



Foster Parents Considering Adoption



This factsheet is written for foster parents who are considering adopting one or more of the children in their care. While this factsheet does not address the specifics of how to adopt,¹ it provides information on the differences between foster care and

¹ For general information on getting started in the adoption process, read the Information Gateway publication *Adoption: Where Do I Start* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_start.cfm). For specifics on how to adopt a foster child living in your home, talk with someone in the adoption unit of the public agency that has legal custody of your foster child.

What's Inside:

- Differences between foster parenting and adopting
- Trends in foster parent adoptions
- Benefits of foster parent adoption
- Characteristics of foster families who adopt successfully
- Foster families whose adoptions fail
- Resources

adoption, and it explores some of the things for foster parents to consider when making the decision about whether to adopt a child in their care.²

Differences Between Foster Parenting and Adopting

There are a number of significant differences between foster care and adoption for the foster/adoptive family involved, even when a child remains in the same household. Compared to foster care, adoption brings the following changes for the parents (Craig-Oldsen, 1988):

- **Full legal responsibility for a child.** Legal responsibility was held by the agency during the time the child was in foster care.
- **Full financial responsibility for the child.** Even if the family receives adoption assistance or a subsidy on behalf of the child, families are still responsible for financial obligations such as childcare and extra-curricular activities.³
- **Full decision-making responsibility.** While the child was in foster care, decision-

making was shared with the agency and birth parent. When the child is adopted, adoptive parents take on this full responsibility.

- **Attachment differences.** The family is no longer working with the agency to help the child reunify with his/her parents; rather, they are now working to incorporate the child as a permanent member of their own family.

Trends in Foster Parent Adoptions

Prior to 1975, agencies discouraged foster parents from adopting the children in their care, and parents who asked about or chose to adopt were not always welcomed. Agencies discouraged adoption by foster parents for the following reasons: fear of losing good foster families when they were no longer available to take other foster children; concerns about how other foster children in the home who were not being adopted might be negatively affected; or fears about the impact of openness between the foster family and the birth family (Meezan & Shireman, 1985b). There was also a common assumption, even within the adoption community, that older children were not adoptable.

In the intervening decades, this practice has turned around as child welfare professionals and agencies increasingly recognize the benefits of foster parents adopting the children in their care if the children cannot be returned safely to their birth parents or relatives in a timely manner. The adoption

² To find out about helping your child make the transition from foster care to adoption, read *Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child: A Factsheet for Families* available at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_transition.cfm.

³ For more information on adoption assistance, go to the Adoption Assistance Database on the Information Gateway website at www.childwelfare.gov/parents/prospective/funding/adopt_assistance/ or read the Information Gateway publication *Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted From Foster Care: A Factsheet for Families* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_subsid.cfm).

field has come to acknowledge the benefits of this type of adoption for children, and shortened legal timeframes⁴ have made it easier for foster parents to approach their workers about adopting the children in their care. If foster parents do not suggest the possibility, their social worker may sometimes work with them to consider adopting children in their care who cannot return to the birth family. Some States now train foster parents as “resource families” for children, along with kinship and nonrelative prospective adoptive families (Grimm, 2003). The foster family’s role now includes not only acting as a support and mentor to the birth family to help the birth parents successfully reunify with their child if possible, but also to love a child and be open to having a permanent role in the child’s life (Lutz & Greenblatt, 2000).

National adoption and foster care statistics show that foster parent adoptions accounted for over half of the adoptions of children adopted from foster care each year from Fiscal Year (FY) 1998 through the end of FY 2002. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS),⁵ in FY 2002, 27,567 (or 52 percent) of the 53,000 children adopted from foster care that year were adopted by their foster parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

⁴ The Adoption & Safe Family Act of 1997 (ASFA) is a Federal law that requires that courts consider termination of parental rights of a child’s birth parents if the child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months.

⁵ States are required to report foster care/adoption statistics to the Federal Government through AFCARS.

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN THE UNITED STATES?

Children in foster care are more likely to be older, members of a minority group, members of a sibling group, or survivors of abuse or neglect. In FY 2002, the average age of children in foster care was 10.2 years. The average age of children adopted from foster care was 7.0 years. A disproportionate number of the children in care are children of color (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

Benefits of Foster Parent Adoption

Adoption by the foster family has the potential to benefit not only the child being adopted, but also the foster family and the child welfare agency. There are a number of reasons that a child’s foster parents may be the best adoptive parents for that child:

- Foster parents have a greater knowledge of a child’s experiences prior to placement and know what behaviors to expect from the child. If they have sufficient background information about what happened to a child before this placement, some knowledge of how children generally respond to such experiences, and extensive information about this child’s specific behavior patterns, the foster family is better able to understand

and respond to the child's needs in a positive and appropriate way (Meezan & Shireman, 1985a, 1985b).⁶

- Foster parents usually have fewer fantasies and fears about the child's birth family, because they often have met and know them as real people with real problems.
- Foster parents have a better understanding of their role and relationship with the agency—and perhaps a relationship with their worker (if the same worker stays throughout the duration of the child's placement).

Benefits for the Child

The biggest benefit of foster parent adoption for a child is the fact that the child does not have to move to a new family. Even very young infants may grieve the loss of the familiar sights, sounds, smells, and touch of a family when they must move. Staying in the same placement means the child will not leave familiar people and things, such as:

- Familiar foster parents and family
- School, classroom, classmates, and teachers
- Pets
- Friends
- Sports teams and other extracurricular activities
- Bedroom, house, or apartment

⁶ For more information on questions to ask in obtaining background information, read the Information Gateway publication *Obtaining Information on Your Prospective Adopted Child* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_background.cfm).

Since the foster family may have met or cared for a child during the child's visits with the birth family, the foster family is better able to help the child remember important people from the past and maintain important connections.

Benefits for Others

Foster parent adoption also benefits the birth parents in many cases by allowing them to know who is permanently caring for their children. For foster parents, receiving the agency's approval to adopt affirms the family's love and commitment to the child. Agencies benefit from this practice as it enables them to move children into permanency more quickly (since finalization of adoption requires that a child be in a placement at least 6 months, and this requirement has already been fulfilled in foster parent adoptions) (Rycus & Hughes, 1998; Fein, Maluccio, & Kluger, 1990).

Characteristics of Foster Families Who Adopt Successfully

Child welfare experts have identified characteristics of foster families who adopt the children in their care. The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPPP; n.d.) provides characteristics of successful "permanency planning resource families":

- These families like to give and help.
- They are satisfied with their lives.
- They are resourceful.

- They are tolerant of loss, anxiety, and ambiguity.
- They have a sense of humor.
- They are involved with the child in the community.

Researchers who studied foster/adoptive families in the early 1980s found that the families who successfully adopted the children in their care had the following characteristics (Meezan & Shireman, 1985b):

- They expected the children would be placed long-term and had the children in their home for a longer period of time than foster parents who did not choose to adopt.
- They enjoyed the children and were able to be actively involved with them.
- The foster parents had some acceptance of the birth family's positive attributes and were able to talk about them with their children. However, these foster families also *perceived* the children to be similar to themselves in some way.
- The children who were adopted by their foster families had successfully resolved their ties to their birth families and were younger than children not adopted by their foster families.

This same study also found the following (Meezan & Shireman, 1985b):

Visits with birth parents were beneficial to the adoption process. Visits with the birth families did not inhibit the adoption process—in fact, just the opposite was true. The families who adopted their foster children were more likely to have met their child's birth parents in the year they were considering adopting the child. The benefits of birth parent visiting for the child include the fact that, through visits with their birth parents, children gain a more realistic view of their birth parents and a sense of their own identity (Littner, 1975; Fahlberg, 1991). Of course, the family circumstances for each child are unique, and visits with birth family members may not be indicated for some children.

A positive interaction cycle was established between the parents and child.

Foster parents had the sense that things were “getting better” as the placement progressed.⁷ This positive cycle in which everyone's needs were met was found to a greater extent in the families who chose to adopt versus those families who chose not to adopt, and it was noticeably absent at the point of adoption disruption in the adoptions that failed. Families may remain responsive to their children only if they think their efforts are justified and their children are responsive. Children will respond to parents only under similar conditions (Meezan & Shireman, 1985b).

⁷ For more information on the positive interaction cycle and its relationship to attachment in children in placement, see V. Fahlberg, *A Child's Journey Through Placement* (1991).

Foster Families Whose Adoptions Fail

Child welfare experts identified characteristics of resource families who did not adopt successfully (adapted from NRCFCPPP, n.d.):

- Unresolved losses in the past and present, resulting in a need to revisit past relationships and an inability to meet the child's needs
- Possessiveness of the child and an unwillingness to acknowledge and work with important people from the child's past
- Desperation for a child, resulting in unrealistic expectations of foster care and adoption
- High stress and anxiety levels
- Aggressiveness
- Power and control issues

A study of foster families in the early 1980s found that the foster families in the adoptions that failed were rigid and did not allow for changes easily. They might have had difficulty sharing parenting with the agency or the birth families. These families were poorly prepared for adoption and did not have open communication or an open relationship with their social worker. Some families felt coerced by their worker into agreeing to adopt the child. These families also experienced more worker turnovers than the families who were successful in their adoptions (Meezan & Shireman, 1985b).

Conclusion

The decision by a foster family to adopt a child in their care will be based on the unique factors associated with the child, family, and circumstances. To help with such decision-making, many States use mutual, informed decision-making in their training for foster/adoptive parents. Examples of training programs include the Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting (MAPP) (Pasztor, 1986) and Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.).

Foster families who decide to pursue adoption should inform themselves as much as possible (see Resources) and work with their agency to ensure a smooth transition for the child and themselves.⁸ Successful foster parent adoptions are the result of a mutual decision by the foster parents and the agency about what is best for a specific child.

⁸ For information on helping the child make the transition from foster care to adoption, read Information Gateway's factsheet *Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child* at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_transition.cfm.

Resources

Lists of foster and adoptive support groups in each State can be found in the National Adoption Directory at www.childwelfare.gov/nad.

Information on adoption assistance by State can be found on the Information Gateway website at www.childwelfare.gov/parents/prospective/funding/adopt_assistance/.

A resource list of national organizations that support adoptive parents is available at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?svcID=135&rate_chno=AR-0011A.

References

Child Welfare League of America. (n.d.). The PRIDE program. Retrieved March 18, 2005, from <http://www.cwla.org/programs/trieschman/pride.htm>

Craig-Oldsen, H. L. (1988). *From foster parent to adoptive parent: A resource guide for workers* [training materials]. Atlanta: Child Welfare Institute.

Fahlberg, V. (1991). *A child's journey through placement*. Indianapolis: Perspective's Press.

Fein, E., Maluccio, A. H., & Kluger, M. P. (1990). *No more partings: An examination of long-term foster family care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, Inc.

Grimm, B. (2003). Foster parent training: What the CFS reviews do and don't tell us. *Youth Law News*. Updated link retrieved May 10, 2006, from http://www.youthlaw.org/fileadmin/ncyl/youthlaw/publications/yln/2003/issue_2/03_yln_2_grimm_cfs_rev_3.pdf

Littner, N. (1975). The importance of the natural parents to the child in placement. *Child Welfare*, 44(3), 175-181.

Lutz, L. L., & Greenblatt, S. B. (2000). *Dual licensure of foster and adoptive families: Evolving best practices*. Washington, DC: Casey Family Programs Resource Center for Resource Family Support. Retrieved February 23, 2005, from http://casey.org/NR/rdonlyres/5F5620F6-743E-4FC0-BE36-0DB04BE81157/128/casey_dual_licensure.pdf

Meezan, W., & Shireman, J. F. (1985a). Antecedents to foster parent adoption decisions. *Children and Youth Services Review* 7(2), 207-224.

Meezan, W., & Shireman, J. F. (Eds.) (1985b). *Care and commitment: Foster parent adoption decisions*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning [formerly, the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning] (n.d.). *Concurrent planning curriculum, Handout 4.10, Full disclosure*. Retrieved February 23, 2005, from <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/cpp/module4-handouts.pdf>

Pasztor, E. M. (1986) *Criteria for mutual selection: Model approach to partnerships in parenting*. Atlanta: Child Welfare Institute.

Rycus, J. S., & Hughes, R. C. (1998). *Field guide to child welfare: Placement and permanence*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America Press.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2005). *AFCARS Report (9)*. Preliminary FY 2002 Estimates as of August 2004 from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System. Updated link retrieved May 10, 2006, from http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report9.pdf