

# Transitioning Children in Foster Care to Adoptive Homes

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**Redmond Reams**

*Reams and Associates*

*Portland, Oregon*

Moving to an adoptive home is a momentous event for children in foster care. No available research

details how these transitions occur in the United States. This study provides 205 surveys from foster and adoptive parents and case-workers describing a transition. The median transitions had four visits over 10 days. Correlates of visitation length included distance between homes, whether the adoptive parent was a stranger to the child, whether the child was neglected, and the amount of emotional sharing between the foster and adoptive parents.

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Almost half (48%) of all children adopted from the U.S. child welfare system in 2018 went to an adoptive home other than their foster home (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2019). The transition process offers the child welfare system an opportunity to provide a planful experience that honors the adoptive relationships that are forming—as well as the foster relationships that are evolving or perhaps ending (Eagle, 1994). This planfulness may stand in sharp contrast to the abrupt, often traumatic moves experienced by the child previously (Burnell, 2009; Davis, 2015; Fisher et al., 2011; Mitchell, 2016; Unrau et al., 2008).

Yet children are not the only ones affected by how well an adoptive transition goes; foster and adoptive parents also are affected. Foster parents can experience exacerbated grief when a child leaves their home precipitously (Davis, 2015; Hebert et al., 2013; Hopkins-Best, 2012; Neil et al., 2018). Adoptive parents can become stressed when transitions go poorly (Neil et al., 2018; Selwyn et al., 2015).

## Literature Review

Recommendations on how to transition children from a foster home to a separate adoptive home have been mostly based on theory and clinical experience. Many authors agree that it is better for adoptive parents to have access to information about the child's background and day-to-day care and behavior, for the children to have visits with the adoptive parents and for those to occur in the foster home initially, that a lifebook (a book created the child that tells their story, before and after adoption) should accompany the child, that the child should receive preparation for the adoption, usually through talks, that there should be contact with former caregivers after the adoptive transition has been completed, and that the adoption should proceed at the child's pace (Burnell, 2009; Capacity Building Center for States, n.d.; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; Davis, 2015; Ewald, 2004; Fahlberg, 1991; Gray, 2007; Henry, 2005; Hopkins-Best, 2012; Johnston, 1997, Neil et al., 2020; Riggs, 2017; Steward & O'Day, 2000).

A few authors have made specific recommendations for time frames for adoptive transitions. Fahlberg (1991), in her classic book *A Child's Journey through Placement*, suggested two to three days for babies under four months of age, seven to ten days for children over four months and under four years, and three to eight weeks for children four years old and older. Gray (2007) has the most detailed set of recommendations. She recommended a transition of six days for children under five months of age, 10 days for children five to 10 months old, 10–14 days for children 11–24 months old, 14–21 days for children two to five years old, and 22 days or longer for children six to 12 years old. Hopkins-Best (2012) focused only on toddlers and recommended one to four weeks. Burnell (2009) suggested transitions of less than two weeks for babies and two weeks to three months for non-babies. Ewald (2004) recommended 4–6 visits for babies 2–8 months old, 8–12 visits for toddlers 8–15 months old, and 3–6 weeks for children one to five years old.

There are only a few studies reporting specific components of transition processes. Berry, Barth, and Needell (1996) reported that adoptive parents had preplacement visits between children and adoptive parents 59% of the time, received background information on the child 71% of the time, talked with foster parents 45% of the time, and received a lifebook regarding the child 24% of the time. Wind, Brooks, and Barth (2005) described much lower percentages: with adoptive parents having preplacement visits with children 27% of the time, receiving background information 32% of the time, talking with foster parents 22% of the time, and receiving a lifebook regarding the child 10% of the time. Selwyn and colleagues (2015), in England, reported an average length of transitions of 14 days. Neil (2018) describes a two-step process for 40 English children aged five months to six years. The first stage was a “getting to know you” stage that lasted one to eight weeks. The second stage involved more of the active transition in which the adoptive parents start performing caregiving tasks for the child and this stage lasted nine to 14 days. In a larger survey of 226 British adoptive parents, transitions lasted an average of 11.5 days with a median of 10 days (Neil, Young, & Hartley, 2018).

There has been very little research on the impact of transitions on children or other participants. Fisher and colleagues (2011) found that using Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for Preschoolers (MTFC-P) reduced stress in foster parents during a placement change. This reduced foster parent stress led to the children being transitioned having normal stress patterns in their daily cortisol rhythms as compared to abnormal cortisol stress patterns in children being transitioned whose foster parents did not receive MTFC-P. Selwyn and colleagues (2015) reported that adoption disruptions were statistically more common “if their adopters considered the introductions to have been handled badly” (p. 85). Poor timing, poor planning, and being rushed were the reasons adoptive parents gave for the problematic introductions between themselves and the children they were adopting. Adoptive parents also described adoption disruptions occurring statistically more often when they felt the foster parents hindered the introductions and the transitional process. These findings were based on transitions of which 39% were judged by adoptive parents to have been handled well, 31% were rated as reasonable, and 30% were assessed to have been handled badly. Neil, Young, and Hartley (2018) found that adoptive parents’ reports of how their adoptions were faring were related to both how the child and the adoptive parents were impacted by the transition, with more negative transition impacts for either the child or the adoptive parents being related to the adoption faring more poorly subsequently.

Another source of recommendations for adoptive transitions is the local child welfare agency: the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS). In setting standards for its caseworkers around adoptive transitions, the Oregon DHS specifies that “the number, duration and location of pre-placement transition visits between the child and the selected adoptive family should be individualized to consider the child’s needs” (p. 1299; Oregon Department of Human Services, 2019). In addition, there is also an expectation that at least one visit occurs in the foster home and another one in the future adoptive home, and preferably several in each home. There is also a specification that the child’s caseworker, the adoptive caseworker, both the adoptive and

foster families, and the child's therapist (if there is one) be involved in planning the transition. The schedule of the transition should be "at the child's pace, and, if necessary, slow down the transition" (p. 1300; Oregon Department of Human Services), although no guidance is provided on how to assess the child's pace. Finally, the child's lifebook is provided to the adoptive family if available.

## **Study Purpose**

The goals of this study were to

- document the details of a sample of adoptive transitions and thereby provide initial data describing child welfare practices in this area,
- search for relationships between study variables and the number of visits between the child and the adoptive parents as this is a crucial parameter of adoptive transitions,
- examine relationships between demographic variables and adoptive transition practices, and
- compare recommendations for adoptive transitions from the theory and practice literature to what actually has been done.

## **Method**

Subjects are from a convenience sample recruited from trainings presented to the child welfare community in Oregon and through the outreach of the Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center (ORPARC). Thus, this sample may not be representative of all foster and adoptive parents or child welfare caseworkers. Surveys were completed about 205 children with a separate respondent for each transition: 94 by adoptive parents, 64 by foster parents, and 47 by state child welfare caseworkers. All three groups were present in the community trainings while the outreach of ORPARC mostly resulted in surveys from foster and adoptive parents. Thus, each participant responded about one child's transition and each transition had only one respondent describing it.

Respondents were instructed to answer about the child whose transition to an adoptive home they most recently were part of. If more than one child was involved in that transition, respondents were directed to answer about the youngest child. Only transitions that entailed a child moving from a foster home to a separate, different adoptive home were included. All transitions occurred in Oregon and included children in the state child welfare system. All questions used in this study were either yes/no or multiple choice. Transition was defined as “the time between the first in-person contact between the child and the future adoptive parent and when the child is living permanently with the future adoptive parent.” Study procedures were approved by the relevant Institutional Review Boards and consent was obtained from all study participants.

All surveys were about the respondent’s most recent adoptive transition. Thus, this is a retrospective study with transitions occurring between one month and 30 years prior to the survey being completed. Because foster parents and caseworkers were involved in more transitions than adoptive parents, they were more likely to be responding about a more recent transition. This retrospection has many issues with it that will be discussed later, however, the decision was made to include all surveys to add greater statistical power and also to provide a view into the way adoptive transitions may have changed over time.

The survey was designed to include characteristics of the child, the adoptive home, the foster home, the caseworker, and the transition process. Some items were only answered by some respondents based on their available knowledge; e.g., caseworkers were not asked about the child’s behavior during visits, but foster and adoptive parents were. Unfortunately, due to an oversight, questions about the racial make-up of the children and the parents was omitted. The variables from each section are listed in Table 1 with summary values for the sample. Potential items were generated from the literature review and clinical experience. An early version of the questionnaire was previewed by members of the local Special Needs Adoption Coalition and input was given and integrated into subsequent revisions.

**Table 1**  
*Sample Characteristics*

<b>Child Characteristics</b>	<b>% of Sample</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Range</b>
How long had the target child been in that foster home at the time of transition (in months)		202	16.9	14.0	13.5	0–96
Child's age at removal from birth home (in months)		187	25.8	14.0	29.9	1–132
Child's age at transition (in months)		204	56.7	46.5	41.5	3–204
Number of prior foster placements		197	2.4	2.0	2.7	0–17
Gender of child	Female 54% Male 46%	201				
Services child receiving at time of transition	EI/Special education 36% Mental health 45% Medical monitoring 17% None 33%	199				
Abuse, neglect and other risk factors	Physically Abused 29% Sexually Abused 17% Neglected 76% Exposed to A&D in utero 66% Exposed to DV 55% Lived with substance-abusing parents 69%	202				
Was child still in contact with birth parent at time of transition	Yes 28% No 72%	180				

*(continued)*

**Table 1 (Continued)**

*Sample Characteristics*

Child Characteristics	% of Sample	N	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Range
<b>Foster home characteristics</b>						
Foster parent's age at time of adoptive transition (in years)		61	45.2	39.0	12.0	28-75
Number of children in foster home at time of transition (not including target child)		201	2.2	2.0	2.3	0-15
Length of time foster parent had been fostering at time of transition (in years)		174	5.5	3.0	6.4	0-40
Was foster parent considered as an adoptive resource	Yes 34% No 66%	180				
<b>Adoptive home characteristics</b>						
Adoptive parents age at time of adoptive transition		93	38	38	7.3	23-60
How many children in adoptive home before target child joined (50% had none)		203	1.2	0	1.7	0-9
Adopted a child before	Yes 22% No 78%					
Any adoptive parent taking a parental leave during transition	Yes 67% No 33%	161				



Work status of adoptive parents at time of transition	193				
51% Both parents fulltime 20% At least one parent only part-time work 29% One or more parents not working outside home					
Preexisting relationship of adoptive parent to child (if any)	187				
Nonrelated strangers 65% Nonrelated but had preexisting relationship 16% Kinship placement 19%					
<b>Caseworker characteristics</b>					
Number of adoptive transitions involved in **	46				
Less than five 22% Five to 10 13% 10 to 20 24% More than 20 41%					
Years as caseworker**	47	11.2	10	7.5	1-30
<b>Transition characteristics</b>					
How long ago did the transition occur (in months)	175	36.5	17	51.1	1-360
Length of transition (in days)	202	27.2	10.5	66.0	1-450
Distance between foster and adoptive homes (in miles)	200	364.0	60	929.8	1-10,000

(continued)

**Table 1 (Continued)**

*Sample Characteristics*

<b>Child Characteristics</b>	<b>% of Sample</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Range</b>
Number of in-person contacts between foster and adoptive parents during transition*		148	5.3	3.0	10.2	0-100
Number of phone calls between foster and adoptive parents during transition*		147	9.0	2.0	43.7	0-520
Number of emails between foster and adoptive parents during transition*		147	3.7	0.0	11.1	0-100
Number of in-person visits between child and adoptive parents as part of transition process		197	4.4	4.0	3.9	0-25
Cumulative length in hours of visits between adoptive parent and child		143	35.4	15.0	58.0	0-400
Number of phone calls between child and adoptive parents during the transition process*		132	1.9	0.0	4.2	0-27
Were older siblings of target child also involved in transitioning	Yes 29% No 71%	204				
Birth siblings of target child in same foster home but not transitioning	Yes 18% No 82%	198				

Who was involved in planning transition	Child's caseworker 86% Adoptive parent 66% Foster parent 65% Adoptive caseworker 43% Child's psychotherapist 21% Court Appointed Special Advocate 20% Child's lawyer 19%	186	3.2	3	1.5	1-7
Number of individuals involved in planning transition		184				
Did a Lifebook accompany child	Yes 56% No 44%	197				
Information shared with adoptive parent by foster parent*	Child's daily routine 82% Child's likes and dislikes 89% Effective parenting strategies with child 62% Child's personality and temperament 85% Child's behavior 75% Child's history 55% Birth family history 42%	130				
Amount of emotional support shared between foster and adoptive parents	Less than 10 minutes 43% 10-30 minutes 18% 30-60 minutes 14% 60-120 minutes 7% More than 120 minutes 17%	148				

(continued)

**Table 1 (Continued)**

*Sample Characteristics*

<b>Child Characteristics</b>	<b>% of Sample</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Range</b>
In-person visits between adoptive parents and child occurred	Yes 90% No 10%	205				
Which visit child alone with adoptive parent without foster parent	First visit 35% Second visit 32% Third visit 21% Fourth visit 8% Fifth visit or later 4%	188				
Which visit between child and adoptive parent is first overnight visit	First visit 20% Second visit 19% Third visit 19% Fourth visit 16% Fifth visit 10% Sixth visit 7% Seventh visit or later 10%	177				
Child had contact with adoptive parent before meeting in-person*	Yes 31% No 69%	140				
How was child prepared for upcoming transition*	Read to 27% Foster parent talk 72% Caseworker talk 61% Child's therapist talk 39%	96-99				

How much notice (in days) was child given of upcoming transition*		107	12.4	5	34.1	0-270
Child's behavior during visits noted by adoptive or foster parents*	Anxiety 42% Hyperactivity 38% Overfriendliness 34% Clinging 34% Aggression 15% Spaciness 14% None 20%	143				
Contact between child and former foster parent after transition	None of any kind 30% In-person 49% Phone calls 48% Written (letters, texts, emails, social media) 34%	203				
How soon (in days) first contact occurred between child and former foster parent(s)*		119	32.5	10.0	65.7	1-400
Contact between adoptive parent and foster parent after transition	None of any kind 25% In-person 23% Phone calls 57% Written (letters, texts, emails, social media) 57%	201				

*Notes:* \*Questions asked of adoptive and foster parents only. \*\*Questions asked of caseworkers only.

In addition, respondents were asked to rate the length of the transition and how well the transition served the dual goals of promoting a new relationship between the child and the adoptive parent and helping the child deal with the change in the relationship with the foster parent and the loss of the foster home. Respondents also rated how stressed the child was during the transition and how stressed they were (only foster and adoptive parents). Finally, respondents were asked whether the transition could have been improved and, if so, how. These evaluative ratings will be explored in a separate paper.

Analyses were conducted using the SPSS statistical package. Pearson correlation coefficients were used when looking at relationships between variables at the interval or ratio level of measurement. Kendall's Tau B correlation was used when looking at association between ordinal variables and variables that were interval or ratio. When examining relationships between dichotomous variables and those at the interval or ratio level, *t*-tests were used. Chi-square analyses were used in situations when both variables were dichotomous or nominal.

## Results

### *Demographic Differences*

It was decided a priori to explore who was the respondent, child's gender, and length of time between the adoption and when the questionnaire was completed as possible covariates of interest.

### *Respondent Differences*

There were some systematic differences based on whether the respondent was a caseworker, a foster parent or an adoptive parent. It should be remembered that when looking at these comparisons that the different groups of respondents are answering about different children.

Caseworkers only completed the survey if they were the caseworker for the child who was moved. Thus, questions about who planned the move had caseworkers identifying themselves much more often as involved

in the planning than did adoptive or foster parents. Foster and adoptive parents endorsed contact during the transition period between themselves at a much higher rate than did caseworkers, most likely because caseworkers were not aware of it. Yet caseworkers reported higher rates of post-transition contact between adoptive and foster parents than did either of those groups. Adoptive parents, who likely had been involved in only a few adoptions, had a significantly longer average time since the adoption they were responding about had occurred (mean of almost 61 months) compared to caseworkers (just under 19 months) or foster parents (just over 17 months). Also, when adoptive parents were respondents, the relationship between adoptive parent and child was more likely to be as non-related strangers than when the respondents were caseworkers or foster parents, perhaps because adoptive parents were largely recruited with the help of ORPARC.

Some other differences seemed to stand alone rather than being part of a larger pattern. When foster parents were the respondent, it was significantly more common for the child to become the youngest child in the adoptive home, for the adoptive parents to not take parental leave, and for the child to have been in the foster home for a longer period than for other kinds of respondents. When adoptive parents were the respondents, then the child was less likely to be receiving mental health services before the transition than when the respondents were foster parents or caseworkers. When caseworkers were the respondents, there were fewer children in the foster home at time of transition and more people were involved in planning the transition than for either of the two groups of respondents.

Some comparisons were only between foster and adoptive parents because caseworkers were not asked. For instance, adoptive parents reported receiving information on foster parent parenting strategies (51%) at a lower rate than foster parents reported giving that information (79%). The reverse pattern was evident for giving birth family information where adoptive parents reported a higher rate of transmission (49%) than did foster parents (32%). In another set of differing results, adoptive parent respondents were significantly more

likely to note overfriendly behavior on the part of the child during visits than were foster parent respondents, yet adoptive parents noted significantly less anxiety on the part of the child during visits than did foster parents. Foster parents also identified more emotional sharing between foster and adoptive parents in their transitions than did adoptive parents. Also, foster parents were significantly older than adoptive parents at the time of the transition (45 versus 38 years respectively).

### *Gender Differences*

There were very few differences related to the child's gender given the number of comparisons made. More females than males were reported as having been sexually abused ( $p < .01$ ), and more females than males were rated as clingy during visits ( $p = .01$ ). The child's therapist was involved at a significantly ( $p = .02$ ) higher rate in the planning of the transition for girls (24%) than for boys (12%), even though girls were not in therapy at a significantly higher rate than boys before transition (50% and 39% respectively;  $p = .14$ ).

### *Time since Transition Differences*

It should be remembered that this variable involves both how long in the past the respondent is trying to remember and also when the transition was actually occurring, and thus may have been affected by policies/beliefs in place at that time. More recent transitions were significantly related to a range of variables. Some of these relationships appeared to be related to each other. For instance, more recent transitions occurred in cases where the child had been in therapy at the time of the transition, the child's therapist had been involved in planning the transition, and the child's therapist had discussed adoption with the child. Another instance of possibly connected correlations were more recent transitions occurring in cases where the foster parent shared parenting strategies with the adoptive parent and when the child or adoptive parent was more likely to have communicated with the former foster parent via writing (texting, email, letters, social media) after the



transition. There were other correlations that seemed to stand alone; with more recent transitions being related to

- the child being older,
- the foster parent had been considered as an adoptive placement,
- the child was rated as anxious during the visits, or
- the transition was not rated as too short.

We will come back to these demographic differences when we find significant findings below in our exploratory analyses to check and see if the demographic differences might help explain any findings there.

## *Exploratory Analyses*

### *Length of Transition*

Respondents were asked about length of transition both in terms of the number of visits and the number of days that the transition lasted. Only number of visits were used in these analyses because of the much greater degree of skew in the number of days reported.

In exploring what are the correlates of the length of the transition in terms of number of visits, only variables related to the child and the transition process were significant. None of the variables related to the foster parent, adoptive parent, or caseworker were significantly connected to transition length. Younger children had longer transitions ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ). Shorter transitions were present for children that had experienced parental neglect (mean # of visits 4.0 vs. 5.8;  $p < .03$ ) and children that were exposed to domestic violence (mean number of visits 3.7 vs. 5.3;  $p < .01$ ).

Among the transition process variables, there were several that related to how many visits occurred. One group of process variable was about who was involved in the planning of the transition. When the child's caseworker was involved in the transition planning, then the transition was shorter in terms of number of visits (4.2 vs. 6.2;  $p < .02$ ). Yet there were more visits in the transition with the involvement of the

foster parent (5.1 vs. 3.5 visits;  $p = .01$ ) or the adoptive parent (5.0 vs. 3.7 visits;  $p < .04$ ).

Another group of process variables related to the length of the transition was about the connection between the adoptive and foster parents. Not surprisingly, the number of contacts between adoptive and foster parents during transition was highly related to the number of visits ( $r = .63, p < .001, n = 147$ ). Also, the number of minutes of emotional sharing divided into a six-point scale was also positively correlated with the length of transition (Kendall's  $\tau b = .24, p < .001, n = 147$ ). If written information was given from foster to adoptive parent, it was also related to (5.3 vs. 3.4 visits;  $p = .01$ ) to longer transitions. The foster parent sharing information about the child's daily routine with the adoptive parents was also associated with more visitation (5.2 vs. 3.0 visits;  $p < .01$ ). Later steps in the transition process—but related to adoptive–foster parent connection—also were related to the number of visits; more transition visits were associated with reverse contact for the child with the former foster parent after transition, whether in person ( $p < .001$ ) or in writing ( $p < .01$ ), and with a trend in that direction for phone calls ( $p < .06$ ).

There were other transition process variables that were correlated with the number of visits and, on their surface, did not seem to connected to other correlates. The distance between foster and adoptive home measured in miles was significantly negatively correlated with the number of visits in the transition ( $r = -.19; p < .01; n = 191$ ) with longer distances being related to shorter transitions. If the foster parent talked to the child about adoption as part of the preparation process for the child, then there were more visits (4.7 vs. 2.8;  $p < .01$ ). If the child was rated as aggressive (3.0 vs. 5.0;  $p < .01$ ), anxious (3.8 vs. 5.4;  $p < .02$ ) or spacey (3.0 vs. 5.0;  $p < .05$ ) during visits, then there were fewer visits. If the adopting parent was a stranger to the child versus either familiar and/or related to the child, then there were fewer visits (3.9 vs. 5.6;  $p < .03$ ).

Variables with significant relationships to the number of visits were entered into a multiple regression equation (see Table 2) as a

**Table 2**

*Multiple Regression Predicting Number of Visits Between Child and Adoptive Parents (N = 90)*

Predictors <sup>a</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Control variables <sup>b</sup>	.09**	
Adoptive parent stranger or not	.09**	-.02
Distance between foster and adoptive homes in miles	.05*	2.28**
How much emotional sharing between adoptive and foster parents	.04*	.59*
Child reported as neglected in birth home	.04*	2.18*
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.31*	

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Two variables were excluded from the multiple regression because of low *N*s (if foster parent talked to child as part of preparing the child for adoption and whether the foster parent discussed the child's daily routine with the adoptive parent). Neither variable was a significant predictor when they were included. <sup>b</sup>Control variables included age of child at the time of the transition and how long between transition and when the questionnaire was completed. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

group after two covariates were forced in first. These covariates were the child's age at transition and how much time passed between transition and when the questionnaire was completed. Four variables emerged as significant predictors: whether the adoptive parent was a stranger or not to the child, the distance between the adoptive and foster homes, how much emotional sharing occurred between foster and adoptive parents, and whether the child was neglected or not in the birth home.

### *Agreement with Recommendations from the Literature*

As described in the introduction, authors have made recommendations for transitions into adoptive placements based on theory and clinical experience. The most detailed recommendations are about the length of the transition, either in terms of the number of days it lasts or the number of visits involved. These recommendations are summarized in Table 3 and compared to figures from the surveys in this study.

**Table 3**  
*Recommended and Actual Characteristics of Transition to Adoptive Placements*

Characteristic	Source	Applicable Age Range	Recommendation	Actual Mean	Actual Median	N
Length of visitation	Frailberg, 1991	less than 4 months	2-3 days	14	14	1
		between 4 months and 4 years	7-10 days	16	10	121
	Gray, 2007	more than 4 years	21-56 days	43	14	79
		less than 5 months	6 days	41	22	4
		between 5 and 10 months	10 days	6	3	9
		between 11 and 24 months	10-14 days	14	10	44
		between 2 and 5 years	14-21 days	20	8	88
		between 6 and 12 years	more than 22 days	45	14	74
Number of visits	Ewald, 2004	1-5 years	21-42 days	18	10	119
	Ewald, 2004	2-8 months	4-6	5	4	8
		8-15 months	8-12	5	3	18

In terms of measures of central tendency (mean and median), the prior recommendations agree fairly well with what has been done in practice. There is an acknowledged pattern for the prior recommendations to be for longer transitions as children get older (e.g., Gray, 2007) but the medians tend to stay at about two weeks for the transitions surveyed. For older children, this results in sizable percentages of transitions that do not fit the recommendations. Gray (2007) recommends transitions last more than 22 days for children six to 12 years old, yet only 23% of children in that age range have transitions that meet that criteria. Fraiberg (1991) recommends transition of 21 to 56 days for children four years of age and older; only 22% of those children's transitions fit into that time frame.

## Discussion

For children in the child welfare system, one of the most momentous events in life can be the transition from foster care into a permanent adoptive home. This shift can be an inflection point, a change in their narrative, and an altering of their trajectory. This study provides an overview of how transition to adoptive placements actually occurs based on over 200 retrospective surveys from foster parents, adoptive parents, and caseworkers. The goals were to describe what actually happens in adoptive transitions, especially with regarding the number of visits, and to compare the child welfare practices with recommendations from the literature. Interrelationships among the variables were also explored.

Transitions in this sample lasted an average of 27 days; however, this is heavily influenced by a few very long transitions. The median is 10.5 days. This second figure is not far from Selwyn and colleagues' (2015) average of 14 days for the transition in an English sample and Neil and colleagues' (2018) median of 10 days in another English sample. Transitions involved, on average, four visits between adoptive parents and children lasting a mean of 35 hours (median of 10 hours); 10% of transitions had zero visits. Seventy percent of children had some

sort of contact with former foster parents after the transition; 49% had in-person visits, 48% had phone calls, and 34% of children had written contact (letters, emails, texts, social media), which is in line with 75% of children having contact with former foster parents in prior research (Neil et al., 2018). This first post-transition contact with a former foster parent occurred on average 32 days after transition (median 10 days). Most commonly, three individuals were involved in the planning of the transition: the child's caseworker, foster parent(s), and adoptive parent(s). Adoptive caseworkers, the child's lawyer, CASA, or therapist each were involved in a substantial minority of the transitions. It must be emphasized that these statistics constitute accepted practice and are not recommendations as best practices.

Length of transition (in terms of number of visits) was also associated to a number of other variables. Length of transition was correlated with the age of the child, with younger children having longer transitions—which runs counter to the recommendations of the literature (e.g., Gray, 2007). Who planned the transition also was related to length of the transition, with caseworker involvement in planning relating to shorter transitions and foster or adoptive parent involvement connecting to longer transitions. Although some might see children acting up during visits as a sign that they are struggling with the shift in relationships and might need more time and support, this study showed that children showing aggression, anxiety, or spaciness during visits had shorter transitions. The last pattern highlighted is that the relationship between the foster and adoptive parents seems to be connected to the length of the transition as evidenced by more visits being related to a variety of variables: number of contacts between foster and adoptive parents, number of minutes of emotional support between adoptive and foster parents, if information was shared on the child's daily routine, and post-transition visits between child and foster parent. This calls to mind Selwyn and colleagues' (2015) finding that the quality of the relationship between foster and adoptive parents was associated with the adoptive parents' rating of the quality of the transition.

There are a number of issues and limitations that need to be kept in mind in considering these results and accompanying suggestions for improvements in future research. First, these surveys all were completed retrospectively, over a lag ranging from one month to 30 years (mean = 36.5 months, median = 17 months). This lag means that there could be both memory effects that systematically affect the data the longer in the past the transition occurred, as well as actual changes in child welfare policy over the years that affected how adoptive transitions were carried out. These two possible ways of understanding effects of the retrospective nature of the surveys cannot be disentangled statistically, making it hard to interpret details of the relationships. Thus, collecting surveys at the time of the transition or shortly after this would be preferable. Second, all the surveys were completed about different children in separate transitions; in other words, there was only one informant for each transition. Having more than one rater on each transition could improve the reliability of the results and allow for the study of differences between observers about the same children. The current differences based on who the respondent was are based on different groups of children. Third, racial composition was not collected on the children or the adults in the study, preventing any investigation of racial differences in the transitions, especially for cross-racial adoptions. This is a key data point that should be included in all future surveys. Fourth, the data here is all survey-based and would be strengthened by interviews from the participants during the process of the transitions, allowing for a more in-depth, qualitative look at the transition process.

This study adds to our scant knowledge of how transitions of children into adoptive homes actually occur, especially in the United States. These transitions are so crucial to the children, adoptive parents, and foster parents—and they deserve much more attention. We also must move from just knowing what is going on in transitions to identifying which best practices for adoptive transitions support less stressful transitions for children, greater foster parent retention (Hebert et al., 2013), and more securely attached adoptive parent-child relationships (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014).

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