

**Good Practice
In
Supporting a Fostered Child's
Transition to
Their New Adoptive Family**

**Devon County Council
Adoption Services
Fostering Services**

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The Context: What we know from research

The population of children in care in England is at a 30-year high, the latest official government statistics have revealed.

A total of 69,540 children were in care at the end of March 2015, the figures published in October 2015 by the Department for Education said, and the number of looked-after children is “now higher than at any point since 1985”.

Whilst there has been a drop in adoption figures, other forms of permanent placements are on the increase, including special guardianship placements.

As well as an increased focus on foster-to-adoption placements, currently 85% of adoption placements are to ‘strangers’.

Recent research has found that there is an association between poorly managed transitions and later disruptions to the adoption, a situation where a child is returned to the placing agency, either pre or post adoption order.

The proportion of adoptions that disrupt post-order lies between 2% - 9%, whilst the overall rate is 3.2% (Selwyn, 2014). It is clear that difficulties in an adoptive family can result in a number of challenging adopted-child behaviours, and the potential need for psychological services, respite and/or alternative foster care arrangements, at considerable cost to Local Authorities.

Ultimately, some adopted children, who have experienced disruption, may move into adulthood with significant behavioural issues, ones that could mean further need for statutory services, and potential cycles of harm to continue.

Given these statistics, and given that the rate of permanent placements is likely to continue to increase, due thought, planning, and a child-centred approach is critical if the transition process is to be managed well, and works to the psychological benefit of children and their adoptive families, rather than a cost, emotionally and financially.

You, us and the child. How, together, we're going to make this work

This guidance has been written within the context of the previous research, with the aim, and the hope of bringing about positive and lifelong change for children who are placed for adoption.

Critical to this guidance, is a mind-shift by all those concerned with a child's transition from foster care to adoption. Work to ensure a stable adoptive placement for a child, does not end when they are placed with prospective adopters, but conscientiously supports them at least, and ideally beyond, the point of their adoptive parents being granted an Adoption Order.

It our belief that we can prevent adoption disruptions because we are now better prepared and more able to understand this extremely delicate transition for children. What we know is that children who are accommodated by the Local Authority, almost always come into care from traumatic and abusive environments. Because of their early childhood experiences, they are unlikely to demonstrate secure attachment behaviours to their birth parents.

Our foster placements provide these children with, wherever possible, secure, safe, warm and loving home environments. As such, our hope is that they will begin to show evidence of increased secure attachment behaviour to their foster carers.

With evolving research and knowledge as our base, this guidance aims to ensure that the warmth, love and security that the majority of these children will have internalised, is held as strongly as possible through the sometimes traumatic transition into their adoptive family.

In writing this guidance, all professionals involved understand the enormous commitment and dedication it will take for everyone, Social Workers, foster carers, adopters and Managers, to make the transition to a child's new family as positive as possible,

However we must all ensure that throughout the transition process, we hold in our minds that the child remains at the centre of our practice.

It is this that will ensure our some of the most vulnerable children within our society achieve and enjoy the best possible outcome in their new adoptive family.

The number of Foster to Adopt placements is also on the increase; many of these placements are made in emergency situations and so transition periods are not always possible. However, in cases where there is more time, the transitions principles should be adhered to as closely as possible, in order to deliver similarly improved outcomes for the children involved.

The Experience

Imagine moving away from all of our life, including our family, job, friends, pets and possessions all in one go, as an adult, and how frightening and distressing that would be.

Now if we were to imagine a small child, one who has likely experienced much trauma, having to undergo such a move, again (having already been removed from their birth family); we may then have some sense of the potential trauma a move to an adoptive family is likely to be.....

With that in mind, moving from foster care to an adoptive family may be a traumatic experience for a child who may show evidence of increased secure attachment behaviours to their foster carers.

Additionally, children may have a range of emotions from their past evoked by the words 'mummy' and 'daddy', and such feelings will be registering in a child's brain at different levels.

The child may revert to earlier coping strategies such as dissociation, aggression or compulsive care giving as a way of dealing with these emotions.

However well planned the move, the child is likely to experience it as a repetition of past abandonments and rejections unless such experiences are acknowledged and the child is supported to approach this transition by those responsible for its care in a conscious and conscientious manner.

Furthermore, concepts of 'permanence' and the 'future' are beyond the comprehension of children under the age of five, who have no real understanding of time. However, we know how child-focused transitions can work to address and manage the potential trauma of such a move.

Recent research backs up what we in the Adoption and Fostering teams know: it is critical that adoption planning is carried out with attunement to, and acceptance of, the individual child's needs.

In order for a child to undertake their move to a new adoptive family, they need to feel safe and to develop a feeling of trust towards the Adopter(s), and research evidences that this feeling of safety is the key to the whole process of transitions (Van der Kolk, 2004, Henry, 2005).

The Devon County Council Adoption Team utilises an approach advocated by the Family Place and Family Futures, that combines elements of Theraplay (Jernberg, 1979), Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (Hughes, 2006) and Neurosequentialism (Perry, 2006).

The underlying concept behind the transitions period, is that its aim is to promote the Adopters bond to the child, and the child's attachment to their new adoptive family

The transitions period has a number of important elements and purposes broken down below into key stages:

- **Stage One:**
The process of the Adopters being trained (specifically in attachment in relation to transitions), assessed and approved.
- **Stage Two:**
The decision for the child to be adopted being made.
- **Stage Three:**
The Adopters being matched to the child and finding out about him/her, (with a number of statutory processes). The importance of the adoptive family becoming familiar with the routines of the child, their likes and dislikes, their coping strategies etc.
- **Stage Four:**
Continuing the child's living story/history. Life story work that began when they entered care, is enhanced with further life history (birth family), expanded with a Welcome to my (adoptive) Family Book, and further information explaining the move to their new adoptive family.
- **Stage Five:**
The child (hopefully showing evidence of increased secure attachment behaviours to their foster carers) being introduced to, and (hopefully) beginning to develop additional secure attachment behaviours towards their adoptive parent(s).

Essential considerations are supporting the child developing a sense of safety and trust with their Adoptive Parents, and their foster carers giving them permission to move on.

- **Stage Six:**

The period following transitions is important for continuing to support the child in building a sense of safety and security.

The focus is on spending quiet, low-key time as a family unit, developing family routines and ensuring that the child continues to gain awareness of who their new family is and vice versa.

There is a difference between routines that need to carry on from the foster carers, at least for a short while, such as meal times etc. and then there are the social patterns, which adopters need to change at first – they need to have time and space to ‘nest’ with their child.

- **Stage Seven:**

Moving on, whilst maintaining contact with his/her significant carers. Foster carers saying, “See you soon” to the child.

This stage includes plans for the maintenance of contact with their former primary carers with whom the child demonstrates as having a secure attachment.

Stage One:**The process of the Adopters being trained, assessed and approved**

A two stage assessment process concludes, for those successful, with approval by the Local Authority's decision-maker, after recommendation by the adoption panel.

Key consideration in this process is how potential Adopters might be encouraged and supported to meet any particular needs of children, and for them to think about their expectations of adoption, and the consequences for them, and their family, of caring for an adopted child who may have a range of complex needs.

For the Adoption and Fostering services, an area to be very clear about, is that a child that is adopted, not matter how 'perfect' their adoptive family are, will not easily adapt to a very new environment; one that is fundamentally strange to them.

In fact, if a child seems 'fine' during and after the process, we would ask how that could be, when we would naturally expect the child to experience a period of grief and loss?!

Furthermore we would hope that Adopters, and all Social Workers, are primed to help children to cope with their distress, by acknowledging and containing it, rather than avoiding, or minimising it.

The child will likely be displaying secure attachment behaviours towards their foster carers (and may even think of them as 'mummy' and/or 'daddy', whether or not they are able to vocalise this).

Therefore, and critically, the work done in the transition from foster placement to adoptive placement must ensure that child has no experience of being 'taken away' from their primary attachment figures.

Critical in the training of Adopters is ensuring they understand basic attachment theory, understand the transition process and why its important, and have the stability and resilience to put it into practice, for the benefit of any child that eventually becomes part of their family.

Stage Two:**The decision for the child to be adopted being made**

A Local Authority will need to consider a child's needs for permanence when that child is about to be relinquished for adoption, or is looked after, either because the child is being voluntarily accommodated, is the subject of an Interim Care Order, or care proceedings have been initiated.

Whilst there are rare cases where a birth parent may consent to their child being placed for adoption, more generally the Local Authority is required to request a Placement Order from the courts, in order to dispense with the parental responsibility of the birth parents' and place the child with a new adoptive family.

Prospective adopters will acquire Parental Responsibility for the child as soon as the child is placed with them, to be shared with the birth parents and the adoption agency making the placement.

When an Adoption Order is granted, some months after a child is placed into an Adoptive family, parental responsibility passes completely to the Adopters, and is no longer shared.

At this stage, it is vital that life story work with the child is carried out, focused on two key areas; what a foster family or 'looking after' family's role is and also providing an initial message in relation to why their birth family cannot care for them. Life story work is led by the child's social worker and supported by the foster carer(s). The supervising social worker and life story book worker, from the adoption team, also support this process.

Stage Three:

The Adopters being matched to the child and finding out about him/her

Key Events:

- 1. Linking Meeting (with Family Finding, Child's & Adopter's Social Workers), chaired by Child's Social Worker's Manager**
- 2. Foundations to Transitions Meeting (All Social Workers, adopters & foster carers)**
- 3. Formulation of Draft Transitions Plan**
- 4. Matching Panel & Agency Decision Making**
- 5. Transitions Planning Meeting**

1. Linking Meeting

The aim of this meeting is for the Local Authority to review the matching criteria for the child and to then consider each potential adoptive family represented in terms of their potential to meet the child's individual placement needs

Critical questions to consider during the Linking Meeting and at further meetings such as those with foster carers, and other advisers in Education and Health, include:

- How is this particular child likely to view the move?
- What have been their expectations and reactions to change in the past and what might they be now?
- What has been the foster carers' experience of how the child has reacted to change?
- How were they when they moved in with the foster carers? Specifically, did they demonstrate particular challenging or disregulated behaviours, and might these be reactivated again?
- What is their developing understanding of how they view themselves, and their world, including other people? We refer to this as their Internal Working Model (simply put "I am ok, loveable and worthy" vs "I am not ok, unlovable and unworthy")
- How do they behave when they are anxious or worried? What are their behaviours on these occasions?
- How do they express other emotions such as anger and sadness? Do they hold them in (and pretend they are ok), or do they overtly demonstrate how they are feeling? This information needs to be gathered as part of the Carers Report.

2. Foundations to Transitions Meeting

Once a child is 'Linked' to their potential adoptive family, a meeting between the child's foster carers and potential adopters is arranged and supported by the Adoption Team.

The aim of this meeting, utilising a template to direct the process (Appendix 1), is to start the transfer of key information to the Adoptive Parents including:

- A discussion about the child's history in detail;
- Knowledge about routines and likes and dislikes and how these are managed;
- A discussion about any difficulties, past and present, that the child has/is experiencing;
- Information about the child's attachment style and needs; how they relate to people;
- An understanding of a child's complexities, in order to predict and rehearse any potential issues; how they cope with and indicate signs of stress and anxiety, for example.

The meeting needs to review the issues highlighted above so that the Adopters will have as complete as possible an understanding of what they will encounter as they become the child's new parents.

At this meeting, there is potential for the following mismatched perceptions due to how each part of this process feels. This should be acknowledged.

For the foster carers, the process may be viewed with a mixture of pride in a job well done, happiness for the child having found a 'growing up family', and sadness for the child moving on from their care.

It is suggested that foster carers bring a photograph of the child's bedroom in the foster placement to this meeting, in order that the Prospective adopters have an opportunity to replicate the bedroom as much as possible, in order to maintain some sense of the familiar for the child.

The Adopters may be overjoyed at hearing about their new child, but also anxious at the prospect of having to spend time with foster carers who will be 'experts' in the care their prospective adoptive child, anxious about having to spend a lot of time in a stranger's home, anxious about the possibility of not appearing 'good enough', and anxious that a lot of eyes (including a number of Social Workers) are focused on them.

For the child, the move may be terrifying and may, even in very young children, reactivate old traumas. These differences need to be acknowledged and talked about, between all present at the meeting, with an emphasis on the child having very mixed feelings about moving, yet emphasising that this is normal, and expected.

3. Formulation of Draft Transitions Plan

The aim of the Transitions Plan (Appendix 2) is to introduce the child to their Adoptive family and to begin the process of integration.

Fundamentally, transitions begin the process of building additional attachments to their Adoptive Parents by helping the child to develop trust, and feelings of safety toward their new caregivers.

There are some key aspects that are critical in this process:

- The transitions must be carefully thought through and carried out at the child's pace. This means that even if a plan is approved, it is 'live', in as much as it is ever evolving, according to the needs of the child. Draft Transitions Plans need to be drawn up in consultation with foster carers and Prospective adopters.
- Length of transition. There is no standard timescale for this, so it can take up to six weeks, and exceptionally even longer for older children if necessary. Please see Devon Adoption policy on timescales (Appendix 2).
- During this period, both the child and the adults take time to adjust to and process new relationships. They need an adequate period of adjustment and integration to get to know each other.
- The transitions should build up in time and intensity. Beginning with a brief hello (of about an hour, and at the child's current home), and moving towards time spent in the child's new home, with their foster carers present. Additional to this is an increase in presence of the child's new parents, with a subsequent decrease in presence of the child's foster carers.
- Transitions are best if they allow for the child to continue experiencing as close to normal routines as possible (no new and exciting trips to adventure play parks for example!).
- The foster carers and adopters need to talk about every step to the child, to acknowledge the process and provide information on what will be happening next etc. If the child is younger, they can discuss such issues out loud with each other in front of the child, so that the child can hear and absorb the information. For an older child, and with the foster carer, they could create a planner (advent calendar style, with a flap to pull off for each day) with pictures and/or writing etc. to explain what they will be doing for each day;
- The transitions need to be well supported with access to Social Workers, expert external support (if identified), and possibly introductory sessions of Theraplay (a child and family therapy that has as its goal to help feelings of safety for a child).

4. Matching Panel & Agency Decision Making

The initial recommendation to Match and place a child is made by the Matching Panel. This recommendation is then ratified the Local Authority's Adoption Agency's Decision-Maker, who has the final approval.

Matching Panel can also contribute to planning around transitions if required.

It is generally agreed that the prospective adopters should bring their 'Welcome to my family' book to the Matching Panel, as well as photos, a DVD, an article of clothing from their house with their scent, and a speaking toy for babies etc.

These articles are then shared with the child, by the foster carer, on a daily basis from when Agency Decision Maker's decision is made to confirm the match, depending on the needs of the child.

For other children this may be too stressful and so this needs to be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis as part of the transitions planning;

5. Transitions Planning Meeting

This meeting is chaired by the child's Independent Reviewing Officer and is attended by the child's Social Worker, the adoptive parents and their Social Worker, the foster carers and their Social Worker and the Family Finding Social Worker.

This meeting is where the draft Transitions Plan (formulated by the Family Finding Social Worker) and a parental responsibility form is signed off.

The draft Transitions Plan is a live document, formulated by the Family Finding Social Worker. At the Transitions Planning meeting, the draft plan is made more real, with changes that reflect the needs of the child, and the needs of the foster carers and adopters.

The final Transitions Plan, is still malleable, as the aim of it is to ensure transition from one set of primary attachment figure(s), to another, in itself a changing an evolving phenomenon.

Stage Four:**Continuing the child's living story/history**

A child needs to have an understanding of what foster care is and why they are there. They also need to know that a 'growing up' family is being sought for them. Finally, they need to be prepared in relation to the transition process that is to come.

There are some key aspects that are critical in this process:

- The use of storybooks and/or games (Appendices 3 & 4), recommended and/or provided by the Adoption team and used in the build up to transitions, during the transitions themselves and post transitions by both the Foster carers and Adopters at appropriate times.

The books and/or games help to provide the child an age-appropriate way of understanding what is happening to them, and why. It will also help the child make sense of the transitions process and give them a sense of their history as they grow up.

- Photos taken during their time in foster care and then during transitions will be used as part of a number of books created and supported by the team supporting the child and adopters.

The books are:

- Looking after family book – the child's time with their foster carers (and what foster carers do: look after);
- About birth family book – an explanation of some of the child's history;
- Welcome to my family book – created by the potential adopters;
- Moving to my new family information/book – how the adopters met and got to know the child, with the help of the foster carers.

Most significantly, it is hoped that the idea of a 'Looking After' family will give the child a sense that the foster carers give permission for them to move on, to their 'Growing up' family.

These books document the child's transition to their 'growing up' family and will help the child remember and make sense of the transition.

Stage Five:

The child (who displays secure attachment behaviours to his foster carers) being introduced to, and developing additional secure attachments to their prospective adoptive parent(s).

Key Events:

- 1. Introduction to Prospective adopters**
- 2. Child Appreciation Day (for children over 3)**
- 3. Mid-way Review**

1. Introduction to Prospective adopters

The transitions are where the work of assimilating the child to their new family takes place.

The intention during introductions is to integrate the child's 'new parents' into the child's life, until the child feels comfortable and at ease with them.

This process is guided by the Transitions Plan, and starts with a first contact, in the child's foster home. This meeting should be short, non-intrusive, low-key, and ultimately child-lead, no matter how excited the prospective adopters may be feeling!

Subsequent contact in the foster placement, and later in the prospective adopters home, will build on each previous contact, in terms of activities and tasks, and emotional and bond-building engagement.

2. Child Appreciation Day

This is an opportunity for the adoptive family to meet as many professionals involved in the child's journey to the point where they have been introduced to their new family. It is, fundamentally, an opportunity for the adoptive parents to ask questions about the child and their birth family, and to get a better idea of the challenges they may face, as the child grows up.

3. Mid-way Review

This takes place in the foster carers' home, and is an opportunity to consider how well the transitions are progressing, and if necessary, make changes to the Transitions Plan. The Mid-way Review is chaired by the Child's Social

Worker's Manager, and will include all those involved in the Transitions Planning Meeting. There is a template for this meeting, one that considers the transition and how the child is coping (Appendix 5).

Critical considerations in the transition process:

- Activities are needed where prospective adopters and child engage with each other and which promote positive interaction e.g. playing with special toys, visits to the local (familiar) park, swimming, and most importantly, activities that are done routinely. It is vital that activities are not too exciting, and do not over stimulate the child.
- There is a gradual progression of tasks, such as bath time including washing hair, and bedtime, with a story. It is suggested that the adoptive parents observe at first, then help, and then do.

This allows the adoptive parents to learn about routines and maintain them during the transition period. It also helps children to feel safe with, and to build trust in the Adopters, who themselves will hopefully be developing confidence in their parental role.

Within the progression of tasks, foster carers need to give permission; they need to be seen by the child concerned to ask the adopters to take part in joining in with activities and looking after the child.

They also need to be seen to be handing over caring responsibilities to the adopters, who increasingly lead the care during the second half of Transitions.

- Play as a group (foster cares and adopters) with the child, emphasising to the child that their 'growing up' family are learning their family culture and atmosphere.

Playing as a group could include ball games, drawing games, nursery rhymes etc. which involves the whole group. The games should be fun and not competitive or too stimulating to ensure that the child does not get too overexcited.

With the aim of building and maintaining safety and trust, games could include those incorporated into Devon Adoption's booklet on Theraplay games (Appendix 6)

- It is not suitable for the plan to include sessions where the child is left alone with the adopters, during the first couple of days or even the first week.
- Research shows that in a very high percentage of cases where adoptions have sadly disrupted, one of the consistent factors has been that transitions

were too short, rushed, badly planned or not supported and adopters didn't feel comfortable in taking the child home.

- If the adopters are expressing uncertainty, misgivings and doubt during introductions, it is better to slow down the process, even though this may be deeply upsetting for all concerned, rather than continue at the same pace, which may lead to a disruption in the future, a situation which is much harder to untangle and will have a much more long-lasting impact on the child.
- No matter how young a child is, even if a baby, they will still have a sense of what is happening and will be feeling unsettled and insecure. If they have been with the foster carers for a period, then they will be feeling grief and loss, for them, as well as their birth family.

Consideration also needs to be given to the sensory experiences of the non-verbal child, for whom sounds, smells and visual stimuli are essential, and need to be incorporated into planning for Transitions (Appendix 7).

- If the child appears to be taking it their stride, it does not mean that is the child is fine and that introductions should be shortened.

Many of the children we work with are unable to express their feelings because of their background, therefore whilst they may present as taking the process in their stride, it is very unlikely this is the case. Moreover, it is likely they are experiencing a sense of loss and trauma, particularly if they have been with their foster carers for a period of time.

Devon County Council has worked with a number of children who seemed fine during introductions and afterwards. However, we now have examples of children who thought their adoptive parents had stolen them, or where they believed themselves to be 'lodging' with their adoptive family; issues that only arose during later childhood or adolescence, when overwhelming behaviour issues came to the fore.

- The Transitions Plan should also take account of a child's need to say goodbye to his/her school, and other regular activities, such as after school clubs, depending on their age and need.

There may be future opportunities for a significant adult, such as a teacher to visit the child, once placed with their adoptive family, in order to support them in managing feelings of loss around their previous school or activities.

Stage Six: The nesting period (Appendix 7)

Key concepts:

- **Focus on the smaller family unit**

The focus needs to be kept on the smaller family unit for a sustained period of time. The role of the family and parents needs to be highlighted to the child on an ongoing basis and in a low-key gentle manner, linking the role back to the 'keeping safe' message from the life story books, as above, as often children do not have an understanding of the parental and family role (including any siblings). The emphasis needs to be on family activities, games and routines.

- **Low-key, calm routines**

The low-key, calming routines and activities from the transitions period should be continued; such as going to the local park and playing family games (including theraplay based games) etc. This is to help increase the feeling of safety for the child. Over-stimulating activities and outings should be avoided; the child will already be in a higher state of arousal and anxiety due to the situation of moving to their new 'growing up' family, with all the emotional pressure that that will entail. Any further stimulation will be likely to cause distress or dysregulation as a child cannot take on lots of things all at once. This will take time. Lots of new experiences will overwhelm them a child. They might well enjoy each individual experience on its own but if there are too many, then many children will experience sensory and emotional overload. This will then start to come out in their behaviour.

- **Meeting the Prospective adopters' wider family & friends**

Devon County Council (and other agencies, such as Barnardos) recommend that adopters leave a period of time before they introduce family and friends following placement of the child. Depending on the children and their specific needs this could be for a relatively considerable period of time afterwards.

This is to try and reduce the anxiety and fear that children may be experiencing having been moved several times already, including from a stable and caring foster placement.

If strangers are introduced too soon into the family, the children may well experience fear and anxiety that they will be moved again. It also may trigger memories and anxieties of previous early childhood experiences, for example, living in a birth family with lots of strangers coming and going.

When introductions to new family members and/or friends take place, they need to be carefully planned around the needs of the child and kept brief, informal, in the new home, and with lots of preparation, explanation and reassurance by the adoptive parents before and after. Photos are useful to support explanations.

This guidance is reaffirmed frequently from feedback from adopters, who sometimes choose not to follow this advice, and introduce family members and/or friends too soon, in too big a group, and for too long. They often observe that their child then demonstrates difficulties and anxiety through their behaviour during or soon after the meeting.

Additional 'family' members, such as new pets, should also not be introduced too soon.

However, it is also recognised that single adopters may well need support sooner. In these circumstances, we advise that they only introduce initial and limited back-up carers, such as grandparents, and also, at first, limit the time of any such introduction, ensuring they keep their focus on the child's needs.

A gradual staged introduction to play-group/childcare/nursery/pre-school/ school

Children should not be rushed into the above, as they need prolonged time in the smaller family unit. If they are not given the time to begin to gain an understanding of their adoptive parents as their 'safe base', taking a child to a play-group can be very distressing for them. Furthermore, without a 'safe base' they are likely to approach strangers or sometimes believe that they are to be taken home by other parents there. Alternatively, a child may appear to be 'ok' with it all, but in reality, there will often be small signs of distress and anxiety present, that pre-empt very high levels of distress and associated behavioural disturbance.

Foster carers may talk about children being very sociable and needing to be introduced to external activities/school etc. very quickly. The foster carers may well be recommending that adopters continue to take the child to a toddler group as they are so sociable etc. However, an adoptive family need to be building a different kind of relationship with their child – a 'forever' one – not just a 'looking after' relationship!

An adopted child needs their adoptive family more than they need others – they need to start building their bond to each other; their relationship will be one of the main building blocks for all future relationships and will help to override their experiences of their initial relationship with their birth family. Their relationship with each other needs to be given the time and the space to root itself and begin growing, without the distraction of other people, activities, nursery, toddler groups etc. Discussions about being on roll and transfer

between schools with timetables should be discussed and agreed at the transitions stage. These discussions many need to include the virtual head.

Stage Seven:**Moving on, whilst maintaining Contact with his/her significant carers**

Moving on is a time for a proper ending, not a forever goodbye, as abrupt endings are likely to lead to separation and loss issues for the child, therefore language that suggests the continuation of relationships is critical.

What we know about attachment in terms of the Transition from foster carers to the prospective adoptive family is very different from twenty years ago. Previously it was thought that a child should be supported in transferring his/her attachment from one set of carers to another (i.e. from foster carers to adoptive parents). The prevailing thinking was that when children were adopted, they formed 'new' attachments to their adoptive parent(s). This suggested that the secure attachments formed with foster carers were then to be replaced, and as such were their 'old' ones.

However, what we now know is that (ideally) foster carers support a child to begin to develop a strong 'Internal Working Model' (including resilience, confidence, self-esteem, problem-solving abilities etc.), and because of this, they are therefore capable of developing additional (earned) secure attachments.

It is acknowledged that foster carers will not be primary attachment figures unless they have cared for the infant/child between birth and one year to a significant degree. However, in most cases, they will be significant and meaningful adults to the child and are likely to represent what sense of security the child has managed to internalise. Relationships are the "Golden Thread" running through a child's life, and there is evidence that the child may suffer grief and loss, unless the foster carers are available to them, after they have moved to their new home.

This shift in understanding is critical to the role that foster carers play in supporting a child in the Transition to their new family, and advocates a need for the benign presence of the foster carers throughout and beyond the Transition process.

Previous knowledge directed a decision that a child required up to a number of months to 'settle' into their new family before having any contact with their previous foster carers.

However, given the current understanding, and insight into the potentially traumatising impact of effectively 'losing' their main caregivers, and of being left with a sense that they have been rejected or abandoned by them, it is now recommended that the child has contact with his/her foster carers sometime immediately after they are placed with their adoptive parents.

Good practice, learning from disruptions and adopter feedback has resulted in the following Contact Schedule, after a child has been placed with their prospective adopters, and up to the point of the courts granting an Adoption Order.

As these contacts will take place up to the point of the Adoption Order, they will add to the Child in Care process. These contacts and discussions around the Transition Plan will be embedded within the child's Care Plan and reviewed through the Child in Care process, as any assessments of the child's transition to their new home will be enhanced by feedback on these contacts.

We regard the number and frequency of contacts to be a 'Gold Standard', and one to aspire to, but they are also an ideal scenario. The child's needs and capacity, as well as that of the foster carers', and prospective adopters', must also be placed in the mix; an ever-changing movement of settling in and nesting. Therefore, it is suggested that the whole Transitions planning takes place within a context of Planning, Doing and Reviewing.

Whilst most of the contacts set out below involve face-to-face contact, alternative means of indirect contact using Skype, telephone calls and letters/cards between these contacts, have been evidenced as a useful method for the child to maintain a relationship with their foster carers, and to support the settling in process, and ultimately strengthening the attachment of the child to their adoptive family.

The Contact Schedule

It is helpful if the following schedule is built into the Transitions Plan, on a case by case basis:

Within first 2 weeks of child being placed with adopters:
Indirect Contact with Foster carers (via telephone/Skype/card/letter as appropriate)

After 2 weeks and within 4 weeks of placement:
Direct Contact with Foster carers ('Pop-round' visit)

Within 28 days of placement:
1st Child in Care Review

4-8 weeks after 'Pop-round' Contact:
Direct Contact with Foster carers ('Assimilation' meeting)

Within 3 months of 1st Review:
2nd Child in Care Review

3-4 months after 'Assimilation' Contact:
3rd Direct Contact with Foster carers ('Affirmation' meeting)

Within 6 months of 2nd Review:
3rd Child in Care Review

A detailed explanation of Indirect and Direct Contacts with foster carers ('Pop-round', 'Assimilation' and 'Affirmation' contacts) is included in Appendix 8.

Please see Appendix 9 for scripts for adopters and foster carers.

Written with advice and support from The Consultancy, Adoption & Fostering Support Agency, Exeter, Devon.

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