

Moving: Through the Eyes of the Child

Take a few moments and experience the exercise below designed to help adults see moving through the eyes of the child*:

You are sitting in your apartment's living room on a warm summer evening. Your spouse is dozing peacefully on the sofa. You're curled up with a good book, and your feeling is one of contentment.

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door. You rise to open it. Standing there is a tall woman you have never seen before. She gently takes you by the arm, and ushers you into her car. She tells you there is no need to take any of your possessions as everything will be provided for you. Before you can comprehend what is happening, she's driving you away from your home.

Soon you stop in front of a beautiful house with a broad, manicured lawn. The woman leads you inside, where she introduces you to the people there. They are warm and pleasant, and smile sweetly at you. The tall woman tells you that this is your new family. The new home is much bigger and more nicely furnished than your previous home. You are shown to your room. All of your new belongings are pointed out, and you are told to make yourself at home. The new people keep smiling at you. You look over your shoulder at the tall woman, who's smiling too. She assures you that this new family will love you forever. And all they expect in return is for you to love them back.

You slowly look at your new surroundings. Your emotions are swirling out of control. You feel as if you are moving through a dream. This new family may be wonderful—superior to your old family in every way—but they're not your family. You don't even know them, how can you be expected to love them?

The tall woman prepares to leave amidst your protests. You have lots of questions about your old family. She assures you that you do not have to worry about the past. You have a new family now and everything will be okay. She drives away.

Think about the ensuing questions. As you do, keep in mind that you are an adult. You have well-developed coping skills. The child you are moving into your home is still in the process of developing the proficiency needed to deal with major life transitions. If from a foreign country or if a very young child, she will not even have the language skills to tell you her thoughts or feelings.

- What were your thoughts and feelings about leaving your home?
- What were your thoughts and feelings about your new home?
- Were you comfortable with your new family?
- How did you feel when you were protesting and were told that everything was okay as you have a new family?
- What do you suppose is happening in your old home?
- How long would it take you to adjust?
- Would you always have questions, or thoughts and feelings about your previous family, friends and co-workers?
- Would you need help to adjust? If so, what type of help might you need?

Hopefully, this exercise has helped you realize that the adoptive family and the prospective adoptive child may have diverse points of view about the pending move. The prospective adoptive child may have a mix of feelings. He may be happy that the move means a final residence, yet he may also be sad to leave behind those who have been caring for him and currently involved in his life. He may also be anxious about whether or not this home will work out. He may be angry that his life is interrupted again. All this, while dealing with his past traumas and abandonments.

The longer a child remains in care, the more placements they are likely to have. Children adopted internationally have moved from their birthmom to at least one orphanage or foster home, and then to their adoptive home. This means that the child has lost parents, siblings, friends, school mates, orphanage mates, orphanage care givers, pets, communities, toys, clothing, a culture, a language, holiday rituals and the list goes on!

These losses are overwhelming, and to the child he has lost everything that is most important—time and time again. As a result of these multiple, repetitive losses, people and things begin to lack meaning,

- Toys can be removed for behavioral infractions and the child is not fazed.
- Things are often lost or broken. There will be more at the next house.
- Living is based on today because tomorrow could mean another move, on to new people and new experiences.
- There is no point getting settled and making plans.
- There is no point getting attached.

The child who has had multiple moves enters the adoptive family with the belief that “you too will give me back.” “I am too bad for any family.” This child may exhibit various negative behaviors in order to create emotional distance between himself, his parents and his siblings. After all, there is less emotional pain if “I push you away before you push me away.” These types of behavioral difficulties often cause the placement to disrupt.

Donna, currently 18, was adopted at age 10, after three failed reunification efforts and eleven foster care placements, she states, “It was hard for me to move from foster home to foster home and settle down to a family that cares. Trying to trust them and love them back is really hard because it got messed up somewhere in between all the homes I’ve been in. My adoptive family has bent over backwards to show their love for me but, it is still hard for me. I know in my head that they won’t do the things to me that my birth family did but there is still that side of me that says, be careful someone might leave you or you might get hurt.”

Jane was 15 and in her eleventh family since being placed in foster care. However, in residence with her birth family, her birthmother had left her with numerous relatives on a frequent basis. She stated, “My birthmom passed me around like a dish at Thanksgiving dinner. She didn’t want me and neither did my grandmother nor my aunts. I am too bad for anyone to keep me.” Jane was used to moving, and upon entering foster care she utilized negative behaviors such as running away, property destruction and temper outbursts to perpetuate the familiar pattern of going from home to home.

Children who have moved numerous times may be struggling with a reunification fantasy. The child may falsely believe that if he can leave the current family he will return to his birth family, to a residence with a sibling, to his orphanage or to a foster family who has meaning to the child,

Jason was 9 when he entered therapy with his potential adoptive family. This was his seventh placement. His previous placements included his birth home, a foster home, and five pre-adoptive placements. His foster placement with “Grandma Rachel and Grandpa Jim” had lasted two years. When Jason became available for adoption, Grandma Rachel and Grandpa Jim determined, due to their age, that they did not want to provide Jason permanency. In therapy, Jason was asked where he most wanted to live. He was quick to reply that he wanted to live with “Grandma Rachel.” The pre-adoptive family was empathic and established contact with Grandma Rachel immediately. She was happy to hear from Jason, and she was able to reiterate her reasons for her decision not to adopt him. She gave him permission to love his new family. Subsequently, Jason’s behavior improved. His adoption was finalized with Grandma Rachel and Grandpa Jim present.

Children who move multiple times are at great risk. Repeated moves jeopardize their opportunity to develop secure attachments with care givers and trusting relations with adults. A large body of evidence links multiple placements with behavioral and mental health problems, educational difficulties, and juvenile delinquency.

As you move your child into your home, or as a professional whose job includes transitioning children into new families, please validate that moving is hard—even if for the better!