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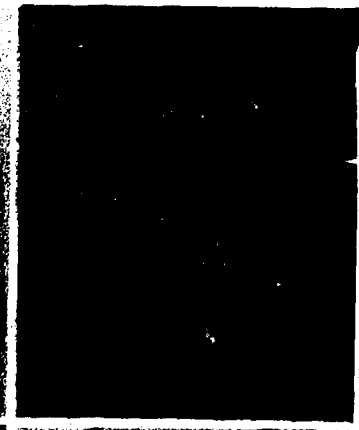
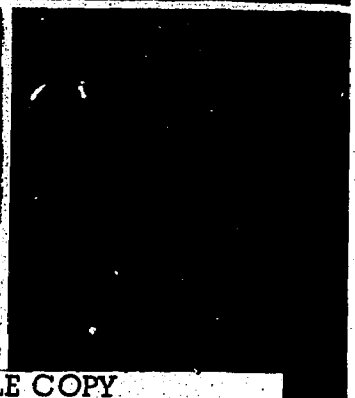
ABSTRACT

This booklet urges social agencies to focus more attention on older children who have not previously been considered for adoption and describes a San Diego adoption program for older children in which the psychological difficulties faced by these children are discussed. The booklet offers suggestions for the social worker in earning the child's trust, handling separation, and building on the child's past experiences. It stresses the importance of foster parents, community, and social agency working together in programs for older children. In discussing methods and techniques for treating older children, the pamphlet focuses on the interview session, the handling of feelings, the use of treats, and the utilization of visual aids. The booklet also includes flexible guidelines for placement of older children in foster and adoptive families. (Author/LAA)

OLDER CHILDREN NEED LOVE TOO





About the Author

JACQUELINE NEILSON has a masters degree in social work from the Hunter School of Social Work, New York City. She is a supervisor in the older children's program and the Tayari program (an outreach office specializing in services to the black community) of the San Diego County Department of Public Welfare, Adoption Services Section, San Diego, California. This agency provides inservice training for all staff under the supervision of a child psychiatrist.

Miss Neilson has worked with psychotic and severely distressed children as well as with normal children in child welfare programs. She has had many years' experience in mental hygiene programs helping persons committed to state hospitals in both institutional and aftercare programs.

Introduction

MANY OLDER CHILDREN are in need of adoption. The Children's Bureau of the Office of Child Development is urging social agencies to focus more attention on older children who have not been considered for adoption. This description of a San Diego adoption program for older children explores the psychological difficulties faced by older children who should be adopted. It will be useful in inservice training programs for social workers who have had little experience in placing older children. It will help foster parents to guide foster children toward adoption and give adoptive parents an understanding of the emotional upheavals that have affected older children unable to return to their families. Jacqueline Neilson's realistic description of the adoption process for older children should be of interest to all people concerned about children who drift from home to home.

Frederick C. Green, M.D.
Associate Chief, Children's Bureau

OLDER CHILDREN NEED LOVE TOO

THE TRADITIONAL PICTURE of an adoption worker handing a bundled infant to a grateful young couple may eventually become only one part of the adoption story.

Adoption is changing as a result of a number of factors, including professional development of the process and shifts in community attitude. There are also many more families currently eager to adopt children than there are infants available for placement. Contraceptive pills are more accessible, and abortions are becoming legally permissible and respectable as a solution to the unplanned-for child. More young mothers may be keeping their out-of-wedlock children, possibly indicating a new trend. All of these factors have had an immediate impact on the availability of infants and therefore on adoption. What their long-term effect will be is yet to be determined.

In every child welfare program there are abandoned, neglected and/or abused children. They are the "orphans of the living"—white, black, bi-racial, and Indian children —who suffer from adult prejudices and are relegated to foster care in protective and dependent child programs. They are children with handicaps that will not prevent them from becoming functioning adults but will require special handling. All of these older children have the same right to a permanent adoptive family as the abandoned, orphaned, or relinquished infant.

Foster Care Geared to Impermanence

Americans display a strong need to preserve the ties between children and their biological families. Our laws rightfully make it difficult to remove a child arbitrarily from his natural parents. Child care agencies, however, are faced with a growing number of children whose natural parents are emotionally cut off from their off-

spring and unable to provide them with permanent care. The responsibility for raising these children generally lies with programs geared only to temporary care.

A child needs continuous and logical parental care to reach adulthood without extraordinary difficulties. When appropriate, this can be provided through a permanent foster care arrangement. However, every child who cannot return to his family should have the opportunity for adoption. Although many agencies permit foster families to adopt, the whole program is geared toward impermanence in the foster home and return to the natural parents.

Since we try to recruit the kind of people for foster care who want a child temporarily, we should not be surprised if they eventually bid him a tearful goodbye. Every agency has a handful of unique families who stick by a foster child until adulthood. Out of this handful there are a few families who make their foster child a true member of the family, and every effort is made by the agency to see that this commitment is given legal permanency through adoption. But for every child who has had this fortunate experience, the files would probably show several others who are forced to endure a series of placements. For one reason or another, usually through no fault of their own, some foster children have to be moved from one home to another. Each home, in itself, might provide an excellent place for the child to be reared, but a series of homes occurring during the formative years provides a poor child-rearing environment. We have all seen the psychic damage caused by this drifting.

Consider the child who is unable to continue being reared by his own parents. His problems are often complicated by the fact that his own mother and father were not skillful parents and gave him few opportunities to grow normally. The child is disturbed, distraught, and in grief over losing his home and family. He has no idea what the future holds for him. He is taken into a foster home and soon learns the rules of that family and begins to settle down to a new way of life. Time passes. The child gets along well and has a feeling of comfort and of being loved. Children in these circumstances frequently do not understand that they are foster children and cling to a

false sense of security. Something happens within the foster family making it impossible for the child to remain. Often a relatively strange social worker tells the child that he must move to a new home. Sometimes this move also means another social worker, leaving the child again totally surrounded by strangers. At best, his social worker will see him once a week and attempt to get him to explore his feelings about moving. Observation of most child welfare programs indicates that due to heavy caseloads, welfare workers are rarely able to continue intensive visiting for more than a few weeks, if even that long. The difficult task of dealing with the child's feelings falls by default to the new foster mother.

When the child is told, "You are safe here, now; we will love you and care for you," he doesn't believe it. He has been told that before in other placements. He depends quietly or rambunctiously on his own personality structure as he tries to discover the new rules within this family. Is it bad to go into the refrigerator and help oneself? If he has to go to the bathroom at night, should he call out and wake his new mother to help him? Can he find where the bathroom is in this dark, new household? The child is expected not only to function in the new household according to the rules, but to respond warmly to the foster family's gift of love.

After a number of moves, the child loses his ability to feel deeply for anything or anybody, and with each additional change, he is less willing to give himself emotionally. As a result, he may be considered unadoptable because of his failure to establish meaningful relationships. This child, however, is simply responding normally to the dehumanizing experiences that he has undergone.

Children who stay with their parents expect security and love to build up over the years. Foster children who must be relocated, leave their security and love in bits and pieces in one foster home after another. They often fail to develop a clear picture of themselves, and frequently, having blocked out the past, their self-concept is limited to the present.

These children should have been considered for adoption as soon as their social workers recognized that their natural parents were not going to reassume their parental role.

San Diego Program

Philosophy, Policy and Staff

SAN DIEGO COUNTY ADOPTION SERVICES has never had an upper age limit for placing a child for adoption, and intake has never been closed for any reason. Our philosophy is that the child who needs a family is adoptable. Based on our experience, we have developed a philosophy, policy and method not necessarily new but carefully coordinated to increase appreciably the chances that children over six will find a permanent family.

The program's policy is based on the belief that failures in adoptive placements of older children are more likely to occur if the agency social worker does not fully understand the child and the potential of adoptive families. The foundation of our program is the relationship between the child and the worker who is going to make the placement. All other aspects of the children's program are secondary.

Social workers are chosen on the basis of their interest and innate skills in handling children as well as for their professional and academic backgrounds. Intellectual understanding of children is but a partial substitute for the unselfconscious ability of a worker to invest himself in a child.

Workers are trained intensively to understand children from a theoretical point of view as well as to acquire thorough knowledge of the personalities of individual children. This does not mean simply collecting a detailed history of the youngster's life. Workers are required to visit a child at least once a week and to become familiar with all aspects of the child's behavior. In the Older Children's Unit, we have found that 10 to 12 active cases per worker is a reasonable maximum.

Working With Natural Parents

Many of our children, although often originally referred by the court or a child protective agency, are relinquished directly to us by their natural parents. This gives us a unique opportunity to understand the child's background. The worker's job is two-pronged. He must help the child to understand the distressing situation, and the parents to explore their feelings and form the best plan for their child. During this period, we do not consider the case as simply an adoption case. We view it more as a problem of planning for the child's future, with adoption held out as only one possibility. Our workers are prepared to explore and implement any appropriate plan that the parents consider best for their child's care, even if adoption is rejected.

Key Is Child's Trust

The social worker must earn the child's trust. The child has to have time to understand how much he can trust himself with the worker. Too often we go to a child and try to explain a series of events in a brief period. A better approach would be to present the child with a realistic picture of his circumstances from the very beginning. For example, when first placing a child in a foster home, the worker might say, "This is a foster home where you will stay right now, but we will be looking for a permanent home for you." At the time the child is freed by court action, the worker might say: "Your own mother had some grown-up problems of her own. She felt scared and ran away. The judge feels you need new real parents who will take care of you."

What gives a child confidence in his social worker is having the opportunity to express over a long period of time his feelings about what is happening to him. If the child comes to realize that the worker truly does know how he feels, he will be more willing to trust the worker when she finally says: "I think I have found the right family for you; I can't be sure until you get to meet each other." From the first contact, the worker anticipates that this child will some day have to accept a permanent home with a totally strange family on the strength of his faith in the worker's genuine concern for his future.

A child can be told that he will be placed in a given situation, and he must go. This is reality, and the child is perfectly aware of it. He has no choice because he is not able to care for himself. How he approaches the situation, what his feelings are, and what he is willing to give of himself in the experience are directly related to the quality of his relationship with the person making the decision on his behalf. Workers recognize from the very first day that they must help children face reality according to their capabilities to understand. Many of the things adults do with children to attempt to make a painful situation more bearable are not appropriate. For example, a worker told two children that they were going on vacation to Los Angeles rather than that they were being placed with a new family. This was out of the worker's own fear of upsetting the children.

If a parent has treated a child brutally or neglectfully, the fact must be faced and discussed. The worker must not be judgmental, because, in a sense, this child is a part of the neglectful parent and may come to fear the worker's judgmental attitude. A child cannot separate from his own parental situation, whether it was a real one or a fantasy that built up in his mind over the years, unless he has some other reality to take its place. In many respects, the problem of a parent's relinquishing a child is only half the task. There is also the aspect of the child's understanding the parent enough to accept the meaning of the parent's action so that he, in turn, may relinquish the parent. Some children can do this totally, some children only partially, and some never. The quality of their relationship with a new family will relate very much to this capability.

Handling Separation

The worker must understand the tremendous impact of separation and grief upon the child. Again, this is a very difficult circumstance for most normal adults, because permitting a child to suffer goes against their instincts. The worker must realize that the child is entitled to his own feelings. While the child must receive the comfort of human companionship and understanding during this period, he must not be "comforted out of the feeling of grief." The worker's willingness to permit the

child honest mourning and to talk honestly about these feelings will help the child develop a sense of reality about what is actually going on. Otherwise the child will form a fantasy and will blame himself for the unhappy experience.

The truth of some children's experiences is very harsh. If they are unable to accept it, they will adopt any of a number of defenses commonly used to avoid feeling what cannot be tolerated at the moment. The worker must hold the truth available and be sensitive enough to know when the child has become ready to cope with it.

The worker must also have the capacity to withstand the emotional barrage that a child can direct toward him in times of distress. A child may need the worker to mother him, and the worker has to be able to do this, still realizing that his role is that of a worker and not a mother. He must help the child to understand what is going on, so that the child himself does not become confused in roles. The worker needs the kind of equilibrium and flexibility that will permit the mothering of a child without either of them being confused as to who the mother will be in reality.

Building on a Child's Past

A study of the child is a continuous process from the time he is first known through his final contact with the agency. In this agency, strenuous efforts are made to keep this process in the care of the same worker for as long a period as possible. In endeavoring to provide continuity for a child, workers are involved with every aspect of the child's environment. For example, they work with parents and relatives and with other agencies if there is need to utilize the agency's services in corrective treatment. The keystone of the worker's activity is the concept of establishing or restoring continuity to the child's life. As the worker is able to reconstruct and understand the experiences of a child's previous life, he helps the child to the same understanding. Workers are encouraged to think in terms of this approach even if they are working with a very young child who is expected to be placed quickly.

First, this approach enables us to make a better choice of family. We are able to provide more accurate informa-

tion about the child to the family and also to make reasonably accurate predictions of his response to adoptive placement. Secondly, understanding a child's prior experiences with foster homes and with workers is important in order to handle unexpected occurrences in his life that could thwart the best of plans.

Agency and Foster Parents Work Together

A child cannot survive simply by being understood; he also has to be cared for, and these two factors must be closely coordinated to give a child the feeling that there is a group of people who are concerned about his welfare. The social worker must help the child digest the foster home experience. The foster family does the actual parenting and is available on a 24-hour basis, comforting and caring for the child.

It is the social worker who helps the foster family to understand where it fits into the agency program. The foster family is a continuous source of information about growth and changing relationships with each child, and they can help the worker construct an accurate picture of the child's personality. As the foster family is made aware of the importance of their contribution to the study of the child, the family and the worker can form an effective team to help the child alter behavior that may be unattractive to himself and to others.

> Handsome, bright and charming, nine-year-old Mike had a great deal of initial appeal to everyone who met him. He could, however, quickly alienate both children and adults with his extremely infantile behavior. When this happened, Mike would resort to the same theme: "Nobody likes me; I'll never be adopted." Only after months of combined effort of social worker and foster parents did Mike begin to absorb the idea that it was his own behavior that brought negative responses and that he could learn to modify and control it.
>
> I had spent several hours with Mike, and we were ending the day by stopping at an outdoor stand for a treat. Mike, who hated to see anything enjoyable come to an end, suddenly stopped being a charming little boy and began to exhibit the kind of behavior that had caused his removal from several foster homes in the

past. He began to push people in the line ahead of us; to run from one parked car to another shouting at the occupants; to climb on tables where people were eating and to tease a passing dog. He responded to my attempts to curtail his behavior by crawling and rolling around on the ground, jabbering baby talk.

When I finally exploded and sent him back to wait for me in the car, he shouted that I was just like everybody else—I didn't like him either. He was still sulking when I returned to the car. This time, as I had done many times before and had to do many times later, I tried to help Mike make the connection between his behavior and my response.

The following week during a visit to Mike's foster home he told me in his foster mother's presence that he wanted to be moved because she had been furious and punished him "just because she didn't like him." It had been obvious for some time that Mike was trying to play the foster mother and me against each other with reports of "unfair" treatment. Focusing on Mike's behavior rather than on his punishment, I learned from the foster mother that she had finally reacted in honest anger to Mike's repeated demands that all activity stop when he was ready to go to bed and to his beating on the door when she was in the bathroom unable to meet one of his minor needs. The foster mother and I helped Mike to recognize his fear of being left alone. I supported the foster mother's reactions, reminding Mike of the previous week when he had made me so angry. Together, we tried to convey to Mike that even though we loved him, certain behavior would earn him certain responses that would make him unhappy.

Some time later after Mike began to take more responsibility for his behavior, the foster mother recalled this incident as a turning point for Mike. She felt that by talking with Mike together, we had helped him to hear more clearly the message we had been trying to convey separately for some time.

The Adoption Section conducts several discussion groups where families get together under the guidance of the foster family coordinator, a worker with a master's degree in social work, to discuss the problems of raising children who are being prepared for adoption. Foster

parents benefit from films, consultative lectures by community professionals, and a recommended reading program.

Services to Waiting Families

As families requesting infants continued to increase, it became necessary to institute programs to handle the anxieties that accompany waiting. Groups were established at every level of the application process, from the period when families await home study to the time when approved families await their children. After learning that families willing to take older children received their children more quickly, a number of the families waiting for infants began to reassess their own circumstances.

Applicant and older child workers meet in a series of seminars so that each may become familiar with the intricacies of the others' assignments and thereby coordinate them more effectively. Applicant workers see the children often, both formally and informally, in person and by pictures, slides and movies, so that they will have personal knowledge of which children are available and will more readily recognize the appropriate family.

Community Contact

The social worker is involved with everyone who had meaningful contact with the child, including teachers, principals, and psychologists. Visits to pediatricians and other specialists are mandatory. A side effect of these contacts has been increased community awareness of our adoption program for older children. It does very little good to know older children can be placed successfully if this fact is not accepted with confidence by members of the other professions that care for these children in the community.

The San Diego County Adoption Services program includes many other activities for both children and social workers, such as picnics, cookouts, and fashion shows. Some are private; others are frank publicity attempts to make our program visible to the community. Our children also appear in person or on slides on local television shows. Our own slide presentation and other appropriate films are all used to educate the public to the fact that the adoption scene has changed and that a child other than an infant is awaiting their consideration.

Methods and Techniques in Treating the Older Child

As stated previously, the foundation of our treatment program is the relationship between the older child and the worker expected to make the placement. In order to show how that relationship is established, the following methods and techniques of handling children are reviewed.

Interviewing a Child

In our culture, adults tend to distrust communication that is not verbal and will often seek verbal confirmation of information received on a non-verbal level.

A child, however, does not always have the words to describe his feelings accurately, even if he recognizes what they are. In communicating with the child, the worker soon finds that much of the time, he has to relearn and rely on that level of communication which was available to him before he became so dependent on words. For example, a child who is saying that he doesn't care that his mother has left him, because this new place has plenty of toys and a dog and a kitty, might betray his true feelings by the expression on his face or the tension in his fingers or by twisting his legs around each other.

If there is no evidence of tension, perhaps the child has not yet grasped emotionally the meaning of the separation. It would be a mistake to assume that because his feelings are not on the surface, the child has already come to terms with the problem. If he does not understand or must repress an emotional experience now, the time will come to face it later. The worker must be alert to this possibility so that he may be able to recognize its manifestations and then support the child.

The child will lead the worker into areas where his problems lie. A worker must watch and listen more than talk. He must let the child start the conversation, and he must listen attentively. Once they start talking, most children cannot resist being listened to. The most irrelevant story may lead by association back to a past event or person exceedingly relevant.

Even the fantasies the child produces are constructed of materials from his past. There is no need to ask, "What does this mean?" or "Why did you say that?", because the child probably cannot answer, since much of this is comming from the unconscious. If the worker waits, thoughts and feelings that seem out of context when first expressed will fall into place as he gets to know the child better. Some children chatter about useless information because they are overly anxious about revealing personal matters. With patience this defense will be dropped as the child gains confidence in the worker.

The hardest child for workers to deal with is the one who remains silent. In such cases, the only feasible attitude to assume is one of patience that conveys the worker's willingness to wait.

Handling Feelings

Unless severely damaged, children will express their feelings. Because of previous confusing life experiences and their very youthfulness, children are not always aware that their feelings are valid and appropriate. They will look to adults to validate their experience; for example, the toddler who has taken a rough and frightening tumble might look to the adult caring for him, ready to cry but withholding tears until he learns if "big boys" cry.

Many children coming into our care have had desperately painful emotional experiences and have had to refrain from normal expression of pain and anger because of experience with inhibiting adults. They need help from the social worker—permission to express emotions appropriately.

Newer workers, fearing they will be unable to control their feelings, sometimes approach emotional situations with a stoically blank face. This is bad for the child. For example, if the worker is angry, the child should see this in his face, hear it in his voice, and have it spoken of

freely. The child will then also see that the worker has control of his anger. The worker should help the child to free expressions by reflecting sympathetically the emotion the child feels. If the child is sad, he should comfort him. If he is crying, he should hold him and provide loving comfort until the child is calmed. He should give the child a full measure of time to express his feelings. No child was ever hurt seeing tears in a worker's eyes if at the same time he knew the worker had things under control. If the child is angry and needs to heap hot coals upon his natural parent's head, the worker can permit this without joining in. The worker's sympathy for the child must stop short of judgmental attitudes toward the natural parents.

We encourage the worker along these lines: "Be natural, be yourself. Most normal people can allow their instincts to guide them to respond appropriately to a child. Watch the child's reactions. If he is getting confused, stop and reassess your own activity. Rely on the child to put the conversation or activity back to the point where he was getting the most from you. Learn to listen."

The Place for Treats

Feeding a bereft child and sharing a pleasant experience can provide solace to the child. It is an unspoken way of saying something warm and nice and is a very important factor in getting to know a child. If a child is distressed and the worker is unable to stay with him, a piece of candy and a firm promise to return is one way to transmit regret and offer comfort. To a very young child, one person is not as good as another.

The pitfall in handing out treats is that children can quickly sense when a treat has become a substitute for meaningful involvement rather than a bridge to involvement. As soon as a child perceives insincerity in a worker, the getting of treats becomes either meaningless or, worse, a "one-up game" in which he tries to get as much as he can. Treats should be a comfort but should not be traded for the sessions in which relationships are cemented.

Life Story Book

The use of visual aids in the treatment and care of children can be very helpful. As said before, adults tend to grasp ideas through words and talking. Children often

appear to understand words but usually understand visible things a great deal better. If they can reconstruct the experience through playacting or visiting an actual location or person important in their past, or see a picture of something that they remember quite accurately, they will begin to correct false impressions of their past life. At roughly age three, when a child becomes interested in himself and where he came from, we start the life story book.

In Barry's scrapbook the worker began with a picture of Barry, now age 6, as a baby with his "first real mama." The story mentioned his birthdate, how much he weighed, and other important facts about his childhood. Barry asked what his mother did for him when he was a baby. The worker responded that his mother did such things as feed and bathe him and change his diapers. Barry indicated that he wanted that written into the story.

Life story books are the children's and workers' working tool, not to be confused with some of the "children's books" that we have gotten together, beautifully photographed and nicely mounted, to be given to the adoptive family. Our life story books are grubby, fingerprint-smudged epics. Their owners often take them to school, finding for the first time in the eight or ten years of their lives, that they can talk with authority about who they are and what their background is. The book is the receptacle of all information that the worker has on the child that the child is able to understand. It is written, if possible, in the child's own language. However, if the child is not able to write, we record his comments about himself and his experiences in his own language. These tapes are typed up without grammatical corrections so that the child can recognize his own words. They are pasted in the book along with appropriate pictures. For the child who has been in the care of more than one agency and has been moved from one foster home to another, the reconstruction of his life in a book like this becomes a tremendous emotional experience. The books are simply made, usually from construction paper, and are bound in inexpensive scrapbook covers, making them expandable for any number of years. They are often kept in the social worker's office, but children periodically take them home and comment on them the next time they see their worker.

Although many of these children cannot recall the experiences themselves, the workers can plant images in their minds by taking them to visit some of the key places in their early childhood. Sometimes this is a cemetery where a parent or a grandparent might be buried. Sometimes it is a house they remember very vaguely.

Sharon, who was relinquished on her twelfth birthday, related tentatively with adults and resisted the possibility of adoption. She was preoccupied with fantasies and had many questions about her natural mother who had died when Sharon was three years old and about whom we knew very little. Sharon seemed unable to accept the idea of becoming a real part of another family until some of these questions were resolved. When Sharon expressed an interest in seeing where her mother was buried, I was fortunate enough to locate the gravesite which she and I visited together.

Sharon stood quietly for some time, just looking down at the headstone on her mother's grave. She read the inscription aloud, several times over, and then began to ask me the same questions she had asked before. What had her mother looked like? What had she been interested in? What kind of person had she been? She listened as though she were hearing for the first time the few facts I was able to give her, asking me to repeat why I thought her mother must have enjoyed being a mother and caring for her children.

I reminded Sharon of her baby book, one of the few possessions she had brought to her foster home, which had recorded the details of Sharon's development over the three years she and her mother had been together. I remarked that the way in which her mother had described Sharon conveyed her pride and her love. We spent about an hour sitting on the grass near the grave, talking about her mother and her past. We had talked about these things before, but Sharon had never seemed as comfortable talking with me as she did that day. As we were leaving, she looked back once, asking whether she might return some day to put some flowers on her mother's grave. Sharon did go back and leave the flowers, and after that she seemed to have no further need to ask questions about her mother. Several months later, she moved easily into an adoptive placement.

A baby picture often gives a foster child a sense of having existed, even though that sense differs from the one experienced by the child who remains with his own family. The life story book replaces or augments letters, photographs, report cards, or family anecdotes about what the child did when he was two and a half or what he looked like when he was one year old. When a child begins to have a feeling of continuity and a realization of a tangible past, it is easier for him to accept the unknown aspects of the future.

Eddie was a child who had experienced two parental rejections in the past and had many unpleasant memories. He was most reluctant to begin a book about himself because, as he said, "I don't want to remember." I commented to Eddie that while perhaps there were many sad things he would like to forget, there were also pleasant things that he might want to remember. Eddie insisted that he didn't want a book, and that he would not buy one or make any pictures for it. I told him that it would be important to him later and that we were going to buy the book. In the store, I had to take Eddie by the arm and steer him to the section where the scrapbooks were located. As Eddie looked at all the bright colored books, his resistance lowered. He announced that he wanted "a sockadelic book." He chose an extra large box of crayons, paste, and construction paper. Eddie again assumed an attitude of resistance toward making pictures for his book. I insisted that if we were to go to the park, he must make one picture for his book before he could play on the equipment.

Each session thereafter, we made at least one picture for Eddie's book. His resistance steadily decreased to a point where he would request materials to draw a picture and would write delightfully spontaneous stories.

Never have I seen a prouder child than Eddie when adoptive placement day came, and he could show the book to his adoptive family and tell them of his life. I had written his story in his language, read it to him prior to placement day, gotten his approval, and typed it, inserting appropriate sections between his pictures. The story included experiences and tones of feelings which I had picked up during the course of my time

with him. The book has assumed a great deal of meaning for the adoptive parents as well as for Eddie.

Importance of Agency Atmosphere

We have tried to make the actual agency building and the non-casework staff become a part of an environment in which the older child will feel that he is valued by everyone involved in the process of finding a family for him.

Secretaries and receptionists with whom the children come in contact learn to recognize them and call them by name. The child is introduced to all of our adoption workers so that he will become comfortable with them. Picnics are held for the purpose of helping the children to get acquainted with staff members away from their offices in a relaxed atmosphere. The value of these activities became apparent whenever a worker had to leave the agency. We often found that a child was already quite familiar with the replacement worker. He might have met the worker at a group function or casually in the course of visiting in the building.

The children also meet the supervisors responsible for the program, and become as comfortable in their company as they are with their workers. A child has sometimes needed to talk to a supervisor when he wanted further explanation of a decision made in his behalf or was angry with his worker. For example, one very outspoken child went through two changes of workers and then was faced with a third.

Bobby, age eight, was not about to accept Miss B. when he and Mr. P. were doing so well. He demanded to talk to the "boss," and Miss B., a very sensitive worker, interrupted my conversation with another worker, to say there was an angry young man outside my door who had something very important to discuss with me. I caught the urgency in her voice, postponed my routine conference, and admitted Bobby and the silent Miss B. Bobby looked me in the eye and told me in no uncertain terms about the other workers he had had, their promises of friendship, and how each had gone away. Since the workers had been honest with him, he knew Mr. P. was not leaving the agency but had been reassigned. He felt Miss B. might be nice but he liked Mr. P. and wanted to keep him. I told Bobby that even before I assigned Miss B., I knew the

change would be hard for him. It stunned Bobby to realize that I knew him so well when he had not noticed me at all. We discussed the earlier changes in detail until he remembered that each had been almost as hard in the beginning, that he had come to like each worker, and still considered them his friends wherever they were. He became willing to try out Miss B. What impressed him most was my personal knowledge of the events of his life. He left, promising to visit again, and he has done so many times.

Selecting the Right Family

In considering a family for an older child the usual criteria used for selecting families for infants must be expanded to include qualities having unique application to the needs of the older or hard-to-place child.

When our workers perceive that a family is interested in or has a particular talent for raising an older child, they explore in detail the family's experiences and expectations. Aware that adults can't like all kinds of children, the worker maintains a nonjudgmental attitude and encourages a verbal free-for-all to take place about the various ages and personalities of children.

What kind of activities can they visualize themselves engaged in with a child. Can they imagine disagreeing with him or ever allowing him to win an argument? What kind of child have they least enjoyed? Why? What do they especially like about their own children? What developmental period do they like best? Does their emotional tone reflect humor, anxiety, anticipation of enjoyment, fear of failure? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The purpose of the inquiry is to find the child that would suit this family rather than reasons for removing the family from consideration.

How do they express affection? Placing a child who likes to be kissed in an undemonstrative family would only invite unhappiness and confusion. This is not to say that a reserved family is a bad family in which to raise a child. In many families, tremendous emotional impact can be contained in subtle communication if a person knows how to read the signals. What are the rules or laws of the household and how are they made evident? Some families are verbal and direct, but children also function well

where rules are more subtly indicated but are consistent and logical.

What will be the child's reactions to their attitudes about religion? Consider the youngster who has been taught to pray as a means of controlling night fears. Placing this child with a family that is indifferent to religion is bound to be confusing.

How does the prospective family relate to serious emotional illness? Are they hung up on genetic purity—concepts of bad blood or bad seed—or sons inheriting the sins of the fathers? How steeped are they in these attitudes, if they exist? Can their concepts be broadened?

How much can they understand and enjoy the differences in children's personalities and leave them untouched? Some parents want children whose appearances and temperaments are similar to theirs. Some view the older child as totally moldable. Either these families will be disappointed or—what is more likely—the child will be bent and shaped into the form expected of him. A child's need for a permanent home is so strong that he may struggle to become the kind of person the family wants him to be. But a child will pay a high psychic price if forced to change his personality patterns drastically.

Does the family recognize that the child's previous experiences are a part of him that should be added to, not blotted out? Can they be helped not to feel hurt by the child's references to other parental figures whom he loved? If they have other children, do they expect that they will not feel close to the new child in exactly the same way that they feel close to their own children? If this is expected, the mature adult can accept the child in much the same way as he accepts the love of a new friend without expecting him to be like any previous friend.

Placement Guidelines are Flexible

Agency rules are flexible in regard to placing the older child. At the point that the child is ready for placement, he should be a highly recognizable individual whose characteristics are clearly understood. When we know the child well, and he understands his "reality," when some of his unattractive behavior has subsided or been modified, and when we can predict with some confidence his response to a new home, we identify him as ready for

adoptive placement. The child himself may be a long way from accepting the idea of new parents, but that does not deter us from including him in the agency's intensive parent search program.

We look for parents who have the capacity to understand what is going on within the child and are therefore able to guide him effectively by themselves. If a child can be sustained in a foster home, he certainly can be sustained in a permanent family if they understand his problems and have explored their ability to cope with them.

The selective process itself involves a team of staff members, including the child's worker and the applicant worker, who conduct an intensive review of all pertinent information concerning the child and the proposed family. Once the professional decision is made, the process breaks down into three phases: (1) telling the family and the child about each other, (2) taking the child to meet the family, and (3) placement of the child. The details of implementing this rough plan, however, depend entirely on the circumstances surrounding the placement. There seems to be no optimal time for scheduling the three steps in the adoptive process. Generally, the emotional tolerance of the child determines the pace of events. The family's anxieties, to be handled by the applicant worker, are expected to be less intense than the child's and therefore of secondary importance. Some children move slowly from the concept of a family "some day" to a family "now." At the time of placement, a child's feelings toward his natural parents, apparently resolved, may resurface and have to be replayed and reunderstood. This final testing of defenses is a very healthy process and must not be confused with regression caused by anxiety.

When the child begins to show a genuine interest in the new family, it has been our experience that it is well to move as rapidly as possible. Once the child grasps the idea that this may be a new home for him, he should become as familiar as possible with the family before meeting them. It is a good time to show him photographs of the family and pictures of the house in which he may stay. These preliminaries make the child's first contact with the new family more tolerable. It is during this tense period that the worker's total investment of time and emotional energy in the child should bear fruit. Despite

glowing physical descriptions and promises of a beautiful future, it is only the child's knowledge of the worker's truthfulness, reliability, and concern for him that will enable him to accept on faith that this is the right family for him. The child must not get the impression that he will have any effect on the choice of the adoptive family, because it is not realistically possible for children to choose their own homes. The child may become frightened if he thinks that his behavior can control the situation. If the child moves slowly in intense emotional situations, he should not be rushed beyond his capacity to cope with the experience. During this period, the worker must be extremely sensitive to the significance of the child's reactions and behavior.

In the course of the preplacement visit, the family is helped to recognize aspects of the child's behavior that have been discussed with them previously. At this point, however, even the best of professional plans can still go awry. Human beings are so complex that there is no way of knowing definitely whether individuals, when they cast eyes upon each other, will take to each other warmly. Most of the time, if we have done our explorations well, we will have made a good "match." But there are times when it will be evident that the match will not work. A worker must be prepared for such an outcome, accept it, and handle the feelings of both child and family. It is important that the worker assume responsibility for the decision not to proceed with the placement. He must make it clear to the child that the decision was the worker's—not the parents'—in order to forestall the child's possible interpretation of the experience as another parental rejection.

If the match is a good one, the more quickly the child is moved into his new family situation, the better. Goodbyes in the foster home and in the child's neighborhood should be handled quickly and matter-of-factly so that their emotional level will remain within his tolerance. But goodbyes should never be omitted. A child cannot conceive of verbal plans as clearly as he can understand completed actions. By this time, if the social worker has done his job well, the child should also begin to anticipate saying goodbye to him. By now, the child has begun to grasp that, in the course of life, individuals experience many goodbyes, that we move on to new experiences with some worry and

much sorrow, but with hope that things will be better in the future, and that we take with us memories of happy experiences even if opportunities to see old friends may not occur again. The child then begins to accept these normal separations and is not damaged by them. This goes for the relationship between the child and the social worker which has frequently been mutually satisfactory but which now must begin to modify itself and in time come to an end. The child has talked about the separation, been prepared for it, and may have acted it out by expressing how he will feel when it occurs.

Supervising Placement

In this agency, the child worker usually supervises placement since we anticipate that most problems will emanate from the child. In cases, however, where the family has had little experience with older children and will need special help in handling the placement, supervision is carried out by the applicant worker. The decision as to who will supervise is generally based on our assessment of where the greatest difficulty will lie.

As the child worker continues supervision, it becomes absolutely essential for him to stop, re-examine his role, and refocus his entire approach to the new case situation. Continuing the same relationship he previously had with the child might be inappropriate and could interfere with the child's adjustment to the adoptive family. On the other hand, the relationship of the child worker to the child with residual problems should continue unaltered until the new family is able to take over the worker's role in helping the child to understand the meaning and consequences of his behavior.

The worker might start by not seeing the child as often as before placement and gradually phase out one-to-one contact altogether.

The worker must be ready for the impact of his own feelings when he sees the child turning away from dependency on him to the family. One excellent worker in reporting to her supervisor about a little boy with whom she had worked intensively, said she knew the case was going well when Joey, who was playing in the yard, saw her and said, "Hi, you here?" and immediately ran to his adoptive mother yelling, "Ma, can I have a glass of milk?"

The worker was pleased to see how comfortably Joey was fitting into his home but was hurt by his casual notice of her arrival. The worker admitted to her supervisor that her first reaction was, "Why, that little rat. He didn't even say goodbye." Later, when she examined her surprising response to the very circumstance that she had striven so hard to achieve, she realized, as tears started in her eyes, that she had continued to need Joey a little bit more than he had come to need her. Everything that he needed was now being provided by the new family, and she no longer had a role in his life.

Impact of Older Child Service on Agency

The investment necessary for an agency and a community that contemplates retooling from a predominantly infant service to a more difficult older-child service is a heavy one. An agency must dare to set out into a relatively unexplored territory of practice. The staff should keep in mind that nothing can be lost by the attempt, whether successful or not, since everything learned in this area in which so little experience is documented is valuable.

The community, in general, must recognize the thousands of children whom our present programs do not serve adequately and accept the responsibility for correcting the situation.

And what about the harvest? What can we reap in terms of dollars and cents? Every child in foster care, placed with a permanent adoptive family that is able to meet his needs, no longer costs State or local government anything. He has become absorbed into the community and is no longer a public responsibility.

If we permit thousands to struggle to adulthood in inadequate programs, they will cost us in the rearing. They will cost us as they struggle in society as inadequate adults. And, their children in turn will come to us begging for solutions to the problems that we failed to face. We cannot save every child, but there are thousands whose conditions we can improve right now. ■

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Films

1. **Angel By The Hand**—23 minutes, color, 1964, loan.
   Adoption through a modern agency is explained in this film.
   Produced by: Los Angeles County Bureau of Adoptions
   Distributed by: Los Angeles County Bureau of Adoptions
   2550 West Olympia Boulevard
   Los Angeles, California 90006

2. **Debbie**—27½ minutes, black and white, 1961, purchase or rent.
   The work of a multifunction child care agency is described with particular emphasis on foster home care, adoption, and treatment of a disturbed adolescent.
   Produced by: Victor Weingarten and Julius Tannenbaum.
   Distributed by: Health and Welfare Materials Center
   10 East 45th Street
   New York, N.Y. 10017