

Introducing the Welcome Book: A 'New' Transition Tool

How can we best help babies and kids when it's time for them to change families? Be it leaving a long-term foster home, moving across state lines, or getting adopted by people you never met, the foster care community has developed many simple and successful tools to help. Now with the power of the Internet and foster care magazines, everyone can learn about them.

The *Welcome Book* is an important tool. Have you heard of it? Originally, it was used with older children in foster/adoption situations. Read on and learn more about how it applies to toddlers, babies and children going to out-of-state placements.

What Is It?

The *Welcome Book* is a simple book made by you with photos introducing the child to his or her immediate family (including pets) and surroundings (car, yard, house).

The *Welcome Book* consists mainly of photos and short descriptions (whew---no tough text like that lifebook). The length is between 5-9 pages. Details about why the book is important and how to make it are below.

What is the Purpose?

The *Welcome Book* helps the new family member, whether they are eighteen months or eight years old, prepare for their new life, by showing them photos. Think of the *Welcome Book* as a preview at the movies – a preview of “life’s coming attractions.”

When the child arrives at his or her new home they can get out of the car and think to themselves, *this house looks familiar*, and it's not a total shock to their system.

Since the child is already in foster care, you can mail a copy of the *Welcome Book* to that child ahead of time. Ask the foster parent or caregiver to read it often as they would a beloved board book. Allow older children to keep the book and talk about the pictures they see. That way, adults can help prepare/transition your child. Otherwise, you can give it to them when you meet. Telephone calls on a regular basis provide another dimension to the introduction. You can ask questions such as, “*What did you think of the dog? Do you think you'll like your new room?*”

How Do I Make One?

Do what works for you. If you are artsy---be artsy. Like things plain and simple? Great. Either way, you are creating a book of photos with captions. Use magic marker and handwrite the or spend hours creating elaborate designs on the computer. The bottom line is, “Don’t stress. Be who you are.”

Tape photos into a booklet and describe what they are of. You can use a photo album, blank book, or bound book from a photo service (such as snapfish). Or, you can just staple together construction paper and glue on photos. That’s it.

In fact, this is a wonderful task for waiting family members to do together. If there are already children in your home, involve them.

Page Suggestions (for all age children including babies and toddlers)

- Begin with a picture of them on the first page. Title it with large words such as *WELCOME Molly, HI Cheydayuh* or *WE CAN’T WAIT TO MEET YOU MARIA!*
- Include a picture of you and your spouse or partner (if applicable).
- Include a photo of your car(s).
- Have an outside picture of your home.
- 1 or 2 photos of inside rooms, especially the ones they will see first, such as the entry way or foyer.
- A picture of kitchen table with dinner on it.
- One or two photos of where they are going to sleep! Their crib, your bed--- include any and all sleeping arrangements.
- Brother or sister? Add pictures of siblings waiting at home. If this is a specialized foster home---also include new foster siblings. Hopefully the child has heard their voice(s) over the phone. Consider getting a photo frame with a voice recording feature and bring it with you.
- Picture of immediate family--- those who live in or near the house. This is not the place to include every cousin, in-law, etc. in your family.
- Pets? This is a great time to introduce your furry friends, to show pictures and make animal sounds.

Special Tips for Older Children

Certainly if you are adopting an older child, then you would want to include more photos. Include the local playground, future school etc. Add anything you think they will find useful and/or interesting to see ahead of time. Familiarity reduces the fear factor. The less anxiety a child feels, the safer he or she will feel. Feeling safe allows for children to open their hearts.

Don't go overboard with trying to show them what a 'good life' they will have. It is a huge temptation to shower your child with toys, clothes and promises of trips to Disney. Let them see what a regular day in their new family will look like.

End with a picture of your family. Add an image of your child to a family photo by superimposing them (with a scanner, PhotoShop program or by manually taping their photo) to make a complete family photo.

For Babies & Toddlers Too?

Yes! Toddlers and even babies (I consider a baby as someone 12 months or younger) can tuck away the images for a short time. You'll have plenty of time to review *The Welcome Book* even if it's a short transition period. By offering some predictability via the pictures, it helps offset some of the new home shock they feel as they arrive. You can mention Scruffy so many times that by the time your child meets the family dog it won't be such a surprise.

Final Benefit

Establishing trust. You can assure the child with the *Welcome Book* by saying, "See I prepared you for your new home and what it would be like and here it is." It is a small project with a huge impact. You can earn credibility and create consistency for the child by working with him or her and previous caregivers thereby bridging two worlds in a concrete and important fashion.

Fast forward a few years and watch as life comes full circle. You might catch them sitting in the living room looking back at their *Welcome Book*. My how times flies!

Beth O'Malley 2007
Sign up for free lifebook tips
www.adoptionlifebooks.com/signup.htm