

By the Grace of Foster Parents: Fostering Preschool Age Children

Jeff and Maria, who had never had a young child place with them, were excited to take their first toddler. They agreed to take Claudia, who was three. This tiny dark-eyed beauty came into their home without a whimper. She let both Jeff and Maria hold her immediately.

But that was the first few hours. That first night she began yelling with a high pitched wail. She did not stop for the better part of four months. She threw herself into furniture. Jeff and Maria realized that she went limp whenever they held her. Her lack of eye contact and inability to focus became more noticeable as time went on.

Sadly, this was Claudia's third placement. Jeff and Maria saw quickly that Claudia needed specialized care and intervention.

All children who come into care experience the loss of their primary family and all that is familiar. Studies show that removing infants and toddlers from their primary caretakers is traumatic and can seriously affect their development.

These critical developmental milestones are rooted in the bonding experience with primary caretakers during infancy and early childhood. Toddlers and infants who come into care may have formed few or no bonds

with caretakers and may exhibit serious signs of developmental delays. They may not be able to sooth themselves or respond to attention.

Or some toddlers coming into care may have challenges from genetics, emotional or nutritional neglect while the mother was pregnant or the effects of prenatal drug and alcohol abuse. These children often require trained foster parents who can devote extra time and attention to their special needs.



Some Suggestions

Here are some suggestions that foster families, social workers, doctors, and mental health workers have for those who foster toddlers:

- Plan to spend a lot of effort and time with these small ones. Although many may not display troubling behaviors, all of them have suffered the trauma of being separated from the people and world that they knew. Despite the fact that small children do not have the language to share their feelings, they are deeply affected by separation.
- Work with your social worker to determine the needs of the toddler in your home. If the child has had psychological evaluations, follow the

Continued on page 2

treatment plan. You will probably participate in therapy with this youngster.

- Be a careful observer of the toddler's behavior. Write down what you observe and discuss your observations with your social workers and the therapist if there is one involved. Record anything that you think may be of interest or may be a clue to finding the best ways to parent this child.
- Pay special attention to withdrawn children. Children who are withdrawn or ones who seems to resist your affections may be easy to care for, but may be deeply wounded. They may need special attention to learn to feel safe and express emotions. These emotions may not come out in ways that are easy to handle.
- Find out all you can about the life the child had before they came to you. This will make it easier for you to help the child transition to your family and routines.
 - A Wisconsin worker recently related that she and her colleagues would sometimes get calls from frantic foster parents unsure of how to soothe the toddlers in their care. The workers said, "this may sound strange, but try giving him some pop and potato chips," because this was something they were used to from their home.
 - Similarly, a Wisconsin foster parent recalls putting a three-year-old to bed who was outraged by reading stories and listening to quiet music at bedtime. She could only fall asleep with a movie on and had a temper tantrum with what the foster mom thought was a nurturing activity.
- Provide for continuity of routines, as well as possessions such as clothes, eating

When Dawn and Rich began fostering Dianna at the age of three, she did little else but scream. She screamed day and night. Needless to say, Dawn was stretched to her limits. Rich took over for her when he could to give her a break.

Dawn tells of singing Jingle Bells in the middle of July during bath time, because it seemed to quiet Diana a bit. The screaming lasted for six months. Dawn and Rich persevered, and have a family member who now says she has two moms. Dianna calls her birth mom, as well as Dawn, "Mom."

—excerpted from FCARC's *A Family Created in Many Ways*

utensils, and toys.

- For example, a blanket or teddy bear may not smell good to you, but is often comforting for a child. It can be an assurance to children that they are safe transferring from one place to another. Don't wash it for awhile.

One foster parent and her child in care made sure to bring a teddy bear to the visits with the girl's mom. At the visit, the mom also had a teddy bear and they would trade so that each could have something that smelled like the other.

- You may be involved in visits with the parents and former caregivers. Be patient of all involved including the other children. Sharing visits and information may be critical to the welfare of the toddler and an essential part of her transfer to a new home.
- Change routines, foods, and clothing slowly. Abrupt changes without explanation or a comforting transit period

Continued on page 3

are often difficult for an adult. Imagine the thoughts and fears of a toddler.

- Continue to talk about what is happening. Children understand more language and speech than you know. If a child is slow with language skills, talking to her will be essential to her development. Keep talking even to the babies.

Facilitating Transitions for Preschoolers

You are an essential part of the team who help facilitate the children moving onto adoption or back to their birth families. Here are some things that would make the transition of a preschooler the best it can be.

- Focus on the best outcome for the toddler. Ideally, the visiting and transition schedule are designed around the child and her routines. In many circumstances, you may need to compromise for what works out with the birth family as well as your own family—and sometimes with the children’s preschool, if they’re in school.
- Be open to pre- and post-placement visits. If your worker hasn’t suggested a formal transition plan, encourage her to facilitate a meeting to work on a plan. A carefully planned schedule of contacts between the toddler and the new caregiver make the transition easier for all who are involved.

Some of you may have watched the powerful video called, “Multiple Transitions: A Young Child’s Point of View About Foster Care and Adoption.” In the video, a child says, “Don’t imagine that I will ever stop yearning for my birth family (even though, as in other things, I will pretend otherwise). Help me find some way to keep a connection with them, even if I never see them again. Bring out pictures, or a life book and hold me while I rage or sob or stare, or all of these at once.

A Sample Transition Plan

1. The first visit with the new caregiver occurs in your home.
2. The next visit is longer. The child is left with the new caregiver for an hour or two.
3. The following visit takes place in the new caretaker’s home.
4. The foster parent leaves the toddler with the new caretaker for gradually longer periods of time.
5. The toddler spends an overnight at new caretaker’s home.
6. The toddler spends more than one night.
7. The transition to the new home takes place. All of her possessions go with her. The foster parent puts the child in the car of the next caretaker and says “good-bye.”
8. Regular contacts with the foster parents are maintained. Foster parents provide respite and babysitting.
9. This period may be stressful for the child. She may regress or withdraw for a period or show agitation, difficulty with sleep or feeding.
10. Take pictures and keep records and mementoes during the time the child is in your care. Give copies of all of these to the new caretakers. Even though children may not remember, they will know they were loved and cared for.

“And understand that none of this is a reflection on you. Don’t be surprised when I comeback from a visit with them peeing my pants or throwing tantrums in the bath that night. I told you: **things matter to me.**”

“So I am going to have feelings about things that matter to me. It would help a lot if you would make the decisions that you need to

Continued on page 4

make and stick with them.”

Claudia, Jeff, and Maria were a fictionalized composite of some real parents.



Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Separation and Loss Issues for Adoptive and Birth Families*, by Vera Fahlberg, M.D.

Additional Resources

- [Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)
- [Literature Review: Developmental Problems of Maltreated Children And Early Intervention Options for Maltreated Children](#)
- *A Child's Journey Through Placement*, by Vera Fahlberg, M.D.
- *The Child in Placement: Common Behavioral Problems*, by Vera Fahlberg, M.D.
- *Attachment and Separation*, by Vera Fahlberg, M.D.