

Tips from Preteens and Teens

A Young Person's Perspective

As you wait, think about the children and youth who will become part of your family. Think about how your family will feel to them and how you can make a possibly difficult transition easier by keeping an open mind and planning how you will take them in. As a prospective parent, you have the luxury of being secure in your own home while you think about taking in a new family member, but when children wait they are:

- Living in a temporary residence
- Facing uncertainty as they anticipate leaving everything they have known for the unknown
- Preparing to leave their current home, friends, neighborhood, and school
- Feeling afraid even though they have longed for a forever family

Below are thoughts and opinions from preteens and teens who were in foster care or adopted. We hope their perspective and advice will help you as you prepare to welcome young people into your family.

Think About What It's Like to Wait

When asked what it was like to wait for a family, Kaayla, who was adopted at 10, explains, “You don’t fantasize—you just worry. You worry about whether they’ll like you or not.”

Brandon, adopted at 12, adds, “It’s a long wait and you start to feel anxious. You want a family to come faster, but then you wonder whether you are going to fit in with these new parents and what they are like.”

Talon, Kaayla’s younger brother, says, “Sometimes it goes slow and sometimes it goes fast, sometimes you feel good—you’re getting a new home and you know it’s your forever home. Sometimes it feels bad because you don’t want to get pulled away from your mom and then all of a sudden you start crying.”

Make Home Feel Like Home

One easy way to welcome a new child is to “ask what they like to eat homemade-wise,” suggests Talon, and then make it for them or take them to their favorite restaurant.

Kaayla offers this advice: “New parents should visit the places where kids have lived before, like their school, their mall, and stuff.” She also thinks it is a good idea for you to display pictures of

the kids that show them doing things with other people before they joined your family. “Take pictures of their foster families and have them around too,” she adds.

Treat the Children Like Your Own

When Larnell joined the foster family that later became his adoptive family, he said he could tell they wanted him there: “They didn’t treat me differently than any other kid in their family. They didn’t treat me any differently than their own kid. That’s the cool thing about it.” Larnell lived in several foster families before he was adopted. He admits he tended to be reclusive and hang out in his room—like many teenagers do. Some people misinterpreted his behavior, and described him as “sneaky” and “untrustworthy.”

His adoptive mother was able to allow him to take the time he needed to come out of his room and learn to interact with other family members.

Larnell thought about how his mom was able to successfully draw him out and adds, “It’s hard to explain how to do that. It just takes a good heart and good character to do that. I think what my mom has done—I don’t think you can get that in training. For one, she wasn’t scared and she wasn’t intimidated by me being a teenager. She understood that I wasn’t fully grown, but I also wasn’t a child. She just saw me as a young man.”

In contrast, Larnell also talked about a foster family that didn’t work out for him: “Even though they thought they were being fair by doing all this whoop-de-do stuff like buying us things, they weren’t fair. They fed me different food—like what was left over. They talked about me right in front of me, and they judged me and my friends.”

Cassandra talked about some things that can hurt a foster child deeply. In one foster home, for example, she felt bad when her school picture was not displayed with the rest of the children’s school pictures.

“In another foster home, I was on the honor roll and everything and no one in the family even complimented me,” says Cassandra.

Many teens remember being asked to sit on the sidelines so their foster family could take a family photo. Not only does this feel awkward and embarrassing, but it’s hard for kids to feel like they’re part of the family when they’re left out like that. (You can’t post or publish a picture of a child in foster care, but you should handle picture sessions respectfully.)

Respect Their Existing Connections

Older children have formed personalities and a past that will always be a part of them. Many children in foster care have siblings or other relatives that are very important to them and need foster and adoptive families who will respect and honor those relationships and their past. Like Larnell, many teens said they are uncomfortable when families seem to want to re-make them to fit in with the rest of the family.

Cassandra, who is 14 and one day hopes to be adopted, chose to remain with her brother rather than staying with an adoptive family when that family decided they could no longer handle her brother. It was hard for her to leave that family but even harder for her to imagine being separated from her brother.

Be Authentic

Thinking about what it is like for her when she enters a new family, Sharniece, who is waiting to be adopted, says, “I think when a kid comes into your home, parents should act like themselves. I don’t think they should be all cheesy.”

Nichole chimes in, “That’s right, be who you are right away. Don’t act as if you feel one way when you really feel another way. If a family lives in clutter and mess, don’t hide it or clean it up for visits. Show who you are right away. I can accept that. I don’t like it when families try to hide things about themselves.”

Be Prepared to Teach and Inform

Nichole also believes parents should be prepared to explain how the world works to kids because many foster kids don’t know. She explains, “My adoptive mom showed me how action equals reaction: If you do your work, you get your credits, if you get your credits, you can graduate, if you graduate, you can get a better job. She showed me futuristically where I will get by what I do.”

Thinking about schoolwork, Dee adds that he thinks parents should plan for how they will help with homework or check out where to find tutors for their kids. Many foster kids have learning gaps for many reasons and need homework support.

Another tip: Most kids don’t like surprises. They want to know how to succeed with a family. “Go over the rules right away and tell kids what to do in certain situations,” says Brandon. Cassandra says she wishes more families would tell all their rules ahead of time so kids don’t accidentally break one. “It’s embarrassing to get caught breaking a rule you didn’t know existed,” she says.

Take It Slow

Sharniece offers another piece of advice: “I don’t think [parents] should take kids places right away either. They should just let kids relax. Let them get to know the house first and let them get comfortable.”

Jessica, who was adopted at 11, agrees that it is hard to meet new people all at once. She says, “Parents should collect pictures of their [extended] family and let the kids look at the pictures and choose who they want to meet first.”

“Don’t be taking them out to meet other relatives right away and show them ‘your daughter.’ I don’t like it when they say ‘my daughter,’” adds Sharniece.

Ask the Child What Works for Them

While Sharniece and Jessica need more time to adjust to a new home, Nichole, an outgoing 16-year-old, says, “I like that when they say ‘my daughter’—it makes me feel wanted. And I like Red Lobster too. If they’re willing to take me there, I’m ready to go!”

They all have legitimate points, which puts the responsibility back on the parent to talk to each child and find out what will make each one feel the most comfortable.

As a parent you are never going to know all of the worries a child might have, but you can follow Alisha’s advice: “Sit down and talk to them. They’ll talk and listen.”

“Don’t interrupt or tell the kid to be quiet,” says Brandon. “Especially when the child is trying to make a conversation.”

Jessica concludes: “And always tell the truth.”

Waiting

by Nichole

I wait, wait—
wait for sorrow to override ,
wait for the sun to brighten the sky.
I wait, wait—
wait to gain a family of my own
only to call a place my home .
I wait, wait—
wait for a friend to come who never does,
treated as if I was shunned.
I wait, wait—
wait for a car that never stops
the weather that never changes
the friend who is never there
and the family who is never patient
I wait.
Tick -tock tick -tock
I wait
continuously wait.