Separation and Placement – Impact upon Development

INFANCY: BIRTH TO TWO YEARS

Cognitive Development
- Infants have not developed object permanence; when things are out of sight they are gone! Even temporary losses of significant caregivers are experienced as total. Infants cannot comprehend that their caregiver ‘will be right back:’
- Infants have a short attention span and poor memory.
- Infants do not understand change; they only feel its disconcerting effects. Without an understanding of events, they are easily frightened by environmental changes and unfamiliar sensory experiences, sights, noises, and people.
- Infants lack language ability and, therefore, have few means to communicate their needs or distress to others, except by crying. They also cannot be verbally reassured that they will be cared for.

Emotional Development
- Infants are fully dependent upon others for physical care and nurturance to meet their basic survival needs.
- Infants generally form strong and trusting emotional attachments to their primary caregiver and turn to that person when in need. Their scope of trusting relationships is very limited. After five to six months, infants can easily discriminate between people, display anxiety in the presence of unknown persons, and often cannot be comforted by others when distressed.
- Infants often experience anxiety in the face of even small changes. Emotional stability depends upon familiarity and continuity in the environment, and the continued presence of their primary caregiver.

Social Development
- Without language, infants have few ways to communicate their distress or needs. Most communications are nonverbal. If adults are not familiar with infants’ cues, and do not recognise or understand the source of their distress, their needs may remain unmet.
- Social attachments are limited to infants’ immediate caregivers and close family members. Infants do not easily engage in relationships with unfamiliar persons. Adults must generally initiate and reinforce interactions. Infants also vary in the speed with which they will interact and be comfortable with strangers. Many infants are temperamentally cautious, and need considerable time to become comfortable in the presence of new people, much less turn to them when distressed.

Implications for Separation and Placement
- Infants’ cognitive limitations greatly increase their experience of stress. Without a well-developed cognitive perception of the event, any change is
threatening. Infants will be extremely distressed simply by changes in the environment, and the absence of trusted caregivers.

- Infants have few internal coping skills. Adults must protect and provide for them by eliminating their distress, and meeting all of their needs. When deprived of the trusted, familiar adults upon whom they depend, they are more vulnerable to the effects of internal and external stresses.

- Infants experience the absence of caregivers as immediate, total and complete. Infants do not generally turn to others for help and support in the absence of their primary caregiver. Infants who have lost their primary caregiver often cannot be comforted by a caseworker, foster parent, or others.

- If traumatic separation occurs during the first year, it can interfere with the development of basic trust. This has serious implications for the infant’s subsequent development of interpersonal attachments.

- Infants who are easily frightened by change and new people may react more strongly and exhibit more distress than a placid, more adaptable infant. This does not mean, however, that less temperamental infants do not experience severe distress during the placement process.

- Infants’ distress during placement will be lessened if their environment is familiar or can be made very consistent with their old one. Caseworkers should also assess infants’ attachments to adults, and should identify persons with whom infants have the strongest attachment. This is not always the parent; it may be an extended family member, a neighbor, or a babysitter. In the best situation, an infant’s regular caregiver should visit frequently, preferably daily, and provide direct care in the placement setting.

- Seriously abused or neglected infants may appear to have no secure attachments with any caregiver. Infants who have not developed attachments, or who have insecure attachments, may not exhibit distress when placed. These infants will often be remote and withdrawn. Such attachment disorders should be of considerable concern to workers, as they indicate these children are at serious risk developmentally. Placement planning for children with attachment disorders should include the identification of primary caregivers, who can be a constant in the children’s lives. Continuity in relationships with trusted caregivers will promote the development of basic trust.

- If the plan is to reunite infants with their families, parents should be included in all phases of placement and permanency planning, and the parent/child relationship should be maintained through regular visitation while the infant is in placement. Similarly, when infants are placed from foster care into adoptive families, the foster caregivers should remain actively involved until the infants are securely attached and fully integrated into their adoptive homes. This ‘transitional’ approach to placement prevents the total disruption of critical attachments for infants, and can help to prevent the serious negative consequences of traumatic separation on development [Gerard & Dukette 1953]. The consistent involvement of a nurturing caregiver is essential to promote the development of healthy attachment. Once it has developed, separating an infant from his or her primary caregiver should be approached with extreme caution.

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HANDOUT 1
**PRESCHOOL: TWO TO FIVE YEARS**

**Cognitive Development**
- Preschool children use language to communicate, but they have a limited vocabulary, and do not understand complicated words or concepts. Many thoughts or feelings cannot be fully expressed. This makes it difficult for them to understand complex events or to fully communicate their concerns and distress.
- Preschool children do not have a well-developed understanding of time. They cannot discriminate between 'next week;' 'next month;' and 'next year'.
- They have difficulty understanding causality and are often unable to discern how events relate to one another, to explain why things happen/or to predict what may happen next.
- They are cognitively egocentric. They are not able to understand perspectives that are different from their own. The world is as they perceive it. Other people's explanations of events may make no sense to them, and they will stubbornly cling to their own perceptions and explanations. Their logic may be faulty by adult standards but seems rational to them.
- Preschool children may display magical thinking and fantasy to explain events, and may believe that their actions or thoughts have exaggerated effects on events in their environment.
- They may not generalise their experiences in one situation to another. They may be unable to draw logical, even obvious, conclusions from their experiences. For example, despite the fact that his house and all his friends' houses have kitchens, a child may still doubt the existence of a kitchen in the foster home until he sees it for himself.

**Emotional Development**
- Preschool children are still dependent on adults to meet their emotional and physical needs. The loss of adult support leaves them feeling alone, vulnerable, and anxious.
- Development of autonomy and a need for self-assertion and control make it extremely frustrating for children this age to have limits and restrictions imposed by others. When thwarted by adults, they are likely to create and engage in battles with adults to maintain some degree of control.

**Social Development**
- Preschool children are beginning to relate to peers in reciprocal, cooperative, and interactive play.
- They relate to adults in playful ways, and are capable of forming attachments with adults other than parents. They can turn to other adults to meet their needs.
- ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ acts are defined by their immediate, personal consequences. Children who are bad are punished; children who are good are rewarded. Self-esteem is often influenced by how ‘good’ children believe they are.
**Implications for Separation and Placement**

- Preschool children are still essentially dependent and have limited coping abilities. They need dependable adults to help them manage day-to-day events. However, emotionally healthy children of this age can turn to substitute caregivers or to known and trusted caseworkers for help and support during the placement process. Having a relationship with an adult in the new home prior to placement also helps to reduce the stress of placement.

- Preschool children will display considerable anxiety about their new home. Because they are still unable to make logical inferences from much of their experience, preschool children may be unable to predict the seemingly obvious. Therefore, any change in environment can have exaggerated ambiguity, and be ominous and foreboding. They will be concerned about being cared for, but may not have adequate language to express the concerns in detail. Their insecurity may be expressed with questions such as, ‘Do they have bandages at their house? Does their dog bite?’ They need reassurance that they will be fed, clothed, and that the new family will care for them when they are sick. While verbal reassurances are helpful, children will often not be comfortable until they actually experience the environment as safe and nurturing.

- Due to their immature conception of time, any placement of more than a few weeks is experienced by preschool children as permanent. Without frequent contact with their parents, these children may assume that their parents are gone and are not coming back. They may abandon hope relatively quickly, grieve the loss, and attempt to establish a permanent place for themselves in the substitute care home. This makes reunification at a later time, at best, another traumatic separation, and at worst, impossible.

- Preschool children are very likely to have an inaccurate and distorted perception of the placement experience and the reasons for their placement. They may feel personally responsible for the family disruption. Many children view separation and placement as a punishment for bad behavior. Egocentric thinking limits preschool children's ability to understand the reasons for placement. That they had to leave home because someone else (their parent) had a problem is beyond their conceptual capabilities. Children this age will cling to their own explanation for the placement, despite attempts by adults to explain otherwise. This self-blame threatens children's self-esteem and increases their anxiety.

- Forced placement without proper preparation may generate feelings of helplessness and loss of control. This may interfere with the development of self-directed, autonomous behavior. Children this age may learn that they cannot influence the environment, and may become placid and unassertive; or, they may become engaged in a power struggle with adults in an attempt to assert and assure their autonomy.
Because preschool children do not fully understand the reasons for the placement, they often perceive the absence of their parents as abandonment, and they learn to expect abandonment in other relationships. They often express concern about the new family leaving them, or about having to move again; they are also anxious about whether the caseworker will return for them. Caseworkers are often these children's only perceived link to their family and prior life, and for this reason, the workers can take on extreme importance to them. The children's anxiety about abandonment is exacerbated if the caseworkers who conduct their placement 'disappear' from their lives, which often occurs when the case is transferred after placement. The need to maintain continuity in all these children's relationships, including the casework relationship, cannot be stressed enough. A continuous parade of new faces in their lives is disruptive, and seriously damaging to their emotional development.

**SCHOOL-AGE (SIX TO NINE YEARS)**

**Cognitive Development**
- School-age children have developed cognitively to the stage of concrete operations. They understand cause and effect, and can often discern logical relationships between events. They will, however, have difficulty understanding abstract relationships. 'Your mother placed you for adoption because she loved you and wanted the best for you;' is a difficult concept for children to understand. In their concrete view of reality, people don't give away things they love.
- School-age children have developed some perspective-taking ability. They can, at times, understand other people's feelings and needs, and they are beginning to understand that things happen to them which are not their fault.
- School-age children usually experience the world in concrete terms.
- They are most comfortable if their environment is clearly structured, if they understand the rules about how things should be done, and if they have a clear definition of what is right and wrong. They are concerned with fairness, and often have difficulty accepting ambiguity, or changes in previously defined rules.
- School-age children have a better perspective regarding time than do younger children, and are able to differentiate between days and weeks, but still cannot fully comprehend longer time periods, such as months or years. A school year is often perceived as an eternity.

**Emotional Development**
- Children this age are performers. Their self-esteem is strongly affected by how well they do in their daily activities, in school, and when playing.
- They become very anxious and distressed when they are not provided with structure, or when they do not understand the 'rules' of the situation. If expectations for their behavior are ambiguous or contradictory, they do not know what is right, and often feel helpless to respond properly. A significant change in expectations, such as occurs when children are placed in a home
of a different socioeconomic class or culture, can create serious disruption and anxiety for them.

- The primary identification for school-age children is with their family. Their sense of self and their self-esteem are closely tied to their perception of their family’s worth. If other people talk about their family in negative terms, it is an assault upon their self-worth.

**Social Development**

- School-age children can relate to many people, and can form significant attachments to adults outside the family and to peers.

- They derive considerable security from belonging to a same-sex social group. For many children this age, their friends are the focus of most activities and social interactions.

- They recognise that being a foster child is somehow ‘different’ from other children at a time when it is very important that they be more like them and accepted by them. The tendency for school age children to be critical of differences, and to ignore or tease children who do not ‘belong,’ exacerbates foster children’s isolation and feelings of rejection.

- School-age children may be fiercely loyal and exclusive in their relationships, and may feel they must choose between relationships. They may not understand how they can care for old friends and new ones too, or love both mother and foster mother. They may feel they must choose between the old and new life, which creates emotional conflict and guilt. This is exacerbated when foster caregivers expect them to ‘become a part of their family;’ and subtly or openly expect children to lessen their attachments to their primary family.

- The value system of school-age children has developed to include ‘right’ and ‘wrong;’ and they experience guilt when they have done something wrong.

**Implications for Separation and Placement**

- School-age children can develop new attachments and turn to adults to meet their needs. If previous relationships with unrelated adults have been positive, they will be likely to seek out help from adults, including a known and trusted caseworker, when they need it. This increases their ability to cope in stressful situations.

- Their perception of the reason for the separation may be distorted. They may verbalise that they are not at fault, particularly if this is reinforced by persons they trust, but they may not fully believe it. They will not want to accept that their parents are at fault either. Their self-esteem is closely tied with their parents’ worth, and they need to view their parents positively. However, in the cognitively concrete world of school-age children, someone must be blamed; and often the caseworker, the agency, or the foster parents are faulted.

- School-age children will compare foster caregivers to their parents, and the caregivers will generally lose the competition. This may be expressed in a statement such as, ‘My mom’s hot dogs are better than these old things:’ Caregivers must allow children to retain a positive attachment to their family.
without feeling threatened. They must also be able to talk with children in positive terms about their family, and reassure them that they can like the foster caregivers and care about their family, too.

- The loss of a stable peer group and trusted friends can be quite traumatic. Making new friends may be difficult. School-age children may be embarrassed and self-conscious about their status as foster children, and they may feel isolated. Maintaining contact with friends is helpful. Workers can also help these children by developing an explanatory story about the reasons for their placement to be used with peers.

- Children this age will be very confused if the rules or expectations in the substitute care home are different from those to which they are accustomed. They will be anxious and uncomfortable until they fully understand what is expected of them. They may also perceive differences in rules as unfair and protest the changes.

- School-age children have an improved conception of time. They can tolerate placements of a few months, if they understand they will eventually go home. Longer placements may be experienced as permanent. Because children this age need concreteness, if they cannot be told exactly when they are to return home, their anxiety increases.

- School-age children, who are placed after some perceived misbehavior, may feel responsible and guilty, and may be anxious about their parents accepting them back. Repeated placements are perceived as rejections, and threaten their self-esteem. Children who have been subjected to multiple placements often express a belief that they are not wanted by anyone.

**PREADOLESCENCE (10 TO 12 YEARS)**

**Cognitive Development**

- Most of preadolescent children's thinking is still concrete. However, some children begin to show an ability to think and reason abstractly, and to recognise complex causes of events.

- At the preadolescent stage, children develop the ability to better understand perspectives other than their own. Some children at this age have developed insight, and can recognise and respond to the needs and feelings of others. They may recognise that their parents have problems that contributed to the need for placement: ‘My Dad is nice until he gets drunk, and then he gets mean and hits us.’

- Preadolescents also have a better and more realistic conception of time. They understand weeks and months, and they can recall events that occurred months and probably years earlier. They are also able to maintain a sense of continuity over time.

- Preadolescents can logically generalise from their experiences. For example, they will not question whether the foster family has a kitchen, even though they have never been to the foster home, because they understand that houses have kitchens.

- Children this age understand that rules often change depending upon the situation, and they can adjust their behavior to meet the expectations of different situations. This does not mean that changes are not stressful;
however, the ability to adapt their behavior helps them cope with the changes.

**Emotional Development**

- Self-esteem and identity are still largely tied to the family. Adolescents often feel that negative comments regarding their family reflect upon them as well.
- Preadolescents have an increased ability to cope independently for short periods of time. They can feed, dress and care for themselves, and travel independently around the neighborhood. They can manage some problems and resolve them without assistance from adults. However, they still turn to significant adults for approval, support, and reassurance, and for help when things are difficult.
- They may be very embarrassed by their foster child status. They are self-conscious about their ‘differentness’.

**Social Development**

- The social world of preadolescents has expanded to include many people outside the family. Peers are extremely important. Most peer relationships are same-sex. Both boys and girls may have best friends who form their social support network, as well as peer groups with whom they identify.
- Children this age still need trusted adults for leadership, support, nurturance, and approval.
- ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ are complicated and evolving concepts. For most children this age, right and wrong are determined by principles that they believe apply to all people, including their parents. While children may not understand the sources or reasons for this moral code, they can begin to understand that their parents have the capacity to do wrong.

**Implications for Separation and Placement**

- Preadolescents have a better capacity to understand the reasons for the separation and placement. With help, these children may be able to identify the causes of the family disruption. They can be helped to realistically assess the degree to which their behavior contributed to the problems. With proper assistance, they can often develop a realistic and accurate perception of the situation, which can help prevent unnecessary and unreasonable self-blame.
- These children can benefit from supportive adult intervention, such as casework counseling, to help sort through their feelings about the situation. Some children this age are able to acknowledge their anger and ambivalent feelings, and talk about them. This helps them to cope.
- If given permission, preadolescents may be able to establish relationships with caregivers without feeling disloyal to their parents. If this is possible, placement in substitute care may not be as threatening.
- Preadolescents are often aware of the perceptions and opinions of other people. They may be embarrassed and self-conscious regarding their family’s problems and inadequacies, and regarding their status as foster children. This may contribute to the development of low self-esteem.
These children may be worried about their family as a unit, and may demonstrate considerable concern for siblings and parents. They will want reassurance that they are okay, and are getting the help they need.

The loss of best friends and peers may be particularly difficult for children this age. It may be difficult to replace these relationships in the foster care setting. They may be lonely and isolated.

**EARLY ADOLESCENCE (13 TO 14 YEARS)**

**Cognitive Development**
- Youths’ emerging ability to think abstractly may make complicated explanations of reasons for placement more plausible. However, they still may be confused if the factors are too abstract. As with adults, the ability to think abstractly may depend upon general intellectual potential and level of education.
- These youths may have an increased ability to identify their own feelings, and to communicate their concerns and distress verbally.

**Emotional Development**
- Early adolescence is a time of emotional volatility. Early adolescents may experience daily (or hourly) mood swings and fluctuations. At its worst, this can be a chaotic time. At best, youths of this age are still unpredictable and emotionally volatile.
- Physical and hormonal changes, including significant and rapid body changes, generate a beginning awareness of sexuality. Early adolescents experience many new feelings, some of which are conflictual and contradictory. Emotional changes may be accompanied by solicitous and exaggerated behavior toward the opposite sex, or anxious withdrawal. Many youth display both behaviors at different times as they experiment with new feelings.
- Early adolescents begin to feel a desire to be independent. However, they are not emotionally ready for true independence. Independence is often expressed primarily through verbal rejection of parental values and rules, and adhering, instead, to the values of their peers.
- Despite a verbalised rejection of adult rules and values, youth this age experience considerable anxiety when deprived of structure, support, and clearly defined limits.

**Social Development**
- Early adolescents may be embarrassed to admit their need for adult approval, support, and nurturance. This makes it difficult for them to enter into relationships with adults, particularly when in an authority or parental role.
- Many early adolescents are conscious of their status or popularity, and their self-esteem is often derived from being accepted by the right peer group. These groups and their membership may change from day to day. Some youths may reject their childhood friends for acceptance into a more popular...
subgroup. Standards of acceptance are rigid, and many youth at this age typically feel they do not adequately measure up.

- Many early adolescents may feel a need to keep up appearances, and may defend their family in public and to adults, even if they personally believe their parents to be at fault.

- At this stage, youths are beginning to become aware of social roles, and they experiment with different roles and behaviors. Consistent social role models are needed. Because sexual identity is becoming an issue, improper or atypical sexual behavior on the part of a youth's parents (sexual abuse, prostitution) may be of increasing concern.

- Although many youths will have developed a moral attitude with clearly defined 'rights' and 'wrongs;' these values may take a back seat to their friends' opinions and attitudes regarding their thoughts and actions. The values of the peer group often supersede their own.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- Early adolescence is emotionally a chaotic period. Youth experience many stresses as a result of internal, biological changes, and changes in expectations for their behavior. Any additional stress has the potential of creating a 'stress overload' situation, and may precipitate crisis.

- Early adolescents may resist relationships with adults, and may describe adults in uncomplimentary terms. In their minds, dependence upon adults threatens their independence. They may not be able to admit their need for support, nurturance, and structure from adults. Without these, however, they may flounder and experience considerable anxiety. By rejecting adults, they deprive themselves of a source of coping support. The peer group, to whom a youth may turn, cannot generally provide the stability and help needed.

- At this stage, youths may deny much of their discomfort and pain. This prevents them from constructively coping with these feelings, and they may be expressed through volatile, sometimes antisocial behavior. The general emotional upheaval of this developmental period may be exhibited in mood swings and erratic, temperamental behaviors.

- Separation from parents, especially because of family conflict and unruly behavior on the part of a youth, may generate guilt and anxiety.

- At a time when identity is an emerging issue, youths may have difficulty in realistically dealing with their parents' shortcomings. The parents may either be idealised, and their shortcomings may be denied; or, they may be discounted, verbally criticised, and rejected.

- The emotional and social nuances of emerging sexual relationships may be very frightening without the support of a consistent, understanding adult.

- Early adolescents have the capacity to participate in planning, and to make suggestions regarding their own life. This provides a sense of involvement, self-worth, and control. They will be less likely to resist or thwart a plan if they have been involved in developing it.

- Persistent, repeated attempts by caseworkers to engage youth can have very positive results. Even if they never acknowledge that their caseworkers
are of help, early adolescents may greatly benefit from the workers’ support and guidance.

**MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE (15 TO 17 YEARS)**

**Cognitive Development**
- By middle adolescence, youths have often developed the ability to understand complex reasons for separation, placement, and family behavior. They can understand that things happen for many reasons, that no one person may be at fault, and that their parents aren't perfect. They may not, however, be able to accept their situation emotionally.
- The ability to be self-aware and insightful may be of help in coping with difficult situations and their conflicting feelings about them.
- At this stage, adolescents have greater ability to think hypothetically. They can use this ability to plan for the future, and to consider potential outcomes of different strategies.

**Emotional Development**
- Middle adolescents are developing greater self-reliance. They are more capable of independent behavior, and can contribute to decisions about their life and activities. This helps them to retain some control of their situation, which helps reduce anxiety.
- Identity is being formulated by considering and weighing a number of influences, including family, peers, and their own values and behaviors. These adolescents are beginning to formulate many of their own beliefs and opinions. Many behaviors and ways of dealing with situations are tried, and adopted or discarded, in an attempt to determine what seems to be right for them.
- The development of positive self-esteem may depend as much on acceptance by peers of the opposite sex as by same-sex peers.

**Social Development**
- Considerable social behavior is centered around exploration of sexual relationships and concerns about intimacy. Much social behavior is centered around dating. Group identification is important, but less so. Individual relationships are becoming more important.
- Adolescents become very interested in adults or older youths as role models. They will be very responsive to people who are honest, and who will talk about their ideas without enforcing behavioral expectations or values. They are often willing to listen and to try new ways of thinking and behaving.
- Adolescents are beginning to focus on future planning and emancipation, and are experimenting with and developing self-reliance. But they still need the consistent support of their family.
- Toward the end of middle adolescence, many youths may begin to question previously held beliefs and ideas regarding 'right' and 'wrong;' and they may
be less influenced by peer attitudes. An emergence of independent ethical thinking may be evident.

**Implications for Separation and Placement**

- Adolescents will often reject a family's supporting, nurturing, and guiding efforts as they struggle to express their need for independence. This often results in conflicting, labile, and ambivalent emotions and feelings toward their family. Separation during this time further complicates an already complicated developmental dynamic. Youth in placement may need help and counseling to sort through their ambivalent feelings regarding their family.

- Adolescents' need for independence may affect their response to placement in a substitute family setting, especially if the caregiving family expects them to 'become one of us.' Adolescents' family identity may remain with their biological family, and they may be unwilling to accept the substitute family as more than a place to stay. This may be perceived as their failure to adjust to the placement, even though it is a healthy and reasonable response.

- Adolescents may not remain in a placement if it does not meet their needs. Some would rather find their own solutions and placements.

- Adolescents may constructively use casework counseling to deal with the conflicts of separation and placement in a way that meets their needs without threatening their self-esteem and independence. A strong relationship with a trusted caseworker or therapist can provide support, offer guidance and direction, and help them develop realistic, accurate perceptions of a situation and their role in it.

**Source:**
