

Building Strong Families and Adoptions That “Stick”

Staff of FAMILY FOCUS ADOPTION SERVICES (54-40 Little Neck Parkway, Suite 4, Little Neck, New York 11362; 718-224-1919) will be conducting an Institute at the 1994 NACAC conference entitled "A Model for Successful Special Needs Adoption." We asked the staff to summarize some of the most important aspects of their placement philosophy and practices for this article.

FAMILY FOCUS ADOPTION SERVICES is an adoptive parent-founded and led agency that has been recruiting and training potential adoptive parents and successfully placing hundreds of children with special medical and emotional needs into solid adoptive families for more than six years, with an extraordinarily low rate of disruptions. According to agency Executive Director Maris Blechner, there is no secret formula to adoption success. There is just a logical practical approach to working with families and children. “We treat families the way we would like to be treated – with honesty, trust, openness and respect... and we treat the children the way we treat the adults.”

FAMILY FOCUS believes strongly that long before a family meets a child, the building of a stronger adoption is begun with a great deal of advance work. A potential family needs to come to group training on raising adopted children, to learn about child development, about raising abused children, about an adult adoptee's perspective, about the realities of the child protective services system and adoptive families. When the study is done and there is a chance for a "match" between an agency family and a child in another agency, somewhere in the state's foster care system, first the family is entitled to see current material about a child. Before deciding whether or not this is a possible child to adopt, a family needs to know as much as possible about that child, and have time to meet with adoption agency experts (known at FAMILY FOCUS as the "transition team") and begin to think realistically about the possibility of a future with that child.

In addition, since the children needing adoption in New York State have most often been living in a long-term foster home, before a potential adoptive family meets a child the transition team meets with the foster family to be sure that they understand what the plan is for the child, and what their own options are. In FAMILY FOCUS's experience, there are a number of foster parents who state at this first meeting that they certainly do want to adopt the child in their care, but have not been assisted to do so by their own agency. Because it is the policy of FAMILY FOCUS that an adoption agency does not break a family to make a family, in those cases no further steps are taken toward a FAMILY FOCUS family adopting that child.

Only when it is clear that a potential adoptive family is ready to meet a child and the foster parent does not want to adopt does a member of the transition team go to meet the child. The purpose of that first meeting is to be sure that

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this child understands what adoption is, and that he or she also understands his or her options.

Up to this point there are many agencies that may function as FAMILY FOCUS does. However, according to Ms. Blechner, the next step is what makes this agency different from most others – and is a key move. At FAMILY FOCUS any child being considered for adoption who is old enough to have language is told dearly that he or she is "the boss" of his or her own decision. The child is told that there is a family interested in meeting him or her, if the child would like to meet the family. Further, even if the child meets the family once, he or she does not have to go forward to a second meeting, and

isn't forced, cajoled, or manipulated into adoption, or even visiting. No further steps are taken toward adoption until the child says that he or she is ready. A pre-adoptive family can and does push, and a child's agency can and does push, but the FAMILY FOCUS transition team ensures that the child still has the choices, in an open-ended transition/visiting process that uses the classic social work concept of empowerment. In this type of step-by-step process, even an older child who has appeared not to want adoption can feel safe enough to move forward.

A child and family begin scheduled visiting and get to know each other as people exploring possibilities – so that both parties can make an informed decision, much like the medical decision known as "informed consent." This ability to choose has been demonstrated not only by teenagers and school age children from foster homes and institutions, but also by children as young as four, from hospitals for chronically ill children. When given a choice, a younger child will visit for at least several months, and then begin to communicate to the transition worker that he or she is getting ready to move in. The older the child, the longer it usually takes until a child makes his or her decision – usually after a potential family has made their decision that they are ready for the child to move in. This appears to be a vital part of the process. The child seems to make the decision only after the family has visibly demonstrated their commitment and willingness to fight for "their" child.

Truly open-ended transition gives a child and potential parent a chance to establish a relationship in which each party makes a consciously articulated decision to be a family before moving in. This process builds an extremely strong adoption from the beginning. Because no one pushes a child or sets possible move-in dates in advance, the youngster actually takes the responsibility of deciding if and when he or she is ready. The understanding that both parent and child must have is that each can take as long as necessary to decide. However, all parties also know that no matter how many months it may take to finalize an adoption, at FAMILY FOCUS "move-in day" is "adoption day." (It is also the day that a child is to begin calling his new family

"Mom and/or "Dad" and should start using his adopting family's last name in school.) By move-in day, the commitment, particularly on the part of the adult, must be firm.

It is also made clear to child and family from the beginning that either party can back out during visiting. This rarely happens. When it does, however, since everyone knew the ground rules in advance, there is the minimum amount of pain for a child, and the child almost always agrees to have FAMILY FOCUS find another family.

FAMILY FOCUS describes their critically important transition work as "front loaded" – with a specific worker for the child all during the visiting time and a separate worker for the family. These are two advocates, working as a team, and always comparing notes. The child's transition worker has enough time to work with a child and be sure that a child hears and understands his or her life history. Before moving into adoption a child needs to understand why he or she is in foster care, why foster parents are not adopting, and what happened to siblings. Openness and honesty are for the child as well as the adults. Sometimes a birth parent's grave is visited. Sometimes a child gets to go back to an old neighborhood. A child who has lived in more than one home is given a list of those homes to keep.

The current foster family is also encouraged to be actively involved in helping the child complete "unfinished business" and move on. Because the pre-adoptive family picks the child up and drops the child off at the foster home during the visiting period, the foster family often develops a personal relationship with the pre-adoptive family. During the time that the child's worker is helping the child resolve old issues, the potential family's transition worker is working with the family on its issues: how to deal with the child's behavior, how to set appropriate limits and consequences, and, most importantly, how to deal with their feelings, which often include anger and frustration which the child's behavior engenders in them. After every visit, the family's transition worker talks with

the family, and the child's transition worker meets with the child.

During the years of doing this specialized work, FAMILY FOCUS has presented many workshops on helping children move into adoption. Many workers at other agencies have stated that they, too, empower children and give them a real choice. However, in discussing specific cases, workers use phrases like "he needed help to decide," "the end of the school year seemed like a good time to move in," or "it was going on too long so we had to do something." They did not appear to see the subtle or no-so-subtle pressures on a child that actually negate the empowerment process. The hardest part of having truly open-ended visiting in the transition phase of an adoptive placement is that the adults who sincerely believe that they know what is best for a child grow impatient at how long a child may "try out" a family before deciding to move in.

It should be mentioned that when FAMILY FOCUS begins to work toward the placement of a child, the transition team sits down at the beginning with the child's agency or institution, to explain the transition process and the theory behind it, in order to enlist that agency's active support. Interestingly, residential treatment center staff is far more welcoming of the idea of long visiting than foster care agency staff, although many foster care agency staff also become "converts" when they witness and experience the rewards of this transition process.

In attempting to describe this agency's front-loaded adoption work, there are several points of particular interest that should be noted. First of all, potential parents need to be taught about the many messages that a child gives. The children are scared and untrusting. Body language will reflect these feelings, as well as a child's verbal language and not-so-subtle clues. Potential adoptive families become "readers" of their children, an invaluable skill for all parents.

Secondly, visiting arrangements for sibling groups considering adoption requires specific and careful planning.

Potential parents need to get to know each child as an individual. Yet the sibling family group needs to visit together as well. Weekend visiting for siblings is arranged so that each sibling visits separately, and group visiting takes place between the various individual child visits.

FAMILY FOCUS believes that the powerlessness that is a normal part of foster care is imprinted on a foster child. If adoption is genuinely going to be different, for a lifetime, then it makes sense that the child should never feel powerless. In the adoption field there is a great deal of talk about a family "claiming" a child. It is the belief of FAMILY FOCUS that a child must do claiming as well. A family that a child is actually allowed to claim is far more likely to remain that child's permanent family.

In its many workshops given about optimum ways to move children into adoption, FAMILY FOCUS points out clearly that there are certainly many other ways to move children. No one has cornered the market on proper techniques. The informed consent open-ended visiting process used by FAMILY FOCUS has drawbacks. It is extremely time consuming and requires great patience on the part of the agency and the pre-adoptive family. It cannot be used in emergency situations or in situations where a child must move in a specific time frame. The agency has learned, however, that many of the most crucial elements of transition can often be preserved even in crisis situations, as long as staff remains committed to truth and respect for everyone's position.

No matter what the circumstances, the payoff makes the process well worth the effort. Direct experience of more than six and one half years has demonstrated that families that are built through a clear conscious decision on the part of the adult and the child remain solid families in the years that follow, no matter how tough it may be to live together. Families built through an informed consent transition process almost never disrupt or dissolve.