Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler

Children ages 3 to 5 are limited in how much they can understand about adoption. Like all children of this age, adopted children are naturally curious and may ask many questions. They also are growing and changing rapidly. As their abilities develop, so will their understanding of their place in their families and communities. These early years are a good time for you to start practicing talking about adoption in a positive and relaxed manner. This will set the stage for open communication as your child grows.

This factsheet is designed to help you understand your preschooler’s development needs. It also provides practical strategies to promote a warm and loving relationship with your child based on honesty and trust. Finally, this factsheet can serve as a reference for parents to revisit as their adopted child navigates the preschool years.

Adoption and Child Development

It is important to understand the typical developmental tasks and needs of preschoolers, as well as how adoption-related experiences may affect your child. This knowledge will help you better meet his or her needs, build a close relationship with your child, and promptly identify and address delays.

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What you can do:
- Provide space, activities and playthings to stimulate both large- and small-muscle groups.
- Provide chances to play and talk with others.
- Give them the opportunity to make simple choices (what to wear or eat). Narrow down choices to just a few things to keep them from being overwhelmed with options.
- Read to your child, and nurture an interest in reading by visiting libraries and bookstores.
- Teach appropriate social skills through words and by example.
- Model and talk about healthy ways to cope with emotions.
- Calm their fears. (“see, there are no monsters hiding under your bed.”) Remember, you may not understand why they are afraid of somethings, especially if a fear is linked to a past memory.
- Help them understand cause and effect. (“You were placed into foster care, because your parents had grown-up problems that kept them from being able to take care of you, not because of anything you did.”)
- If possible, when transitioning a preschooler into your family, use familiar foods, clothing and blankets – little things that will help them feel comfortable and make the transition easier.
- Be calm, patient, consistent and predictable. Listen to your child, and be emotionally and physically available.

The National Library of Medicine provides a brief overview of the typical developmental tasks of preschool children, visit www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002013.htm

How preschoolers think:
- They believe in magic and imaginary characters such as fairies, elves and monsters.
- They believe they cause life-changing events, everything revolves around them, and everyone shares their point of view.
- Their thoughts are often occupied by fantasies and/or fears.
- They give lifelike qualities to nonliving objects (children may believe a stuffed animal has thoughts and feelings).
- They are literal thinkers and may not understand abstract concepts (children may think a child “put up for adoption” is literally put up on a shelf).
Institutionalization or multiple moves from family to family may limit a young child’s ability to form a healthy attachment to a primary caregiver. This can delay emotional and social development.

**Grief and loss.** Children who experience separation from their birth parents may feel an unresolved sense of grief or guilt. Even children adopted as infants will experience grief about the loss of their birth parents and a potential life with them. These feelings may recur over their lifetime, particularly at milestones in their life, even when the adoption was a positive experience. Unresolved grief can affect a child’s emotional and mental development.

**Trauma.** Trauma is an emotional response to a stressful experience that threatens or causes harm (such as child abuse, neglect, separation from loved ones, institutionalization and/or multiple moves). While most children have some resilience, trauma overwhelms a child’s natural ability to cope, and untreated trauma can interfere with a child’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health and development. Some of the signs of trauma in preschool-aged children include irritability (fussiness), tantrums, startling easily or being difficult to calm, repeating traumatic events in play or conversation, and delays in reaching a variety of milestones.

Parents should know that while the experiences outlined above can negatively affect a child’s development, every child is different. Not all children will exhibit impairments or disabilities. For those children that do, there is hope. Parents can help their children build resilience (the ability to cope and heal) following negative life events with nurturing and support. Although many children will catch up developmentally, some children will always have challenges.
More information on brain development is available at www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/impact/development/brain.

Gaps in Development

Children who spent a lot of time living with a family or in an institution and experienced maltreatment may not learn how to communicate well or to express their feelings. They may not have had chances to play with other children, take turns or just have fun. If this was your child’s experience, your child may be much younger in development than his or her chronological age, and it may be helpful to think of your child as being younger. This reduces expectations that can frustrate a child or damage his or her self-esteem. Your child may need time to “catch up” to children in the same age group in some skills. Most children are able to do so, particularly if parents are patient with their child and if they offer the guidance and experiences necessary for growth. Although parents might be uncomfortable allowing their child to behave in a younger manner, children must go back and learn what they have missed in order to grow. Also, if your child’s first language is not English, there may be additional delays and challenges.

You can help your child overcome these developmental gaps by considering your child’s developmental needs, rather than his or her age. Allow your child to learn at his or her own pace. Break tasks down into smaller, doable steps so the child can feel a sense of mastery and accomplishment. This encourages progress.

The following are some examples:

- **Teach your child new ways to interact and communicate.** Use both actions and words. (“I am waiting for my turn to throw the Frisbee.” “John showed his anger with words, instead of hitting.”)

- **Teach your child about safety, privacy and healthy family relationships.** Demonstrate appropriate behavior and explain. (“In this home we go to the bathroom one at a time,” or “We don’t talk to strangers.”)

- **Use simple games and activities that help your child develop and coordinate all five senses.** Finger-paint in the bathtub with colored shaving cream, practice writing with foam rubber letters, play dress-up with multifabric clothing and accessories, and identify toys and point out their different characteristics (red, yellow, smooth, soft, big, small).

Allow your child to play with “baby toys” designed for much younger children. A child cannot catch up without experiencing earlier developmental steps.

Parenting to Build Attachment

Secure attachment — the strong, emotional bond between child and primary caregiver that makes a child feel safe and loved — is an important and powerful influence that positively affects a child’s brain development, social and emotional development, and self-regulation. Children who have experienced trauma (maltreatment and/or involvement in the child welfare system) may exhibit problems associated with a lack of healthy attachment to a caregiver, including
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developmental delays, difficult social relationships, struggles with emotional regulation, aggression, low self-esteem and depression.

Use the knowledge of your child’s history and developmental needs to help enhance his or her attachment to you. Offer your child the kind of attention, nurturing and physical closeness that he or she may have missed during early months and years. This is particularly important for children who have experienced traumatic life events because positive, healthy relationships with supportive and loving caregivers increase the odds of recovery.

What you can do:

- Establish regular routines, guidelines, family activities and traditions.
- Plan future events to reassure your child that he or she will always be part of your family. Show your child where he or she will go to grade school, middle school and high school. Talk about the future in your conversations (e.g., next Thanksgiving, next summer, on your sixth birthday).
- Help your child grieve. Talk about former caregivers, and look at their photos together, if available. Allow your child to feel sad and to miss people; it doesn’t lessen your child’s bond with you.
- Help your child remember his or her past with scrapbooks and pictures, but follow your child’s lead. Some children may not always want to talk about their pasts or have pictures within view.
- Find ways to make eye contact playing board games across from each other, fixing hair or face painting.


When to Seek Help

Children learn skills (talking, walking, kicking a ball, recognizing letters) at their own pace. Don’t become alarmed if your child is slightly behind others his or her age in one or more areas.

However, any child, adopted or not, may have a developmental delay or disability. This is defined as a significant delay in one or more skill areas. Some delays are present at birth while others become more
Gaps in Development…… Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler (continued)

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There are several things you can do if you feel your child’s birth family history or early experiences may put him or her at risk for developmental delays or disabilities:

- Talk to your child’s doctor about the possibility of a developmental delay or disability. Choose a doctor who has experience with children who have been adopted or those in placement, if possible.
- Contact the placing agency to ask about postadoption services that may be available. It may be possible and helpful to retake preadoption trainings and review the materials you acquired during the adoption process.
- Contact your state’s postadoption resource center or adoptive parent association. See the Adoption Assistance by State database (specifically, the question, “What types of postadoption services are available in your state, and how do you find out more about them?”) on the Information Gateway website. For more information, visit www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-assistance.

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Talking About Adoption...... Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler (continued)

development center. For information about early developmental and behavioral screening for kids, visit the following link from the U.S. Department of Education at www2.ed.gov/about/initlist/watch-me-thrive/index.html.

It’s important that you maintain a positive attitude and establish a tone of loving support and encouragement by showing you are willing to meet the child where he or she is developmentally. Recent research shows that nurturing environments and loving relationships can build resilience in children.

Child Welfare Information Gateway provides more information about postadoption services, health service locators, respite care, developmental and physical disabilities resources, therapy, and adoption preservation services on the Finding Services for an Adopted Child Web page at www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/services.

Talking About Adoption

Parents who project an attitude of acceptance and comfort with adoption are better able to help their children explore their own feelings and fears. With young children, how you say something is more important than what you say. Stay relaxed and matter-of-fact. Your tone of voice is important. Parents who tense up when the topic of adoption is raised may send the message that something is wrong with being adopted. Similarly, keeping information “secret” implies that adoption is negative, bad or scary. This section provides strategies to help you communicate effectively with your preschooler.

Continued in the Next Issue

The spring 2016 REACHOUT newsletter will feature the remainder of this article, which provides strategies to help you communicate effectively with your preschooler. Parents will learn how to talk openly with their child; support birth family relationships; and help their child with postadoption issues. Other topics will include: transracial/transcultural openness, social media, and adoption fears and fantasies. Discipline considerations in relation to abuse and neglect will also be discussed. So keep an eye out for the second half of this article!

Save the Date!
APRIL 16, 2016

19th Annual Region 5 Foster and Adoptive Training Conference

Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, Texas

Conference Partners:
SFA School of Social Work
Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
Region 5 FPA Council
Angelina College, Community Services
New Foster and Adoptive Home Development Staff Members

Please welcome the newest member of our Foster and Adoptive Home Development Team, Anna VanMetre. Anna, a FAD specialist, is located in the Orange office. We are very excited to have her join our team! Also, please welcome our new FAD Supervisor, Brandi Chambers. Brandi will be the second FAD supervisor for the region, joining Jennifer Vincent. She has been in the FAD program as a specialist for eight years and is very excited to start this new journey.

Protect Your Child!

Make sure you visit with your FAD home developer BEFORE using a babysitter. Anyone that babysits in your home must have FBI fingerprints completed along with all regular background checks. Anyone that babysits outside of your home must have all regular background checks completed, as well. Any person(s) babysitting must submit a 4054 background check statement form to your home developer BEFORE any babysitting is provided.

Also, please remember to report ALL serious incidents to the hotline at (800) 252-5400 or online within the timeframes set in the Minimum Standards Subchapter D. Serious incidents must be reported within 24 hours. Also, be sure to inform your home developer and the child’s caseworker of the incident. If you are unsure whether an incident needs to be reported, contact your home developer immediately for assistance.

New Annual Trainings

Remember, medical consent, trauma informed care, and psychotropic medications are all required annual trainings and are available online.

Medical Consent: www.dfps.state.tx.us/child_protection/medical_services/medical-consent-training.asp
Trauma Informed Care: www.dfps.state.tx.us/Adoption_and_Foster_Care/About_Foster_Care
Psychotropic Medication: www.dfps.state.tx.us/Training/Psychotropic_Medication.

If you complete the online psychotropic medication training, your FAD specialist will need to arrange an in-person visit with you within 30 days in order for you to receive credit.

Need Support and Encouragement

We all need a little help sometimes so please join us for one of our Foster Parent Association Meetings!

In addition to the support and encouragement you will receive, benefits include: additional training opportunities and automatic membership in the Texas Foster Families Association. Also, child care is provided.

For details on meetings in your area, speak with your Foster and Adoptive Home Developer.
It can be a very exciting and emotional time when a family is adopting a young child. Foster and adoptive parents play an important role in guiding and encouraging their preschooler to grow and understand adoption.

The Child Welfare Information Center offers great resources on adoption of young children. Books and DVDs are targeted to guide you, as well as your adopted child through this process.

“Child’s Play: How Having Fun Turns Kids into Adults”
Playing is how children try out roles and test limits. It also allows for the development of basic physical and mental skills. Playing is fun and free, yet also a dress rehearsal for adulthood. It’s the engine that drives child development.

“Successfully Parenting Your Baby with Special Needs”
Discovering your baby has a problem can be a very traumatic experience. This DVD is designed to give parents hope and support by informing them of the wonderful benefits of early intervention. Early intervention is a system of services designed for children with unique needs from birth to the age of three.

“Understanding Children with Disrupted Attachment”
The first DVD in this series is intended to help parents work with children with disrupted attachment. It explains the effects of disrupted attachment and provides introductory information.

“Parenting Children with Disrupted Attachment”
The second DVD discusses attachment issues encountered by foster and adoptive parents and family members.

“Connecting with Kids Through Stories”
Adopted children whose early development has been altered by abuse or neglect may form negative beliefs about themselves and parents, and may resist connecting with others. This book outlines how stories can help children heal and develop healthy attachments, and demonstrates how to create stories to improve relationships, heal past trauma, and change problem behavior.

“The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family”
The adoption of a child is always a joyous moment in the life of a family. Some adoptions, though, present unique challenges. This book provides proactive parenting strategies with compassion as the cornerstone.

“Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections”
This book reviews the core issues all members of the adoption triad face, and examines the affects of standard parenting challenges like sleeping through the night, discipline and attachment. It also covers specific challenges many families have faced.

(Continued on Page 12)
Complete for one hour of training credit and return to your caseworker.

Learning Objectives

- The participant will define the term “secure attachment” and identify ways to build attachment.
- The participant will understand their preschoolers developmental characteristics and needs.
- The participant will develop strategies for creating bonds with their preschooler.
- The participant will identify methods to help their preschooler overcome developmental gaps.

Learning Activities

Activity One

Define secure attachment:

_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Describe three things you can do to build attachment with your adopted child(ren):

1. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________
3. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Activity Two

Determine which of the following is a characteristic of thinking and/or learning during preschooler development.

A. Thinking                   B. Learning

1. How to jump, hop, climb, ride a tricycle, and throw a ball____
2. Their thoughts are often occupied by fantasies and fears____
3. They believe in magic and imaginary characters such as fairies, elves and monsters____
4. How to recognize family members and friends____
5. How to put words and short phrases together____

Activity Three

List five things you can do to promote healthy growth and development in your preschooler.

1. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________
3. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________
4. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________
5. _____________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Activity Four

What are three methods and examples of helping your preschooler overcome developmental gaps? List one method and one correlating example.

Method/Example One:
1. ____________________________________________________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________________________________________________

Method/Example Two:
1. ____________________________________________________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________________________________________________

Method/Example Three:
1. ____________________________________________________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________________________________________________

Children that have development gaps do not need to go back and learn what they have missed in order to grow.

True                   False

Evaluation

Trainer: SFA, School of Social Work, Child Welfare Professional Development Project, Date: ____________

Name (optional): ___________________________________________________________

Newsletter presentation and materials:

1. This newsletter content satisfied my expectations.
   ___Strongly agree   ___ Agree    ___Disagree    ___Strongly disagree

2. The examples and activities within this newsletter helped me learn.
   ___Strongly agree   ___ Agree    ___Disagree    ___Strongly disagree

3. This newsletter provides a good opportunity to receive information and training.
   ___Strongly agree   ___ Agree    ___Disagree    ___Strongly disagree

Course content application:

4. The topics presented in this newsletter will help me do my job.
   ___Strongly agree   ___ Agree    ___Disagree    ___Strongly disagree

5. Reading this newsletter improved my skills and knowledge.
   ___Strongly agree   ___ Agree    ___Disagree    ___Strongly disagree

6. The following were two of the most useful concepts I learned:

   ____________________________________________________________________________________

7. Overall, I was satisfied with this newsletter.
   ___Strongly agree   ___ Agree    ___Disagree    ___Strongly disagree

Comments:
________________________________________________________________________________________
Check out the CWPDP Child Welfare Information Center Web page, to learn how to receive foster parent training hours at no cost - without leaving your driveway! Graduate assistants, in SFA’s School of Social Work, Dharti Patel and BreAnna Hall, are ready to assist you with locating training materials that fit your needs.

This issue of the REACHOUT Newsletter offers ONE HOUR of foster parent training. The feature article, “Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler,” is designed to help parents understand developmental needs and provide practical strategies to promote a warm and loving relationship with their child. The first half of the article focuses on developmental needs, effects of early experiences, and strategies to help your preschooler overcome gaps in development. The spring 2016 newsletter will continue with the second half of the article. Recommendations for communicating effectively with 3 to 5 year olds are provided, including talking openly about adoption, birth family relationships, transracial/transcultural identity, and adoption fears and fantasies. To receive training credit, complete the enclosed test (pages 12 and 13) and return to your caseworker.

We hope one or more of these resources help you meet annual foster parent training requirements and, most of all, help you make a difference in the lives of East Texas children you foster in your home! We welcome all feedback and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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"I’m Just Anneke and The Family Journey: What Happens When Your Child Changes Gender?"
These films provide a portrait of a 12-year-old girl, Anneke, and her family’s journey, as well as other families who are raising gender nonconforming children. Anneke takes viewers into the heart of the new generation of children who are questioning traditional gender roles.

"Interview with a Mother About Addictions and Foster Care"
This documentary is a candid interview with a mother whose children were taken from her and placed into foster care. Without making excuses for her behavior, she talks about her past mistakes and what she had to endure before she was willing to get clean and work to get her children back. The viewer feels the deep love she has for her children and her gratitude toward their foster mother.

"In Plain Sight: Stories of Hope and Freedom"
This documentary is an inspiring film featuring the work of six modern-day abolitionists as they fight sex trafficking in our nation. Through engaging interviews with numerous victims, a similar pattern of vulnerability and abuse becomes clear. In the midst of the darkness, stories of hope and freedom emerge as each survivor shares how she was transformed through the work of a sex trafficking aftercare home.
REACHOUT NEWS

Mark your Calendars:
19th Annual Region 5 Foster and Adoptive Training Conference
April 16, 2016

Fall 2015

Earn One Hour of Foster Parent Training