

PREPARATION FOR ADOPTION OF OLDER CHILDREN

Written by Dudley Gilmer

On four evenings every week, children at the three pre-adoptive cottages of the Grandfather Home for Children in Banner Elk, N.C., gather for what they call "Group." For an hour they talk about their feelings and help each other look realistically at their feelings of sadness, guilt and anger. This structured peer interaction, which takes place under the supervision of trained houseparents, is an important part of an unusual "Preparation for Adoption" program that is having marked success.

As a teacher of institutionalized children, I was skeptical about the possibility of successfully placing in adoptive homes teenagers who had histories of behavior problems. My own experiences had convinced me that the behavior of such troubled young people seldom really changes. They have known years of problems and hurt. How could a children's home expect to take these disturbed children and convert them into family-style kids within a few months? It was inconceivable. But after spending time on the campus of Grandfather Home, interviewing and observing the counseling sessions, I was persuaded that the Preparation for Adoption program is working. Healing is taking place.

In addition to the Group meetings, each child has at least one hour per week of private counseling with Bill Painter, director of the Preparation for Adoption program. Painter says low self-concept based on multiple rejections is the basic trouble revealed in the sessions. There are a number of complicated psychological and emotional results from such past experiences, and each child develops his or her own defense mechanisms to keep from getting hurt again. In 90 percent of the cases, sexual abuse has been part of the child's history, although many have never told this before. The child's feelings of anger and sadness are generally expressed through inappropriate behavior, which ranges from violence to withdrawal.

The approach used by the Preparation for Adoption program is to let the young people face each problem, express their grief, anger or guilt, and accept themselves as worthwhile people. Only then, it is felt, can the children give and receive love in a new family.

Most homes for children and other agencies dealing with troubled young people have tried hard to put salve on the wounds of neglected children. They have given care in the form of food, shelter and clothing. They have provided educational opportunities and they have used various methods of behavior control to try to give the youngsters a chance for acceptance in society. They have tried keeping the children in institutions, rehabilitating families, and placing them in foster homes or with adoptive parents. Some of this has been successful, but much has been frustratingly inadequate for young people who have been emotionally damaged.

Adults working with disturbed children have often found it necessary to focus primarily on the disruptive behavior. Neither public schools nor group homes nor foster parents can handle some of the extreme misbehavior. To their great disappointment, many well-motivated adults have found that their best efforts often did not bring healing to the kids. More than a "salve" was required. Jack Lowder, one of the houseparents at the Grandfather Home, says, "There have been 'typical institutional kids' as a result of the efforts at most children's homes. These young people feel the world owes them something. They can't express their feelings. They never interrelate, or maybe they clam up. They've never learned to be 'real.' "

Painter was a social worker at Grandfather Home for seven years before the Preparation for Adoption

program was initiated. "The kids shared a lot," he says, "and I had good rapport with them. That was beautiful. But I found myself feeling totally inadequate to meet their needs. They became dependent on me, and I was not the solution to their pain. After several years of frustration and hearing the traditional 'don't get emotionally involved' advice, I knew that in spite of all our efforts, we were not making a long-lasting impact."

When Grandfather Home was selected for a state pilot study on adoptions, Painter was working with several children who qualified for the study. At a special training event at the Adoption Resource Center in Winston-Salem, N.C., everything he had been feeling about the inadequacies of traditional group care seemed to come into focus. "The idea that there were better ways to tune in to the anger and sadness of our children, the possibility that we could actually learn to meet their need," he said, "just fit perfectly with my gut instinct."

As he began to succeed in utilizing some of the therapeutic techniques he was learning, more and more agencies began to send kids with behavior problems to Grandfather Home. Painter was excited about the possibilities. He recommended that Grandfather Home establish a new program "to meet multiple rejections and to prepare children for adoption." The new pre-adoption program took shape and was formally undertaken in August 1984.

The program has met with enthusiasm from the staff and administration of Grandfather Home. "The greatest impetus may be in a long-range sense," Lowder says, "This seems to be a chance to break the cycle of low self-esteem that has continued sometimes for generations. When our girls see themselves as worthwhile, they will choose partners who also see themselves as worthwhile, and they will have children who know they are worthwhile. We want to break the chain of having more hurting kids in every generation. I see this as Christ at work through Grandfather Home."

The concept of "mission" and "ministry" rings throughout conversation with the staff at Grandfather Home, a Presbyterian institution where the kids are required to attend church. Lowder says: "I feel that God has moved in this place. He is giving us this program. Instead of housing children, we are now helping to make children what they were created to be: members of a family."

Robert Orpen, another houseparent, adds: "No one could be successful in this work without the love of God. God is moving through here all the time. But we don't expect these children to understand that until they've experienced human love. We are here to give this."

Reprinted with permission from *Presbyterian Survey* (now *Presbyterians Today*) June 1988

Even though this article was written years ago, the *Preparation for Adoption Program* at the Grandfather Home is still going strong. For more information on this vital ministry, contact:

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