



Staying Connected: How Foster Parents Can Help Smooth Adoption Transitions

by Kathy Moore

During the eight years my husband and I were foster parents, we (and our two young children) opened our hearts and home to 35 foster children ranging in age from three months to 16 years. Most were preschool age or a few years older, and most went back to their birth parents. Only five had their parental rights severed and went on to join new adoptive families. For those children, we personally developed an effective process for transitioning them from our foster home to an adoptive home.

In creating and fine-tuning the way we transitioned our foster children into permanent families, we tried to follow the child development and bonding and attachment philosophies of Claudia Jewett and other respected professionals. Although our system was informal, it worked wonderfully for all parties and provided the children with new forever families and a connection to a forever extended family.

Below are two true stories that illustrate how we effected transfers from foster care to adoption. My hope in sharing these stories is that other foster and adoptive parents as well as caseworkers may get an idea or an inspiration that will influence how they handle future transitions.

Dick and Jane

When a blond, blue-eyed brother and sister, ages five and six, walked into our home and hearts, they had already been through three other placements in as many years. Dick and Jane's (not their real names) parents' rights were due to be terminated at any time, and their current foster parents were having a hard time handling the pair. Not only did the foster parents wish to have the children out of their house, they strongly recommended that Dick and Jane be placed separately. To emphasize their convictions on this point, the foster parents requested separate respite foster homes for the two children while the parents went on vacation.

During the vacation, our family took care of Jane, and another family took Dick. We saw nothing in Jane's behavior to warrant separation from her brother. The parents caring for Dick echoed the same sentiment, even though we all knew that placing the children in separate foster homes for four weeks proved nothing.

Months later, when Jane's placement disrupted, we got the call to take her into our foster home again. This time, we wanted to take both Jane and her brother for a long enough time to determine how the two truly behaved with one another. Only then, we argued, could we make a fair recommendation concerning their permanent placement.

Nightmarish is the word I would use to describe the next nine months—not because of the children’s behavior, but because of the way in which the system dealt with these children. We had little information about their early experiences, but both children (Jane especially) had some very manipulative and provocative behaviors that helped us understand how damaging past events had been. Nonetheless, we felt strongly that Dick and Jane should stay together in a permanent placement and that separation would only worsen their troubles.

After nearly a year of court delays and an agency campaign to persuade us to adopt the children (we had two birth children the same age and knew a permanent placement would be a bad idea), the agency finally searched for another family to take both children. Then, over our protests, the agency made a very hurried and inappropriate match and transitioned the children too quickly and abruptly.

Four days later, the placement disrupted. Again, the agency asked us to take the children back. Our condition this time: we would take the children only if we could be directly involved in the next selection process and take the lead on implementing the transition plan.

With our input, the agency found another family to adopt Dick and Jane. The family lived in the same school district (just four miles from us), had some previous foster care experience, and had no other children. During the next few weeks, Dick and Jane had several visits with their new family, each one longer than the last. Gradually they began to spend more time with their new family and increasingly less time with us.

At about six weeks, they moved into their new home, but still came back to us for a few overnight visits. After that we saw Dick and Jane at school events and attended an occasional family function with their adoptive family. Their new parents were very comfortable calling us for support and guidance.

By the time Dick and Jane were entering adolescence our contact had lessened significantly, but we still had a role to play. Jane’s behavior started to escalate when her adoptive mom was struggling with some health issues and trying to maintain a full-time work schedule. Because we still had contact, on a few occasions I was able to take a morning off of work (instead of making the adoptive mother risk losing her job) to look for Jane when she ran away or spend time with Jane after she had stayed out all night. Another time, when the adoptive mom was having a medical treatment, my husband attended a crucial individualized education plan (IEP) meeting for Dick that kept the teen in high school instead of tracking him toward a GED.

When Jane became pregnant in her late teens, I attended her baby shower. As Jane began to examine her family history, I had some difficult conversations with her and always made sure I was an extension of her adopted family, not a safe haven or part of an unhealthy triangle. Jane struggles with the mental illness that we caught glimpses of in her earlier years, and her adoptive parents are now raising her son.

We saw Dick throughout his teens and early 20s as he found a job and started his own family. Though we were not an integral part of their day-to-day lives, we gave Dick and Jane continuity

and gave their adoptive parents critical support at times that may have broken their commitment to these challenging children. We were and are an important link that could otherwise have been missing in the children's lives and perhaps even their memory.

Bob

By the time Bob joined our family, he—like Dick and Jane—had been through a series of foster homes and experienced adoption disruptions. He was also older (a pre-adolescent) and happened to be in the same grade as our birth son. Bob did not stay with us very long, but when he found an adoptive family, we again went through a careful transition process during which we cared for Bob on weekend overnights, and provided the adoptive parents with phone support.

For several years, during particularly challenging junctures in Bob's life, his adoptive mom would call and tell me that she needed respite—time away from her son to regroup. I would then ask my son if he would like to have Bob over to spend the night. As far as Bob knew, coming over to our house was a social visit with my son; to his adoptive parents, it was a much needed break that helped them to “let the steam off” their family kettle.

Bob's parents later adopted two other boys and we attended their high school graduation parties as well as Bob's. Again, Bob's adoptive parents raised him and gave their all to him. I believe we were able to help them stay healthy and resilient at some particularly challenging moments.

Looking Back

My husband and I quit being foster parents almost 20 years ago. At the time, due to the success we experienced in helping foster children make a relatively smooth transition into adoptive families, I had hoped we could help our agency formalize the process and benefit more children. Unfortunately, consistency is difficult to achieve in our child welfare system; since we stopped being foster parents, little progress has been made.

The transition protocol we developed enriched our lives and added to the quality of our former foster children's lives. The process also gave our birth children some continuity as they grieved the loss of many foster children who returned to their birth parents and never communicated with our family again. It could have helped many more children too.

In my role as the director of a statewide child advocacy organization for more than 16 years, I have long promoted the view of adoption as a lifelong process that should be funded accordingly. The adoption journey does not stop at finalization, and adoptive families' ability to survive and thrive through the unique challenges presented by their children depends in no small part on quality of support each family receives. Extra support in older child adoptions is especially crucial.

Each time a foster child is moved abruptly from one placement to another, his or her ability to bond and attach to new families and friends declines. Sudden moves can also cause children to lose their memory about past placements and those periods in their lives.

I believe that extending the foster care relationship into the adoptive family—as we did for Dick and Jane, and Bob—can greatly shore up children’s bonding and attachment abilities and help keep more adoptions from disrupting. For the sake of our children and adoptive families, I strongly encourage decision-makers to find ways to ensure that more children and families have these positive transition experiences and high levels of ongoing continuity and support.