



Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

A BULLETIN FOR
PROFESSIONALS

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Foster Parent Adoption

Child welfare practitioners are increasingly aware of the importance of foster parents as permanency resources for children in foster care. Many children in foster care who become available for adoption are adopted by their foster parents. In order to facilitate these adoptions, professionals should be knowledgeable about the benefits, costs, and practice issues surrounding foster parent adoption.

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Trends in Foster Parent Adoption

Foster parents are the most important source of adoptive families for children in the child welfare system. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from 1998 on show that foster parents consistently adopt close to 60 percent or more of the children who are adopted from foster care (U.S. HHS, n.d.).

Foster parents were not always preferred candidates for adoptive parenthood. Earlier in child welfare practice, distinctions were made between foster parents, who were seen as temporary caregivers, and adoptive parents, who were specially matched with a particular child for permanent placement. The practice of discouraging adoption by foster parents continued through the mid 1970s, when two in three States either prohibited or warned against the practice (Festinger, 1974). By the early 1980s the tide had turned, influenced by a combination of foster parent activism and permanency planning projects that demonstrated the benefits of foster parent adoption. The result was the passage of the Federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272), which supported foster parent adoption by making subsidies available for children adopted from foster care (Proch, 1981).

In current practice, foster parents are recognized as valuable resources for waiting children. Many States now require that foster parents be considered as an adoption resource and receive preference under certain circumstances when a child becomes free for adoption. Foster parent adoption is also

the basis for two well-recognized practices in adoption. In “legal risk placements,” children whose situations indicate that parental rights will likely be terminated are placed with foster parents who are willing to adopt if the child becomes free. In concurrent planning, a practice supported by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, the permanency goal of reunification is supplemented by an alternative goal (often, adoption) to ensure that if reunification is not possible, the child has a clearly identified permanency option that can quickly be put in place. Initial placements are made with foster parents who would consider adoption should reunification become impossible, thus minimizing the number of placements for children. For this model to work, these foster parents must be able to support both the reunification plan, as well as the plan for adoption.

Benefits of Foster Parent Adoption

While the research on foster parent adoption is limited, studies do indicate that adoption by foster parents can benefit children and parents in a number of ways. Unlike most other types of adoption, children and foster parents involved in foster parent adoption have already spent time living as a family before the adoption is initiated and have had the opportunity to make some initial adjustments. In addition, research indicates that children placed for adoption with their foster parents are less likely to experience disruption of their placement than children placed in nonrelative, non-foster-parent adoptions (Berry & Barth, 1990; McRoy, 1999; Smith & Howard, 1991).

For children, some of the other benefits include:

- A continuing and legally secure relationship with parents they know and trust
- An end to the uncertainty of foster care and, for many children, a positive psychological shift in their sense of identity, connection, and belonging (Triseliotis, 2003)
- Experienced parents to manage their needs (often including emotional and behavioral challenges due to complicated life histories)
- The chance to remain in a familiar community, school, and neighborhood
- Tendency for shorter time to permanency than in other types of adoption (Howard & Smith, 2003)
- Greater likelihood of maintaining an ongoing connection with the birth family than in other types of adoption (Howard & Smith, 2003)

For the adopting family, the advantages of adopting a child in their care include:

- Permanent protection of the relationship with the child
- The opportunity to raise the child without the oversight of the agency and to become the sole decision-maker regarding school, religious practice, medical treatment, travel, discipline, and much more
- Often, both familiarity and a relationship with the child's birth family and greater knowledge of their child's background than in non-foster-parent adoption

For the birth family, foster parent adoption means the birth parents typically know those who will be the permanent caregivers for their children.

For larger society, there are also benefits from foster parent adoption. These include:

- Reduced costs to government agencies when a child moves from foster care to adoption, since the administrative costs of recruiting, training, and approving an adoptive family are reduced
- As with all adoptions from foster care, a decrease in the number of children aging out of foster care with no family and at risk for a host of problems, including homelessness, incarceration, and poverty

Costs of Foster Parent Adoption

Just as there are benefits, there are also costs when foster parents adopt. While families gain autonomy, they lose the assistance of the agency and relationships with caseworkers. They may receive fewer resources and supports, leaving the family financially vulnerable. While the parents gain decision-making privileges, they become financially responsible for the child's welfare, as well as legally responsible for the child's actions. Some of these costs to parents may be mitigated by adoption assistance and other postadoption services. A potential cost to the agency may be the cost of a foster home becoming unavailable to other children needing foster care. If parents decide to discontinue fostering after they adopt or if the number of children in the home after a child's adoption exceeds the number allowed by State policy, then the agency has lost a foster home.

Practice Issues With Children and Parents

Even though foster parents have the advantage of knowing and having cared for the children they plan to adopt, they still need careful preparation and support. Research indicates that foster parents need and want more preparation and information than they customarily receive in making this important transition (Howard & Smith, 2003). Practice issues with families moving from foster care to adoption include assessment, preparation for adoption, facilitating an ongoing connection between the child and birth family (when it is in the child's best interests), and working with families who choose not to adopt. As with all adoption practice, policies vary greatly among States and agencies.

Assessment

Assessing the family's interest and ability to adopt is a crucial step. Workers should not assume that foster parents will choose to adopt, even if they have cared for a child for an extended period or have expressed interest in the past. Instead of asking parents, particularly those who are ambivalent, if they will adopt, another approach is to help them explore the benefits of adoption, while still addressing their concerns.

In reviewing the concerns, the worker can explore the seriousness of each concern and determine what information or resources might reduce the parents' anxiety. This exercise may help parents realistically examine their fears and consider if they should proceed. If the worker helps the foster parents explore their feelings, fears, and hopes openly

and honestly over time, the odds increase that the foster parents will commit to adopting or will be active in helping the child move to another permanent family (Howard, 2002). However, a foster parent should never be pushed to adopt a child. A resource for foster families considering adoption is the Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet *Foster Parents Considering Adoption*: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fospar.cfm

Foster parent interest in adoption may stem from their sincere desire to become the adoptive parents. It may also stem from strong feelings toward the child and discomfort with the idea of others raising the child, despite their own misgivings about adoption. It is important to help foster parents consider factors that may make it difficult for them to meet the child's needs now and in the future, due to the nature of adoption.

Indicators that the foster parents are good candidates to adopt include evidence of:

- A mutual emotional connection between children and parents, including signs of affection
- Understanding and acceptance of the child's behaviors, abilities, and challenges
- Commitment to keep siblings together whenever possible
- Valuing the birth family (even when they have made serious mistakes as parents) and respect and support for the child's emotional connection to previous attachment figures, including siblings
- Competence in meeting the child's needs and advocating for needed resources
- Commitment to caring for the child now and in the future

Many agencies have specific assessment processes for determining whether adoption by a particular family is in the best interests of the child and for helping families come to a decision about their suitability for adoption. Those same processes are still relevant in cases of foster parent adoption. While the foster family may already have a completed home study, including background checks, the family should complete any remaining parts of the assessment specific to adoption. Agencies that have implemented a dual home study process that covers both foster care and adoption requirements initially will be able to process foster parent adoptions more expediently.

Preparation for Adoption

Once the parents (and the child, if old enough) have committed to the adoption, the worker should help the family make the transition from fostering to adoption. Even though foster parents and children benefit from knowing each other, adoption is an adjustment for all parties. As with assessment, many agencies have standard procedures for helping families and children prepare for adoption. While some of the procedures may be unnecessary since the child has already been living in the home, there are other preparations that the worker can facilitate.

For the family, these preparations may include:

- Providing full disclosure of information about the child and the birth family in writing, including explanations of the child's placement history and full medical history, as well as implications for parenting
- Preparing the family for the possibility of the child acting out and new conflicts arising after the adoption is formalized

- Preparing the family for less support from the child welfare system
- Preparing for the impact on other children in the family, particularly other foster children who are not being adopted
- Providing information on the legal steps in the adoption process
- Providing information on adoption assistance (subsidy)
- Helping the family negotiate ongoing birth family contact, if in the child's best interest

For the child, preparation may include:

- Helping the child understand the differences between foster care and adoption and what those differences will mean on a day-to-day basis and in the future
- With the family, helping the child review his or her history and put together a Lifebook or Lifemap that includes a visual presentation of the child's life and a chronology of the child's removals and placements
- Helping the child grieve the loss of the birth family and accept the adoptive family as the permanent family
- For older children, involving them in the adoption decision
- Helping the child to prepare for ongoing contact with the birth family if that is in their best interest and will occur in the future

A resource for workers and families is the Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet *Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child*:

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_transition.cfm

Facilitating Ongoing Connection With the Birth Family

Children adopted by their foster parents often have deep emotional attachments to members of their original families, including siblings who may be placed elsewhere. Even children who were not well cared for in their birth families may experience profound loss at separation, which may deepen when they are adopted and learn they will never return home.

Foster parents are likely to have had contact or even relationships with their children's birth families. Workers and adopting parents, often with the help of therapists, need to assess what level of ongoing connection is in the child's best interests and how to develop a postadoption connection agreement that works well for everyone. Some States use mediation or family group decision-making to help develop such agreements.

Postadoption connection does not necessarily mean contact, although it may. A range of possible connections are described in the Child Welfare Information Gateway bulletin *Openness in Adoption*:
www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm

In addition, the Child Welfare Information Gateway publication *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* explores postadoption connections:
www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/cooperative.cfm

Families Who Do Not Adopt

Some parents may evaluate their situations and realistically conclude that adopting a

particular child is not right for them. If that is the decision foster parents make, and additional information and support do not allay their concerns, it is important to honor their decision and involve them in helping the child understand and transition to a new family. Specifically, the foster parents can help with:

- Preparing the child for transition to a new family
- Helping the child grieve leaving the family and giving their blessing for the move
- Being an ongoing presence in the child's life, if this is in the child's best interests (Howard, 2002)
- Considering the possibility of providing respite care if needed, or even taking the child back into foster care in their home if the adoption disrupts

What if the family is willing to adopt the child, but the worker has reservations? Despite good intentions, many initial foster placements are made quickly, without adequate time to assess the fit between family strengths and child needs. While the emotional connection between the child and family is one important consideration, workers must consider whether a foster parent adoption is the best long-term option for the child. Older foster parents of young children, parents who have limited support systems, parents who are harshly critical of a child or the child's birth family, and parents who exhibit limited ability to meet a child's needs are examples of situations workers need to assess with special care.

Pre- and Postadoption Services

Pre- and postadoption services may be just as necessary for foster parent adoptions as they are for other types of adoption. The fact that the child has lived with the family as a foster child does not preclude the need for services at the time of the adoption or in the future. In addition, the family may require resources such as adoption subsidies or other types of assistance. Specifically, workers can help provide information about:

- Construction of an adoption assistance agreement that reflects the child's current and future needs; for more information, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet *Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted From Foster Care*: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_subsid.cfm
- Formal support in the form of therapy or counseling resources or other mental health services, especially with therapists and counselors who have experience with adoptive families and will accept Medicaid
- Support groups for adoptive families, especially families who have adopted children with a history of maltreatment; for listings by State, see the National Adoption Directory: www.childwelfare.gov/nad
- Experienced adoptive and foster parents who might serve as mentors
- Educational and informational services
- Parenting education, such as classes, conferences, and workshops
- Respite care, if available

Much of the preparation for adoption is best done through group trainings, where parents join other foster parents who are considering or currently taking this step. There are a number of curricula to prepare parents for fostering and adoption. Visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway webpage on Training for Birth, Foster, Kinship, and Adoptive Parents for links to curricula and other training information:

www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/workforce/educate_train/train_parents.cfm

The Child Welfare Information Gateway bulletin *Postadoption Services* provides detailed information about the range of services that child welfare workers can facilitate or link families to in order to ensure that the adoption is successful:

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_postadoptbulletin/index.cfm

Questions for Further Research

Given the significant increase in adoption following ASFA, most of which has been through foster parent adoption, there is a need for more research on foster parent adoption to ensure that workers and agencies are providing the best services for children and families. Important questions include:

- How do the needs of nonrelative adopting foster parents differ from those of subsidized guardians, relatives who adopt, and other adoptive parents?
- What are the barriers to foster parent adoption, and how can they be overcome?

- What are the long-term outcomes for children adopted by foster parents?
- What are the differences in outcomes for children between foster parent adoptions that stem from planned placements (such as legal risk and those arranged through concurrent planning) and those that are unplanned?
- Given that most foster parents have moderate to lower incomes, are adoption assistance payments adequate to meet the needs of children after adoption?
- What is the impact on adopted children when their parents continue to foster other children?
- What is the impact on the family's birth children when adoption occurs?
- How might initial placements for children be more carefully selected?

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Resources

The Internet offers many additional resources for workers facilitating adoption of children from foster care. These include:

- The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice
www.caseyfamilyservices.org/pr_casey_center.html
- The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)
www.cwla.org
- Child Welfare Information Gateway—Foster Care Adoption Section
www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/foster
- National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning
www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp
- National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption
www.nrcadoption.org
- North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC)
www.nacac.org

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