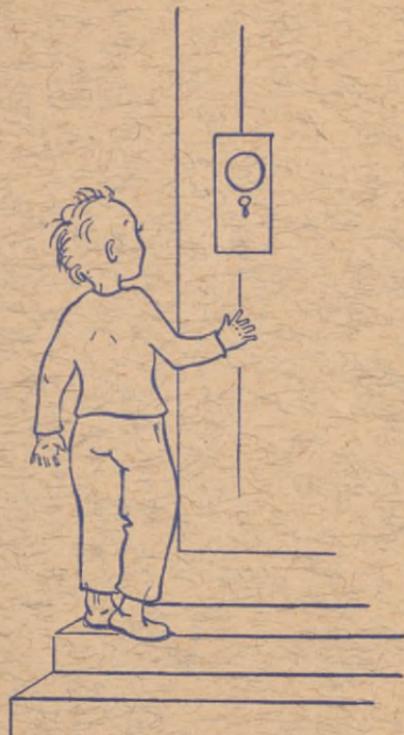


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TO FOSTER PARENTS

THIS IS YOUR FOSTER CHILD

JUN 28 1950



*Prepared by the
New York City Committee on Mental Hygiene
and the Bureau of Child Hygiene of the
New York City Department of Health*

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TO FOSTER PARENTS
THIS IS YOUR FOSTER CHILD

"A mother is likened unto a mountain spring that nourishes the tree at the root, but one who mothers another's child is likened unto a water that rises into a cloud and goes a long distance to nourish a lone tree in the desert."

Being a foster parent is as important a job as any that can be named. It is rich in satisfaction. But it also carries its share of headaches. Many of these can be avoided with better understanding of the problems which are especially likely to crop up in the care of foster children. This pamphlet tries to bring to you some of the experience of others, which will help you to profit by their mistakes, and which will smooth the path for you and for the children in your care.

ALL CHILDREN HAVE EMOTIONAL NEEDS

All children need love and affection. They need security in family life and the privilege of being respected as a person. They need fun and adventure and the satisfaction of personal achievement. And they need the wise friendly understanding of warm-hearted adults. These are the things that you—foster parents—can give to your foster child.

A FOSTER CHILD HAS SPECIAL NEEDS

A foster child has the same needs as other children—and a few extra.

He needs "to belong." The sense of "belongingness" is important for all of us, but especially so for a foster child, because it is the experience he is most likely to have missed in his early life. Do everything you can to show him that he has a place in your heart as well as your home.

He may feel sensitive about being placed out. Some children (not all, of course) are much upset upon first being placed. On the surface his childish grief may seem to last only a day or two. But do not misjudge it for that reason and treat it lightly. Handle it as delicately as you can. He may be hiding a deep hurt. Do not be afraid of "spoiling" during those first few difficult days.

His feelings are mixed. The child may be torn between his fondness for his own parents, and his new growing fondness for you, his foster parents. A child needs to feel loyal. He may get all mixed up because one of his families does things one way

and the other does them another way. He feels—quite without being aware of it—that if he goes along with one he is being disloyal to the other. Such feelings are likely to become the more confused if you and the own parents differ a good deal in what you expect of him, or if you criticize each other or disagree, or if he feels hurt by one or the other of you.

He may feel some self-pity, some shame, some confusion, about being in a boarding home. Because he is uncomfortable in his feelings he may try to get away from them by daydreaming, by building up a glorious picture of his own home, and by letting his imagination run on and on. Do not scoff at him, or ridicule him.

He may have suffered emotional shock. The very fact that it has been necessary for him to be placed outside his own home often means that there were unfavorable conditions at home. Perhaps his mother has had to work out, or perhaps he has observed illness or death, and the breaking up of the home. He will need your understanding and sympathy.

A YOUNGSTER CAN BE BAFFLING

Experience tells us that when a child is first placed in a new boarding home, it is not at all unusual for him to show certain behavior problems—sometimes fairly serious ones. More often than not, such problems are only temporary (even though “temporary” sometimes drags on for what seems like a long time). If you are prepared for some problems, you will not be shocked—and you will

not take them too seriously. Do not be overwhelmed and fear that the placement is a failure. Talk things over with the worker and try to plan ways of helping the child.

He may show problems, or he may not. Do not make the mistake of *expecting* trouble because you have heard that the child had difficulty before. He may not have that problem at all in your home. It can be quite unfair to a child to "pigeonhole" him. He will not *necessarily* show any problems. But he *may*.

He may seem set in his ways. Perhaps he will hang on to the things he brought from home—even torn and dirty things. Perhaps he will refuse new things, and new ways of doing things. This may be an expression of his tie to his own home, of his desire to cling to memories and to be loyal. It may be a sign that he does not yet feel at home with his new family. Do not ridicule or force him.

He may seem indifferent. If he does not talk about the things that you would expect him to feel most keenly about, this does not mean that he has forgotten them. The time will come when he can talk about them if he is free to be himself—or he may never talk about them. If he has never had much love and affection, he may be unresponsive because he does not know how to give or to take affection.

He may show almost any form of exaggerated behavior. Is he restless? overactive? inconsistent? Does he tell tall stories? use shocking words? eat poorly? cry a lot? Is he too quiet? too mannerly? afraid to play with other children? Is he a perfect little angel—so good that he doesn't seem human?

(Look out for a reaction!) Or perhaps he is demanding, jealous, afraid of not getting his share. He may carry a chip on his shoulder. All of these are signs of his struggle to adjust. Minor illnesses may be another—frequent colds, sore throats, slight intestinal disturbances or mysterious little upsets which require a doctor—these are not unusual.

He may show some really troublesome behavior. For example, lying, or stealing, or running away. These sound bad. And it's true that they cannot be laughed off. But they are often not as serious as they seem. The thing to realize is that they are probably only a passing phase. Do not take drastic steps, or be unduly upset. Do not use strong measures. Go easy on the punishment.

Bed-wetting is another problem common among children first placed out—in fact it is more common among all children than is usually realized. It is a great nuisance. But punishment rarely helps. It is usually necessary to understand the child quite well to know why he does it. The best treatment is to do all the things that make the youngster feel comfortable, loved, and wanted. Above all, avoid shame and ridicule. (These are *never* good ways of handling *any* problem.) Give the child enough responsibility but not too much. Let him feel that you want to help him and that you know he will get over the habit.

Lying, stealing, truancy, bed-wetting—these are among the more common problems in the early days of placement. They will probably improve as the child gradually becomes more comfortable in his new home.

TEAM WORK

Do not hesitate to discuss your problems with the social worker or nurse for fear she may think you are not capable of doing the job you have undertaken. None of us are all-wise and this is a case where two heads are better than one. The worker may be able to help you from what she has learned earlier from similar situations, and your experience is something which she can pass on to other foster parents.

Remember it is a "team job." You and the worker have each accepted certain responsibilities for the child, and if the child is to gain you must pull together. You're not "telling on" the child. Your motive is to help him.

AVOIDING FRICTION AND HURT FEELINGS

Experience tells us that certain things which sometimes result in injured feelings are fairly easily avoided by a little thoughtfulness. Here are a few:

Criticism of parents. Anything which causes divided loyalties is a potential source of trouble. Criticizing the child's own parents or even the parents of his friends will make the child think less, not more, of the foster parents. It may make him turn against the foster parents completely. One boy of 13 was expressing this idea when he said that he ran away "because I didn't like the way my foster mother talked about that other boy's mother."

Discussion of money. If the parents do not pay enough — if they are late in paying — if they squander their money—just don't talk about it in

front of the child. There are three main reasons, all very important: first, it is a criticism of the parents and the reasons for avoiding that are clear; second, it is likely to give the child the impression that his parents do not care enough for him to pay his keep; and, third, it is also likely to give him the impression that the reason the foster parents have taken him is to have the money.

Threats. "I'll send you back home"—"I'll tell your father"—"I'll tell the agency"—"They'll take you away from me if you're not a good boy." These are threats which are likely to be used only too easily in moments of irritation or defeat. The child may appear to be unaffected, but such threats leave an impression, often a painful one. He has already lost one home (or more) and now he is being threatened with losing another. Anything which undermines his security is destructive for him in the long run.

Favoritism. Since the one need likely to be most important of all to the foster child is the need to belong, he may be even more sensitive than other children to any sign that another child in the family is more favored than he. It may be necessary to go a good deal out of one's way to make sure not only that some one child actually *is* not discriminated against, but also that he does not *feel* discriminated against.

Standards. Homes vary widely in what they expect of a child with regard to table manners, language, and the like. Manners which seem gross and crude in one home may be taken for granted in another. Language which is shocking to one family may have quite a different meaning in another

family. Before you reprimand a child, be sure you understand what has been expected of him before. Don't scold. Don't nag. Help him to absorb the new standards gradually.

SOME HINTS TO SMOOTH THE ROAD

You will work out for yourselves many ways of making matters run easier. Here are a few to start with:

Pay attention to how the child is received. This may affect his attitude throughout his stay. He is going to be afraid, whether he shows it or not. Make him welcome. Don't rush him into showing response. This may be a moment of greater emotional stress for him than he shows.

Receive him quietly. It may be a temptation to have the neighbors and friends come in the first day to celebrate his arrival. Spare him! He may already be self-conscious and confused. Do not put these extra social demands on him. Settle down to regular routine as quickly as possible. Have the celebrations later—on an anniversary of his arrival perhaps, or on a birthday or holiday.

Respect his feelings for the past. Don't probe into it if he prefers not to. Don't close the door on it if he wants to keep it open. If he wants to talk, let him. Accept the fact that his past has been different.

Respect his loyalty to his own home. His own parents are important to him even if you may not approve of them. Don't try to take their place in his heart.

Avoid frustrations when possible. Everything we have learned about children in recent years has emphasized the importance of sparing them experiences which make them feel unloved, deprived, lonely, at an early age. Later they have to learn to take it. But when they are little, protect them from such experiences if you can.

Use household tasks constructively. Give him responsibilities in line with his age, not too many, not too few. See that he gets recognition for carrying them out.

Let him have his prized possessions and give him a place to keep them.

Provide him with clothes like those of the other children, or have it clearly understood that the own parents will do so. This is especially important for foster children.

Give him a small allowance. This teaches responsibility and gives dignity.

Point out to other members of the family little things they can do to help him feel more comfortable.

Avoid stressing orderliness and obedience for their own sake. Untidiness and disobedience in small matters, are often inconvenient and annoying, but usually not as important as a number of other traits which give evidence of emotional maladjustment.

Answer his questions truthfully. Talk frankly with him.

Use punishment sparingly. Punishment frequently defeats its own ends. It is not the same as

“discipline.” The purpose of discipline is to teach the individual to discipline himself. Punishment rarely does this. Constructive discipline makes punishment less often necessary.

Don't push him beyond his capacity. Help him to find the true level of his ability. If he is retarded accept his limitations. Give him other satisfactions to make up for those he cannot have.

Expect occasional problems. Try to give them their proper weight. Do not minimize the really serious ones. Do not worry over the trivial ones. A good book on child care and training will help you to know what to expect and how to handle difficult situations constructively.

RECOMMENDED READING

THE PARENTS' MANUAL: A GUIDE TO THE EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN

by Anna W. M. Wolf. N. Y., Simon & Schuster, 1941. 331 pages. \$2.50.

BRINGING UP OURSELVES

by Helen Gibson Hogue. N. Y., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943. 162 pages. \$1.50.

INFANT CARE

Publication No. 8 of the Children's Bureau, U. S. Department of Labor, Washington, D. C. 135 pages. 1942. (Single copies may be obtained free by writing to the Children's Bureau at Washington, D. C. For sale by Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C. 10c.)

CHILD GUIDANCE PAMPHLET No. 17

This pamphlet was prepared jointly by the staffs of the New York City Committee on Mental Hygiene and the Bureau of Child Hygiene of the New York City Department of Health, as part of a project in mental hygiene education made possible by a grant from the Greater New York Fund to the New York City Committee on Mental Hygiene of the State Charities Aid Association. The writer wishes to express appreciation to the several agency staffs and to the many individuals who helped in the preparation of the pamphlet.

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