expect consistent reactions to misbehavior from his adoptive parents. For example, if he expects to be disciplined by being given a time-out, you could say, "Your parents will give you time-outs when you do something that hurts others so that you can think about how you want to behave and make a better choice about the way you act with others."

The activity will allow the child to see that there is nothing to fear from his adoptive parents and that they will reliably and appropriately respond to her needs. This of course assumes that parents will react that way. It may be useful at this point to encourage discussions with the parents (or, if you are the parent, to enter into a discussion with your partner or social worker) about discipline techniques and the importance of consistency.

Exercise 5: Identify and examine feelings

When a child lashes out, it is often because she does not know how to identify or express her feelings. It may be that her birth family or another foster family never demonstrated or explained the range of, reasons for, or proper ways to share human feelings. She may, for instance, know lots of ways to show anger and hostility, but few ways to release those feelings safely. Her knowledge of kinder emotions and

appropriate ways to express joy or affection, may not have developed in a socially acceptable way. To help the child learn more about her emotions and how to express them:

- Show the child a series of simple line drawings or magazine pictures that depict different emotions.
- Ask her to identify how the person is feeling in each picture (by choosing from a list of possible emotions), and write—or have you write—the name of the emotion under the matching picture.
- Then go through and discuss each emotion, and have the child give examples of when similar emotions came up for her.

To take the exercise further, role-play with the child. Pretend that you are the caregiver and the child is expressing her feelings to you. Ask her to share how she feels about something that's important to her. Respond in a caring and supportive way, and suggest how she can constructively deal with more difficult emotions like anger and sadness. Let her know that she will experience many emotions during the transition from foster care to adoption, and that it is okay to express her feelings.

Exercise 6: What makes you, you?

Identity is often a big issue for children in foster care who join a new permanent family. After adoption, children may feel at sea—after all, many of the ways they used to identify themselves have changed. They are now part of a new family living in a new house, often in a new community. They likely don't look just like their new family and may not share any identifiable traits with them. They are often full of questions that can be hard to articulate as they

try to fit into another family. "Who am I?" "How do I fit in?" "Why am I so confused?" To help the child explore the meaning of identity:

- Ask the child to describe himself. For instance, he could say, "I'm a good listener. I can run really fast. I like to swim, and chocolate chip is my favorite kind of cookie."
- Help the child to identify positive characteristics that he has in common with his birth parents, foster parents, or adoptive parents. It could be a taste for a certain kind of movie or restaurant, an ability or talent of some kind, a physical resemblance, or anything else about which the child can feel good.
- Assure the child that the core characteristics, whether he shares them with a biological relative or his new family, will never change (unless he wants them to) and will continue to remain the same throughout his journey from foster care to adoption to adulthood.

The purpose of this exercise is to reinforce the idea that the child's core identity doesn't change, despite the many external changes that occur as he grows and matures.

When children transition from foster care to adoption, they experience a wide and challenging range of feelings, fears, and expectations. We hope that the exercises we have included in this article will help you (as a caregiver, adoption professional, or the parent of a newly adopted child) to address and discuss issues, concerns, and expectations with the child in a positive, non-threatening way during the transition to his or her permanent family. The sooner a child can openly address valid adoption concerns, the sooner he or she can build meaningful connections with a new family. ❁