

Submitter: Dr Michelle Pliske  
On Behalf Of:  
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There are several important aspects to understand for how using garbage bags (i.e. trash bags) for moving children within the foster care system can impact their mental health. First, when a child is initially removed from their home they may have their belongings packed into a trash bag. There are times where the family does not have access to luggage and the parent very lovingly packs their child's belongings into a trash bag so they can take their needed belongings with them. Removing the items packed by the parent from the trash bag to a duffle bag or luggage can create animosity between the child and their support workers. However, some children have their belongings thrown into trash bags when they are placed in substitute care with no thought to the belongings packed or the impact of the garbage bag on the child's mental health and well being. Once a child is in foster care, often movement to new placements are due to their resource/foster parent not being able to support the child's needs and manage their behavior. These children may believe they are a problem if their items are placed (or thrown) into trash bags. These children can develop low self-worth and low self-esteem as a result of this experience. When their belongings are then packed into a trash bag, this affirms their view of not being worthwhile, important, or wanted. Using trash bags can become symbolic for children, meaning the child believes they are trash. This symbolism may cause the child to internalize harmful messages, such as "I'm worthless" or "I'm unlovable" which will then impact and influence their future relationships as they begin to believe these negative statements are an aspect of their identity or who they are as people. These are experiences of adversity in early childhood. It is well documented that children who have high levels of adverse experiences are linked to later mental health or chronic health conditions. Simple preventative measures such as offering the use of a duffle bag to children can help alleviate the stress of moving and support a greater sense of self-worth. Workers require training for proper assessment of children and how to offer support services, such as bags, in a manner which is meaningful to the child and aligns with the current situation. Prevention efforts (adequate training, access to resources) can become protective factors for children, thus mitigating the effects of early exposure to childhood adversity and trauma.

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