



## Normal Phases of the Pre-Finalization Phase

⇒ **Dating/ Getting acquainted** - This phase generally occurs during pre-placement visitation. All parties are on their “best behavior” and are engaged in learning more about each other. Children and families rarely experience “love at first sight,” and the “getting acquainted” phase allows them an opportunity to begin the attachment process. At this point, however, there is no real attachment. The parents and child are often engaged in activities such as going to the movies, eating out or playing miniature golf. It is recommended to adoptive parents that they provide some “reality” for the child during this phase by maintaining a schedule, expecting children to have manners and setting some limits. Consequently, when the child does move in with the family, there will already be some guidelines and expectations in place.

⇒ **The Honeymoon** - This phase is characterized by excitement and great optimism. Everyone is eager for the adoption to occur. There is great anticipation and expectation for the newly forming family. The child is on her best behavior, and all family members get along well. Often the adoptive parents feel that the caseworkers’ warnings and cautions were unwarranted, or they believe themselves to be one of the lucky families who will have minimal problems. *In reality, the child at this phase is emotionally detached from the family, and is likely to be superficial in her relationships.* The child gains considerable gratification from being the center of attention. The parents frequently overlook inappropriate behavior, and they minimize the importance of problems.

*Typical characteristics of a family in the honeymoon stage may be:*

- Belief that the worker was overly negative in preparing them for placement;
- Over-indulging child with too many gifts, trips, special foods, setting no limits;
- Children in family enjoy the novelty of new siblings and interact without arguments, competition, etc.

*Child behaviors during The Honeymoon may be:*

- Child is compliant and eager to please adults;
- Child may be emotionally numb from the shock of the move.

As adoption specialists work with a family prior to the placement of a child, they can prepare parents for the "honeymoon" stage by:

- Training the adoptive parents about the stages of family development;
- Using the "prediction path" to inform parents of child's adjustment patterns during previous separations;
- Helping the adoptive parents assess their expectations and assure that the expectations are realistic.

The worker's role during this stage of adjustment:

- Worker encourages entitlement of the new parents whenever possible;
- Worker continues to provide education regarding typical patterns of adjustment;
- Worker encourages positive interactions cycle during honeymoon.

⇒ **Ambivalence** - *The Honeymoon phase is followed by the Ambivalence phase. The child's behavior is no longer compliant. Rather, the child begins to resist the parent's authority; begins to test the parent's ability to define limits, and tests the parents' commitment. The child often struggles with feelings of distrust, divided loyalty, resurrected grief, and fear of attachment. The child concurrently desires closeness with the adoptive family, yet fears being rejected and/or abandoned. The child also struggles with feelings of disloyalty to the biological parents and former caregivers if she attaches to the adoptive family. Consequently, the child may intermittently display both attachment behaviors (clinging, whining, neediness) and disengagement behaviors (aggression, hostility, behavioral acting out, and/or direct rejection of family members.)*

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that *the family also experiences ambivalence*. As the child's testing behavior escalates, the parents may question their decision to adopt, or may question whether the agency gave them the "right" child. Each of the adoptive parents may have different perspectives of the adoption yet are not communicating their fears and concerns to the other parent. Extended family members may withdraw their support. Siblings may feel resentful or threatened, and their behavior may regress. The parents may fear discussing their ambivalence with the worker, or even with each other, as

this may exacerbate their feelings of disappointment and failure. ***If the family and child are unable to navigate through the Ambivalence Phase, it is likely that the adoption will disrupt.***

All family members must understand that ambivalence is a normal and expected part of the adjustment process. Feelings must be aired and validated. The worker can remind parents of similar periods of ambivalence early in their marriage, or after the birth of a child, and ask them how they dealt with it then. The family must learn to understand and accept the child's experience and to provide support, while maintaining appropriate discipline and behavior management. Often, understanding the nature of their own ambivalence minimizes the parents' disappointment, and enables them to maintain a commitment to the child and the adoption. The child's ambivalence may most effectively be addressed and resolved by the foster parent, or another attachment figure with whom the child feels most secure.

*The role of the adoption worker during this phase is to "shepherd" the family through this process.* Often, workers deny the family is experiencing ambivalence as they are hoping for a smooth, problem-free transition. However, the family (and the worker!) must come to understand that ambivalence is a normal feeling when an individual is confronted by a new situation such as marriage, new job, new home, moving to a new city.

*Characteristics/behaviors of families in the Ambivalence Phase:*

- Family begins to report behavioral problems with the child;
- The parents excitement and enthusiasm begins to wane;
- Parents may show evidence of marital strain;
- Parent makes comments such as, "I'm not sure we are the right family for..."

*Characteristics/ behaviors the child may exhibit during the Ambivalence Phase:*

- Child acts out in an attempt to return to earlier placement, birth parent or to test the commitment of the adoptive family;
- Child engages in conflicts with children who were already in the family;
- Child tells worker he is being mistreated.

*The Ambivalence Phase is likely to impact all members of the adoptive family including other children residing in the home. For example:*

- Other children are disappointed in the quality of the relationship with their new sibling;
- Children are angry and jealous about the time and energy devoted to the new family member;
- Other children try to sabotage the placement by "framing" the new sibling or by constantly complaining to the parents about behaviors of that child;
- Other children are angry that the new sibling is not sufficiently "grateful" to the parents or are upset about disrespectful treatment of their parents.

*What resources or supports can help a family through this stage?*

- Mentor relationships with more experienced adoptive families (aka "Buddy Families")
- Reassurance that this is normal, helping the family to remember other situations in which they experienced ambivalence (i.e., new home, new job) and identifying the skills that helped them cope in the past;
- Use of the Prediction Path to see an "end" to the testing behavior and empowering the parent with specific strategies to manage behaviors;
- Time away from parenting to focus energy on the marital relationship, however respite care should not punish the child! Use of extended adoptive family members is helpful;
- Support, education from the adoption worker;
- Use of a diary or log to track the family's progress;
- Training/Education classes that assist in managing the child's behavior;
- Books, videos and websites with useful information;
- Attending an adoptive parent support group;
- Family therapy to assist the family in communicating. Individual therapy may need to take a hiatus as forming the family relationships is paramount at this time;
- Some agencies have Adoption Adjustment Groups that are both educational and supportive;
- Blessings for the child from earlier attachment figures to move on and attach to a new family.

*Families will utilize the resources and supports that are valued by their*

*culture.* Some families may not go to a support group because they believe that "what goes on in my family, stays in my family". A "buddy family" may be more acceptable to them. Attending therapy at a mental health clinic may be out of the question for some families but talking with their child's school counselor may be an alternative.

⇒ **Reciprocal Interactions** - *When adoptive families are able to cope with their ambivalence in a constructive manner, they generally progress to the "Reciprocal Interaction Phase."* They are learning to accommodate their feelings and responses with the needs and feelings of their child. During this period, family members begin to develop feelings of closeness. The adoptive parents feel less threatened and tend to manage the child's misbehavior with less resentment. They also recognize and come to appreciate the child's individuality. Unless the child has serious attachment problems, he typically begins to trust family members, begins to believe he is going to stay, and works to establish a place for himself within the family unit. It is evident that affectionate bonds are being formed through the reciprocal "give and take" among all the family members. *The family begins to have more good days than bad.* They are anxious to share small accomplishments with the child and now have a sense of hope that the adoption will succeed.

*Signs that the family has successfully moved to the Reciprocal Interaction Phase:*

- Family reports feelings of "success" in managing the difficult behaviors of the earlier stage;
- Parents begin to ask questions about the process and timing of legalization;
- Parents demonstrate more comfort in making parenting decisions regarding the needs of the child.
- Parents share examples of pleasurable moments with the child

*Examples of child's behavior during the Reciprocal Interaction Phase:*

- Child talks of a future with this adoptive family;
- Child engages in less testing/conflict with other family members;

*Examples of behaviors of the other permanent children in the home:*

- Other children have developed a more realistic and accepting view of the new family structure;
- Conflict between children continues, but at a manageable level;
- Adjustments to changes in birth order, when necessary, are made.

*Resources that might prove most helpful to guide a family in this stage:*

- Encourage the adoptive parents to use the positive interaction cycle;
- Reinforce commitment and successes of parents in making adjustments;
- Refer family to adoptive parent support organizations.

⇒ **Bond Solidification** - During the "Bond Solidification" Phase, all family members feel increased satisfaction with family relationships. Attachments between the family and the child have been strengthened. The family has re-established its equilibrium; and has re-stabilized. A new family system emerges that has accommodated the child's needs, abilities, likes and dislikes. The family plans a future that includes the adopted child. The child now sees himself as part of the family, and has begun to incorporate adoptive family traits into his identity.

*Changes that can be observed in the adoptive parents as they re-establish their "new" equilibrium:*

- Parents demonstrate much more entitlement, are less reliant on the caseworker, foster parents, mentor adoptive parents for support and guidance;
- Parents are eager to legalize the adoption;
- New parents often talk of creating or updating a will to include the newly adopted child.
- Parents refer to themselves as "parents" and call the child "our son (daughter)."

*Examples of the child's behavior in the Bond Solidification Phase:*

- Child might express interest in choosing a middle name that "connects" him to the adoptive family;
- Child is clear about referring to adoptive parents when he speaks of "my parents."

*Role of the worker in promoting successful legalization of the adoption:*

- Worker asks parents if they feel comfortable with the idea of legalization;
- Worker asks parents what needs to occur to help them feel more comfortable with legalization.