

See You in Court: **Tips for Preparing Foster Kids For their Adoption Finalization**

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When the big day is set and an adoption is going to be made legal how can social workers help foster families to prepare and children and teenagers to understand and celebrate this momentous occasion? After all, do you know anyone who *likes* going to court?

Before the Court Date:

Devote at least one home visit to meet with the entire family and explain what will actually happen in court.

If the children are old enough, I ask. "Have you seen Judge Judy on TV?" They usually laugh and say "Yes". Typically they relate a Judge to some sort of punishment. Perhaps they have an image of a Judge harshly saying, "Go to jail" while banging down a gavel.

Kids often think sending people to jail are the only thing Judges do. I say, "A Judge is a wise person who gives answers when people can't agree on something." Sometimes the disagreement involves money, land or a family situation such as a divorce. In a child's case, decisions center around who will parent them.

Remind children that Judges can be young, old, man, woman and any race. If you know which Judge will hear the finalization it helps to have their name to personalize the process.

Creative Reframe

Rosemary Broadbent, adoptive mom and adoption social worker for 26 years, tells all families, "Adoption is a process not just an event." She explains that all of the time they have

spent getting to know, love and trust each other, they have actually been in the process of “adopting each other.”

In this way, she honors the entire time a family has spent together and acknowledges the adoption legalization as a milestone in a usually lengthy process. This concept is especially effective for older children who want to feel that their adoption is something they are involved in and not something being “done” to them.

Let’s Play Court

Nothing helps ease nervous jitters like role playing. During a home visit “play court.” As the social worker, take the lead by playing the Judge and have child (and other siblings and/or parent(s)) play themselves. Have them sit and waiting for the Judge to enter. Instruct them about basic courtroom etiquette which dictates that they are supposed to stand when the Judge enters, that all cell phones, beepers and toys be shut off and that proper dress be worn

Tell the family, “You may be seated,” and ask siblings a few simple questions, such as “How old are you? What grade are you in? What sorts of things do you like to do?” and wait for them to answer.

Role play the actual ‘adoption part’ as well. I’ll tell families that once the Judge signs the adoption papers – the child is officially adopted. I’ll say, “Well I’ve read the reports and I think this adoption is really wonderful. You are all very lucky.” The family should then practice clapping and yelling, “Hurray!

If they are shy, cue them by saying, “1, 2, 3.” Be sure to complain that they weren’t loud enough when they celebrated. Do this part repeatedly when each family member takes a turn being the Judge. Don’t be surprised at how much they love bossing each other around.

How Long Does it Take?

This is the loaded question you should expect. After many rollercoaster years and sleepless nights, the actual adoption takes all of 10 minutes (OK, sometimes 5). It helps families to know a head of time how quickly it goes.

Some Judges have their own rituals, which makes it a longer as well as unforgettable day. Some read a very formal statement or let adopted child/teen sit in their chair and bang the gavel (you may have to ask— but I've never heard a Judge say no). Most Judges enjoy adoptions and are often heard saying, "This is the best part of my job." However, some Judges are more subdued so families might have to make the day special all on their own.

Encourage the family to eat out after the court ceremony and/or to have a party and celebrate the adoption anniversary like a birthday – that day and for years later. Children should be allowed to help plan the celebration and to invite special guests. Don't let families start party planning too early (before the appeal period is over). Nothing like waiting 18 more months to put a damper on things!

Tell them to invite extended family and friends. Let them know that while they will have to walk through a security check (similar to an airport) that balloons, flowers and cameras are all allowed in the courtroom. I often volunteer to take pictures so they can focus on the actual event.

Older Kids: Rituals

A picture is worth a thousand words. One Boston social worker filled up her bulletin board with photos of families on their Adoption Day. When kids would come to the office they were mesmerized by the pictures anticipating adding theirs to the mix.

Here's another idea. Create an album (simple 3 ring notebook) with a page for each of the families you have worked with through finalization and bring it with you on a home visit. This will provide a visual for "getting adopted" and prove that this 'adoption thing' really happens.

Bittersweet Feelings:

No matter how loving an attachment between adoptive parent and child, the legal finalization officially signals that the child has 'lost' their first family and possibly previous foster families too. There are no more chances the birth parent(s) will return to the parenting role or that previous biological or foster siblings will share the same parents or roof.

If a child is getting a new last name this may be troubling. While they may be happy about their inclusion in their permanent family they may be sad to give up a rare possession that they have carried with them – their last name. Or, they may feel disloyal to biological family members for changing the name. Other children have practiced the spelling of their adoptive name from Day 1, craving the security and permanence offered through adoption.

While the adults usually celebrate the end of an arduous, labile process—it's important to remember that this occasion may bring up sadness for the older foster child.

On the day of the finalization, and during anniversary celebrations, the child needs his/her complex feelings honored. On anniversaries, a child once happy about her finalization might become sad or a previously grieving child might feel joyous. Feelings can change hour to hour or year to year.

Saying Good-bye Families

As the social worker, acknowledge your shifting role. An adoption finalization likely means you will no longer have regular home visits, not to mention legal custody. Sometimes it feels like you are losing good friends—while other times families are glad to no longer have the “state” sitting at their kitchen table. Acknowledge the feelings of family members as well as your own.

For me, I’ve found in my role as a social worker, there is nothing as important to me as making families. I am honored and awestruck every time I witness a family being formed through adoption.

SIDEBAR: If the adoption finalization is in the summer or early fall, it may be worth it to wait for National Adoption Day which is November 19th. Many states close the courtrooms that day and pay special attention to adopting families.