

# TIPS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS: PREPARING CHILDREN FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING

*A youth's voice is the most important and powerful recruitment tool*

## CASEWORKER PREPARATION

Consider this about your role:

1. Do you believe all children deserve a family?
2. Do you believe all children can find a family?
3. Do you believe all approved adoptive families are prepared to accept older children?
4. Do you believe a particular child will be difficult to place?

Whether you are new to recruiting families for children or a seasoned veteran, you should assess your own feelings about finding permanent families for children. Be honest with yourself about what you think and believe. Your attitudes and beliefs are conveyed in subtle ways to a system-savvy youth.

1. Good adoption casework requires you to be strengths-based. Case records contain all of a child's deficits. Family recruitment for older children requires that you know the deficits but also see the strengths. Communicate with other important people in a youth's life, such as caseworkers, caregivers, therapists, etc. This will give you better insight into their current circumstances and help you to engage the youth.
  - a. Reframe the deficits and make it your goal to see the real child.
  - b. Children are products of their environment, and a new environment can result in you seeing the real child.
  - c. Most adoptive parents know our kids have challenges and see that as a part of the package.
  - d. When reading a child profile, ask yourself what is missing. What are you not seeing that will better offer a strengths-based picture of this child?
  - e. We apply labels to children, and they help explain the challenges a child faces. Remember that anyone's goal in life is to overcome negative labels. Michael Jordan was labeled in high school as a bad basketball player, but he overcame that label. Our children have that potential, too. Sometimes the label has a "strength" counterpart.
  - f. Finding a child's first strength will lead you to the other strength.
  - g. Know that you will be challenged at times and that this is expected.

## SELECTING THE YOUTH

1. **Not every youth is an appropriate choice to speak publicly or attend a matching event. No one should be forced to attend.** You and your agency must decide who should attend based on their personality and needs.
2. For each youth you consider, ask these questions:
  - a. Is the youth ready for a family?

- b. Does he or she understand adoption?
  - c. Have they been through the adoption process?
  - d. Does the youth understand the word family?
  - e. Do they want to belong to a family?
3. Assess each youth and discuss the idea with them to help you determine if he or she is interested and comfortable with participating.
4. Some youth are enthusiastic about attending. Others feel too vulnerable and don't want to face what they may interpret as rejection if no one seems interested in them. Others have attended matching events in the past and are reluctant to try again.
5. If one tells you: "I don't want to attend," talk with them about those feelings.
  - a. Why is he or she reluctant?
  - b. Is this their first matching event?
  - c. Would more discussion about what will happen make the youth more comfortable?
6. Sometimes, letting a youth know this is a chance to meet other youth who are also waiting to be adopted may encourage participation.
7. Describe the event to the youth and explain what they should expect. You never know what a youth might imagine about the event.

## **YOUTH PREPARATION**

1. Make sure all who attend have a good time and meet other youth, as well as prospective adoptive families. Let them know exactly what to expect.
2. Be honest. Answer any questions to the best of your ability. Find the answers to the questions you can't immediately respond to. Explain to them that this is one of the many ways you are trying to find a family for them. Reinforce the idea that adoption is a process, and it does not happen that day. The event is an opportunity for everyone to learn more about themselves and about adoption.
3. Listen to their concerns. Use reflective listening to respond to their concerns, fears, anxieties and general questions. Let them know you will be there throughout the event to offer support and assistance.
4. Talk to the youth about the room setup, who will be there and the different roles of those who will attend. Show a video or pictures of where the event will take place. All of these activities will help prepare the youth and reduce anxiety of the unknown.
5. Role-play the event. Explain the side benefits of attending, such as becoming more comfortable with public speaking or helping other children find a family.
6. Discuss what he or she plans to wear. Encourage them to get a good night's rest, ready their clothing ahead of time and eat a healthy meal before the event.
7. Assess the level of support the child's current caregiver can provide. Can they support the child's decision to attend and reduce their anxiety? Share information about the event with the caretaker and request they support the child's participation.

8. Also ask for the caregiver's support before the event. Suggest they take the youth for a haircut or style, encourage a good night's rest, prepare or select a healthy meal before the event, help them choose clothing that reflects the child's personal style and confidence. Listen to the youth's excitement or fears about the event.
9. An adoption event is a good opportunity to enhance your own relationship with the youth. Explore some of the feelings he or she has about being adopted. Spend time before and after the event discussing the experience with them.
10. Offer realistic expectations. Youth need to understand that matches don't happen instantaneously. Explain the adoption process and time lines:
  - a. How families become approved,
  - b. How communication occurs between child and family caseworkers, and
  - c. How a family is selected.
11. Listed below are some suggested topics of discussion. Encourage the youth to pick several to discuss, either through a presentation, question and answer or interview format:
  - a. What games do you like to play?
  - b. What are your favorite toys, video games, movies, books, television shows or CDs?
  - c. What is your favorite thing to do outdoors?
  - d. What job would you like to have as an adult?
  - e. What is your best subject in school? Least favorite subject? What do you like and dislike about it?
  - f. Who is your favorite teacher? Why?
  - g. What do you like to eat?
  - h. What chores do you help with around the house?
  - i. What have you accomplished that you are most proud of?
  - j. What are your talents or skills?
  - k. What sports do you enjoy participating in or watching?
  - l. What activities do you participate in at school or where you live (choirs, plays, clubs, Scouts, etceteras)?
  - m. What do you do when you are with your friends?
  - n. If you could have one wish, what would that be?
  - o. What would a person learn about you by looking at your room?
  - p. What do you do during breaks from school?
  - q. What holidays do you like to celebrate? What do you do?
  - r. What school trips or vacations have you gone on and especially enjoyed?
  - s. If you could visit any place on earth, where would you go? Why?
  - t. What does adoption mean to you?

- u. Why would you like to be adopted?
- v. What do you want your adoptive family to be like?

12. Offer several options to the youth about the day. Would they like to present themselves independently? With you? In a question and answer format? Do they want to be present while you talk about the youth? Be sure to encourage them to clarify anything you do not get exactly right.
13. Prepare a script and practice the presentation with the youth. Try not to rely on a PowerPoint presentation but rather on the youth's interests. Maybe she could demonstrate a special talent like martial arts, or maybe he would could dress up and act out what he wants to be when he grows up, like a news anchor. Be creative!

### **AT THE EVENT**

1. Arrive early to give the youth time to adjust to the location.
2. Walk with them around the room or facility and explain who is present and what their roles are at the event.
3. You should have visual contact with the youth at all times throughout the event because you are their lifeline.

### **MEETING THE FAMILIES**

1. Make the most of the event. Families will want to learn more about the youth.
2. Families will be interested in where the youth is living and how he or she is doing in school.
3. This is your chance to meet interested families and talk with them about the children who attend, as well as others on your caseload.

### **AFTER THE EVENT**

1. You can make a big difference in how the youth experiences and reacts to an adoption event. The experience does not end when it is over. Processing feelings will go a long way toward making them comfortable and minimizing their anxiety. Remember they feel vulnerable and took a risk just by attending.
2. Encourage them to talk about their experiences at the event. Let them tell you what they liked and disliked. Understand that quiet time may be necessary to absorb and reflect on what took place. When it feels appropriate ask them easy questions:
  - a. Did you meet any other youth?
  - b. How was this experience for you?
  - c. Which activities did you like best?"
  - d. Or consider asking them scaling questions, such as:
    - i. *On a scale of 1 to 10 how much fun was this; how scary was this; how was the food; how do you think you did?*

Your role is to *listen* and let youth direct the discussion. If the event was troubling for them, what you learn from this discussion should be conveyed to the caregiver.

3. When you are asked if any family was interested, reiterate it is unlikely adoption will result immediately. Families often take time to talk about their wish to adopt and the youth they have met. You can also share that several families expressed interest, but it is a process before an adoptive family can be selected.
4. If appropriate, encourage the youth to talk about the experience with the foster parents, therapist, foster siblings and anyone else they feel close to. Processing it with other people often relieves tension or anxiety.
5. Make them more comfortable by sharing news about the event with the foster parents, residential treatment worker or group home worker and therapist. Tell them how the youth reacted and responded to you when the event was over. Tell them how the day went. Regardless of how the youth reacted to the event, help the caretaker understand how this experience could impact them—both positively or negatively—for several weeks to come.
6. When events are planned sensitively and children are well-prepared and talk with their social workers afterward, they typically enjoy the experience. Particularly with older children, participation in their own recruitment efforts gives them a sense of mastery over their future. As one enthusiastic social worker said, “In a perfect world, we would not need adoption parties.” The reality is that nearly 130,000 children around the country are yearning for permanent families. Attending these events increases their chances dramatically.