

Multiple Transitions: A young Child's Point Of View on Foster Care and Adoption

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I want to talk to you about what it feels like getting ready to be adopted; When you are a little kid who has already had about a hundred mothers; When you can barely remember what your first mother smelled like; When everyone spoke a different language in the place where you were born, than in the place you are now; When some of the people who took care of you were called "foster parents" and you didn't know what that meant except something about they weren't going to stick around.

When, in the process of being moved all over the place, you lost some of your brothers and your sisters and a particular pair of shoes that felt just right and your absolutely most favorite cuddly, and a certain place on the inside of your last crib where you used to scratch with your fingernail to help yourself go to sleep.

Kids like me, see, don't have families of our own. Because there's something wrong about us (I guess); or because there aren't enough to go around; or something. And I probably won't get one, either. Or if I do, will it be too late for me to believe that they love me and are going to stay with me?

So I want to talk to you, Big People, about these things even though I am not sure you are real interested. Are you the same Big People who keep doing these things to me in the first place? (Please don't get offended if I talk to all of you at once: caseworkers, foster parents, judges, adoptive parents. I just need to say how it all feels to me, and sometimes I can't get the cast of characters straight.)

Some people say that my first parents shook me until my eyeballs got loosened up, or they left me alone, or they gave me away, or they just ran away. I guess you think, because of that, I am supposed to not miss them? (Because if I didn't it would sure make me lots more cooperative with all the plans you keep making for me.)

Should I just say, "They did the best they could," "I am not so ticked off and lonely and worried all the time about what the Big People are going to do next?" The truth is, I can't do any of these things: I can't forget. (Even when my brain does, my body won't.) I can't stop myself from yearning (even though later I will get quite good at playing games about this).

I'm not saying I was some cherished treasure or anything, in my family. But what were you thinking when you sent big men in uniforms to grab me out of my screaming father's arms at eleven o'clock at night, scaring me to death? Or when you sent me to a foster home without telling them about the special ways I needed to be handled because I had never stayed anywhere long enough to get attached to anybody?

Or when you then took me from those people who were so disappointed in me after a few weeks that they said I would have to be "disrupted" (whatever that means).

*So you sent me to a family with an older foster child who was mean to little kids because they were weak and small. And so he punched me a lot in secret. And he pulled real hard on my penis in the middle of the night. And when that family got rid of me, and the next, and the next, did you think I was going to take it all lying down? Did you think I was supposed to just be sweet and adorable and ready to connect to yet another family who were going to throw me away?
(Could you have done that?)*

*After a while, I had just lost too many people that I might have cared about. I had been with too many "parents" who really weren't, because they couldn't hold me tightly in their hearts at all. None of you got how I was being changed by all these losses, in my heart and in my behavior. After a while, I began to get some pretty bad ideas about how things work. And mostly those ideas said that I was, by that time, in deep doo-doo. I wasn't going to let anybody like me.
Not even me.*

And so, now, I won't let you imagine even for a minute that I like you; That I need you.....desperately; That I might ever grow to trust you. I am not, after all, a complete moron.

Are you ready to have me not believe you? Are you ready for me to fight you for control? Are you ready to hold me, and then hold me some more (when all the time I act like I don't want you to at all?) Are you ready to really stay with me, through a battle that might last almost my whole growing up? Are you willing to feel as powerless as I do?

What will you think when I say I don't care a bit whether you go on vacation and leave me with Aunt Harriet, who I hardly know at all? Then, when you come back, are you ready to deal with me taking a dump in front of your bedroom door every single day for three whole weeks?

You see, it is like this, Big People: I'm not stupid. I was not blind. I do pay attention, because it matters lots to me. And so when my first parents knocked me around or acted like I was invisible, or gave me to someone else to raise, or stood there screaming while you took me away from them, I noticed.

And when no one came to take their place, I noticed that too. And when the orphanage didn't last, and the first half-dozen foster families didn't last, something started happening to me. A little bit of my spirit started to die. For some reason, then, I started pulling out my eyebrows. (I'm not sure what that has to do with my spirit dying.)

I agree that it doesn't make much sense for me to join in with all the other people that have hurt me, by hurting myself. But I do it anyway. So I bite on my hand, or dig at my face, or make a real bad sore on the top of my head from scratching myself. I pull out clumps of my hair, and

so the kids at preschool laugh, and Big People have an odd look on their faces when they see me. I masturbate a lot to comfort myself. (I even let a dog lick me down there) They say that sometimes I try to touch other kids down there. Sometimes I run into the arms of strangers, like I have known them forever, and like I don't actually care anymore who I am safe with or not. Am I safe with anybody? Does it matter any more?

Did I mention how much I am growing to hate smallness, and weakness and defenselessness? It's getting so the only thing I know how to do is to just be as tough as I can, and to try to rub out smallness and weakness wherever I see them; In the kittens that get hung by the clothesline in the backyard and squished with a tennis racquet; In the babies in my recent foster homes who turned up scratched; In my own Self, which I attack, particularly when I am feeling small or scared, and I need to beat myself into more toughness.

And as little parts of my spirit keep dying, will it surprise you that I'm not exactly going to be overjoyed when you finally say you have permanent parents for me? Do you honestly think I am going to say, "Oh, I get it, you were just kidding all those other times, but this time you really mean it"?

And, so, do you want to hear something funny? Just about the time I am ready to get what everybody thought I needed (parents who are actually never going to leave me), I'm going to get just a tad weird. I'm going to start banging my head more than I did before. I might start acting like a baby again and, even if I had gotten a little bit comfortable with my latest "parents," I'm going to go back to stiffening my body, and screaming at night, and doing everything I can to tell you that I don't want you to love me.

I can't stand all this talk about "permanence" and "adoption". I will make you sorry you ever thought about trying to get close to me. I will make you feel almost as helpless and small as I have usually felt. So are you wondering what I need? Are you wondering what I would do about all of this if I had the power?

First of all, it would help a lot if you would start with one simple, clear commandment to yourself:

Never forget that I am watching. Never forget that every single thing you do matters immensely to me (even when I work like crazy to make you think that it does not). And I will remember. You may be able to get away with treating me as if I am invisible for a while (perhaps long enough to "disrupt" me or move yourself to a different casework job). I was there, watching, I was having deep feelings about what was happening to me and I needed someone to act as if it mattered, hugely.

Second, don't imagine that I will ever stop yearning for my birth family (even though, as in other things, I will pretend otherwise). Help me find some way to keep a connection with them,

even if I never see them again. Bring out pictures, or a Life Book and hold me while I rage or sob or stare, or all of these at once. And understand that none of this is a reflection on you.

Don't be surprised when I come back from a visit with them peeing my pants or throwing tantrums in the bath that night. I told you: things matter to me. So I am going to have feelings about things that matter to me.

Third, it would help a lot if you would make the decisions that you need to make and stick with them. Some days I think my mind is going to explode because I know something is going on in my life but I can't tell what it is; later I'll learn that there was a court hearing that day and everybody in my life was wrought up and then it was "continued" (whatever that means - except mostly that nothing is getting decided, and I still don't have a family). I don't get to make the decisions, you do. So have the courage to make them; So that I can get a life.

Fourth, it would mean a lot to me if you would take good care of my foster family. They have their hands full. Sometimes they don't know what to do with me. So make sure someone is there to answer their questions, to encourage them, to help them understand me better. You won't like what will happen if I keep getting disrupted, and the only way I can think of to prevent that is to take extra good care of the people that are taking care of me.

So have I told you anything that you wanted to know? Have I helped you to understand how we feel - all of us kids who fell into the world of foster care and adoption? I know it is a burden for you to think so carefully about me, and I know you might get a little nervous to realize that I am watching and affected by all that you do. But you won't be sorry if you take me seriously. Someday, see, I will be Big People.

GIVE THAT A THOUGHT.