

## THE MIDDLE PHASE OF FOSTER HOME PLACEMENT

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THERE have been many who have realized that it is not placement itself which is destructive to the parent and child, but the degree of unresolved guilt and ambivalence which keep parent and child, using most of the energies which otherwise might be released into more constructive channels, struggling against the new experience. This points up the essential psychological task of a placement worker. The caseworker carries a pivotal role in the placement experience, not only at intake and during the initial period of separation, but throughout the entire placement experience. Within the placement constellation of child, parent, foster parent and caseworker, the caseworker serves as a coordinating and integrating force, balancing the needs and interactions of the others, in order to facilitate the parents' and child's use of the foster home placement service.

At intake, and particularly the beginning of placement, both parent and child struggle with the necessity for emotional readjustment brought about by the change in the child-parent relationship which flows out of the new living experience. In the foster home placement, the child goes to live with another family, unrelated to him, where he re-

ceives a mothering experience from a frequently more capable parent, and where the parental task of meeting his needs for food, shelter, clothing, adequate physical care, opportunities for wholesome recreation, affection and guidance, are carried by a family to whom, at the onset, he has no sense of "belonging." He is exposed to normal family interaction, which frightens and threatens him at first with its difference from his known, safe past experience, no matter how traumatic and pathological this may have been. In accepting the child for foster home placement, it is hoped that he can begin to identify with these normal experiences and integrate them as part of a healthier pattern of adjustment.

Assisting in this living experience is the agency caseworker, who chose the home and who is there to help him in using this experience—helping with his feelings about being an agency client, with all that these differences imply; with his feelings about his family and the rejection implicit for him in their placing him; in his feeling about the new family and whether they really want him; feelings of divided loyalty, whether he should let himself take and give affection from the members of this new house-

hold; anger, guilt, overwhelming sense of loss, of worthlessness, and a whole constellation of feelings which trouble the child, confuse him and interfere with the use of his full capacities for creative living, unless he can be helped to release them and understand them. We see then that the caseworker must evaluate the parents' and child's capacity to separate and use the new experience and to help both in this complex ongoing experience. If the parent and child cannot separate and use the new family experience, the agency has the responsibility to help them see it and end the placement which has no positive meaning for them. If they can use help to accept the need for separation, this reaffirmation introduces the next phase of placement experience, which we have designated as the middle phase of placement.

The foster home placement provides the over-burdened parent with the relief from day to day parental care and often unsatisfying relationships with his child, and provides him with an opportunity to experience his child differently, now that he no longer faces the overwhelming burden. Now he shares the parental care with another. This, however, brings a new set of feelings and problems with which the parent needs help: guilt at failure, jealousy and rivalry with the new parent figure, fear of loss of his child's love, fear of loss of control.

Just as there is for the child, opportunity for new corrective living experience and a reorganization of his feelings and needs in relation to the parents, so there is for the parent the opportunity to learn to understand his own part in the disturbed parent-child relationship. With increased understanding, he can make the adjustments and changes in the parental situation and attitudes, which are necessary if the parent and

child are later to reunite on a sounder foundation.

The foster parents participate with the agency in providing the living experience for the placed child. They frequently find themselves the objects of highly complex sets of shifting emotional attitudes and behavior by both child and parent, as well as within themselves, as they are drawn into the placement constellation. Foster parents, therefore, also need the caseworker's help in carrying out their role.

In pointing up some of the dynamic factors operating within the placement experience, I have begun to delineate the role of the caseworker with the three interacting clients and have suggested some of the content with which the caseworker deals in the ongoing process. The beginning of placement dealt with the central question of whether the parent and child could, in actual living, permit the kind and quality of separation which makes placement a valid one for the agency to continue.

The middle phase of placement can be defined as one in which the parent shows evidence of greater ability to share the child with the agency and foster parents, is more comfortable with it, less ambivalent about the placement and more ready, through the separation experience, to work on those aspects of his other problems which are connected with his parental functioning. The child, on his part, is showing more acceptance for the need for separation, with less need to hold on to his parents. He is freer in moving into a relationship with the foster family, and, with less guilt now, has more energy released for creative activity.

To carry out its responsibilities to both parent and child, as well as foster parents, the agency needs to set up its structure in such a way as to clearly define the various roles and responsibilities

of the participants in the experience. Significant areas, and those most charged with feeling, are responsibility regarding physical and health care, clothing and gifts, board payments and visiting arrangements between child and parent, as well as the necessity for continuing interviews with the caseworker. The parent, in sharing the child with the agency, needs to delegate certain responsibilities for the child to the agency and through it to the foster parent. The child's routines for sleeping, eating, waking, bathing, play and school with all their emotional significance, are now experienced daily with another family. The child cannot be helped fully, if he separates himself or is separated by the parent from the full meaning of these experiences. For example, he cannot experience the full essence of mothering of the foster mother, if the parent cannot give up responsibility for discipline to the foster parent who must carry this essential role within the living experience, if they are to be of help to the child. The parent who must retain the right to provide clothing or regulate the kind and quality of clothing, separates the child from the placement experience, creating and perpetuating rivalry between parent and foster parent and agency. Parents' gifts too need to be dealt with in relation to its meaning to the parent and child, as they foster or retard the child's use of placement. Parental visiting is perhaps one of the most significant dynamics by which one understands the parents' feelings about the separation—his relationship to the child and attitude toward service. In recent years we have begun to deal with parental visiting in an organized, sustained way, with the agency taking responsibility for setting up realistic controls and dealing within the casework interview with the meaning of the experience to the parent and child. We

have tried to help the parent to understand himself and the way he carries his parental role in this experience.

The whole experience of placement is one of a series of inter-related steps, beginning with the intake process and moving through the pre-admission separation. In the actual placement the parent and child experience the role of the worker as she helps them meet and absorb the impact of separation. She introduces both not only to the new living experience affecting them, but also to the casework relationship which they both usually share and in which their fears and anxieties are prominent. The caseworker's respect for both the child and parent's feelings, help the parent begin to experience the child in a new way. In the relationship between parent and worker, on one hand, and the child and the worker on the other, the anxieties evoked by the separation and the back and forth movement as far as acceptance of it is concerned, there is a great depth and significance.

The role of the caseworker shifts from the focus on the testing of placement with all the intensity of feeling exhibited by both child and parent, to a seemingly quieter period, in which both begin to use the separation. If a caseworker cannot make the shift to the new focus in this phase of placement, the case tends to drift, with the parent, child and foster parent finding their own way of dealing with each other and the placement, and excluding the caseworker in a way that all too frequently tends to negate the separation. The parent and child, having struggled with the beginning of separation, and having begun to bear it, may feel a sense of achievement and completion. They cannot foresee what new problems face them, and how the caseworker can serve as a connecting link between the parent's goals and plans with all their affects on the child, and

the child's continuing experience in the foster home placement. Recognizing the plateau in the parent's and child's feelings, and their need to integrate the new experience in living, the caseworker can introduce a change in the interview sequence, providing greater spacing between interviews. The child, being absorbed in the living experience, needs the worker less, but differently. His interview content is now focussed more on the actual experiences in the living than on his essential struggle against the separation. The parent, moving toward other needs and tasks, may also feel less need for the worker and be less clear about how she can be helped now, unless the worker takes the initiative in focusing the continuing relationship around the experiences within the placement. The important task for the worker is to relate the parent throughout in a continuous goal-directed way, through the actual placement experience, to a resolution about the placement.

Herbert Aptekar, in a recent paper, defined the essential task of the placement worker and the focus of her activity, stating that it is not necessary "to depart from the placement situation in order to deal with the psychological causes of placement. In actuality, one gets to the problem and personality *through* service. The parent who places his child cannot divorce himself from this extremely important factor in his life and start concentrating on his marital problem, his own aggressive personality trends, or anything else of this character. Very often he can best know that he is excessively dominant, aggressive or whatever the case may be, *by seeing himself in action in the actual placement situation*. The worker can reflect any such characteristics to the parents, and do so effectively, when it is something that represents direct and

immediate experience of both client and worker."\* Thus within the actual experience of placement and in the way in which the parent deals with this, the caseworker finds the focus for help to the parent.

The worker, in recognizing that all of the parent's important problems and chief character traits will come out in relationship to the placement, can deal with them on the basis of their relevance to the placement situation and not as a separate entity. This becomes the core of the casework with the parent throughout the placement experience. If children are to be returned to their own home, something must happen during the period of placement which will help the parent to take on more normal responsibilities, or in those instances, to recognize his inability to do so and separate permanently from his child. To do this, the parent must receive psychological help which has profound meaning for him. The help to the parent, as we have indicated, will be an experience deriving from the placement experience itself and what the parent learns about himself and his child within this new experience.

The work with the child deals with his personality too, as it is reflected within the content of the placement experience. The same dynamics operate here in relation to the meaning of the various aspects of the placement for the child, as they do for the parent. As our services have focussed on providing a placement experience for the child, we have in the past tended to consider placement a child-centered service. We cannot help the child unless we reach the essential problem of the parent in relation to his

\* *Casework with Child's Own Family in Child Placing Agency*. Six papers on Child Welfare Problems, selected from the Program of the Child Welfare League of America at the National Conference of Social Work 1952, C.W.L. 1953.

placed child. At the core of our placement casework is the work with parents.

During this middle phase of placement, which is the heart of the placement experience, the worker relates herself to child, parent, foster parent, with the constantly shifting emphasis and content. The concern may be around the child's problem of his identity, his needing to understand and absorb divorce, separation, or death. Or it may be with problems growing out of the actual living experience, such as the parent's re-evaluation of his own needs in relation to his child's needs, as he better understands himself and his responsibility as a parent. It is impossible to enumerate here all the complex problems that are dealt with during the ongoing placement experience. As the placement moves on and there is progress in the terms of parental

growth, one can see movement toward a resumption of parental responsibility. As this emerges, we see that we are ready to move out of the middle phase of placement into the discharge process.

In summary, the middle phase of placement encompasses the heart of the placement experience. During the period, the caseworker helps the child and parent sustain the placement and find positive meaning in it. By relating dynamically and continuously to the actual placement experience, the caseworker provides the mirror for the parent to view, not only his problem with placement, but his other problems which are connected with it, and to deal with these problems, through the understanding he receives of his own personality and needs in his experience with placement.