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Foster Parents Considering Adoption



If you're a foster parent and considering adopting a child, children, or youth currently in your care, you're not alone. In fact, foster parent adoptions account for more than half the adoptions of children from foster care. According to the national Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), in FY 2010, 53 percent of children adopted from foster care were adopted by their foster parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

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Foster parents who open their hearts and homes to a child in need may develop relationships as strong as those with their birth children. Adoption of children and youth by foster parents is increasingly common, and deciding whether adoption is right for you and your family can raise a lot of questions. This factsheet is written for foster parents, like you, considering adopting a child or children in their care.

While this factsheet does not address the specifics of how to adopt, it provides information on the differences between foster care and adoption, and it explores some of the factors you should consider before deciding to adopt.

Differences Between Foster Parenting and Adopting

There are significant differences between being a foster parent and an adoptive parent.

Legal Differences

- Foster care is intended to be temporary care for children and youth unable to live with their parents because of neglect, abuse, parent incarceration, or other issues. However, when reunification with birth parents or adoption by another relative isn't possible, foster parent adoption becomes a viable option. Adoption is a lifetime legal and emotional responsibility.
- Foster parents have no legal parental rights, but when you adopt, you acquire the same legal rights and responsibilities for your adopted child as parents have for their birth children. The child is no longer in the State's custody but is a full, legal member of your family.

Financial Differences

- As a foster parent, you receive a stipend or reimbursement for the care you provide. With adoption, that assistance changes.
- One of the misconceptions about adoption is that it's expensive. In reality, foster care adoption is very affordable (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, n.d.). You aren't expected to carry the financial load alone. In many instances, Federal and State assistance programs are available during and after the adoption process. Of children adopted from foster care in 2010, 90 percent received some form of adoption assistance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). See the Resources section of this factsheet for additional information on adoption costs.
- Most children and youth in foster care are covered by the Federal Medicaid program. Your child also may be eligible for medical assistance from your State after adoption (National Foster Parent Association [NFPA], 2009).
- Even if families receive adoption assistance or a subsidy, adoptive families are still responsible for everyday financial obligations such as child care and extracurricular activities.

Full Decision-Making Responsibility

- While a child is in foster care, decision-making is shared by the agency, foster parents, and perhaps the birth parents.
- When a child is adopted, the adoptive parents take full responsibility for making decisions about issues such as school enrollment, travel outside the State or country, birth family visitation, and more. While some families may choose to continue to share some decision-making and visitation with the birth family or relatives to benefit the child, the adoptive family has the ultimate decision-making responsibility after the adoption.

Attachment Issues

You likely dealt with, and perhaps continue to deal with, attachment issues after your child or youth joined your family through foster care. Attachment is formed through more than just providing food, shelter, and clothing; it's formed through consistent and predictable interaction—smiles, hugs, conversation, etc.—and it plays an important role in physical, emotional, mental, and psychological development (Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children [ATTACH], n.d.). However, addressing attachment issues isn't a linear process. There may be new or recurring issues as your foster child or youth becomes a permanent member of your family. Bear in mind:

- The idea of permanence with a foster/adoptive family and the termination of the birth parents' parental rights may trigger intense grief or a sense of loss.

- Bonds with caregivers, even abusive caregivers, are extremely strong. Additionally, past abuse or neglect may be difficult to detect as children in a temporary environment may not have felt comfortable enough to confide in others (Sullivan & Lasley, 2010).
- Children or youth may experience conflicting feelings between love for the biological family and growing affection for and a sense of security with their foster/adoptive parents.
- Sometimes, children or youth struggle to fully commit to adoption unless they know their birth families are all right and that being adopted is acceptable. Connections and contact between foster/adoptive parents and birth parents can sometimes ease the transition (Riggs, 2007).
- If your child is a regular user of social media, you may want to explore positive ways to use Facebook and other sites to maintain healthy contact between your child and his or her birth family members. Although statistics are not yet available to document the number of adopted people and birth parents who find each other through these sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is a growing trend.

See the Resources section of this factsheet for resources on dealing with attachment issues.

DATA ON FOSTER PARENT ADOPTION

- Approximately 408,000 children are in foster care in the United States, and it's estimated that 107,000 are eligible for adoption.
- In FY 2010, about 53,000 children were adopted from foster care. Of those children:
 - 53 percent were adopted by foster parents.
 - 32 percent were adopted by other relatives.
 - 15 percent were adopted by nonrelatives.
- Of the parents who adopt from foster care, 67 percent are married couples and 28 percent are single-parent families.
- Of the children in foster care:
 - 43 percent are White.
 - 25 percent are African-American.
 - 21 percent are Hispanic (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Advantages of Foster Parent Adoption

Compared to other kinds of adoption, foster parent adoption offers the advantage of familiarity to the adopting family, the child, and the birth family. You can build on existing relationships because you may already be familiar with the child's personality, family and medical history, education plan, and other important aspects of his or her life. Additionally:

- Foster parents usually know about a child's background and experiences and know what behaviors to expect. If the foster parents have sufficient background information on the child, as well as some knowledge about child development and behavior, they are better able to understand and respond to the child's needs in a positive and appropriate way.
- 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 strengths and problems. They may have previously partnered with the birth family to work for the child's return.
- Foster parents have a better understanding of their role and relationship with the agency—and hopefully a good relationship with their caseworker.
- Some foster parents participate in concurrent planning in which adoption may be one of the goals. If so, some of

the necessary steps toward adoption may have already been taken (NFPA, 2009).

While children and youth benefit the most from foster parent adoption, this type of adoption offers a number of advantages for others as well.

- **Adoptive parents:** One of the biggest advantages of adopting your foster child or youth is seeing your child achieve permanency and complete the placement process. Foster children and youth don't always stay with one family and can't always be reunited with birth families. When you adopt your foster child, children, or youth, you and the child are granted the permanent protection of your relationship, and you both have a new, permanent family relationship—in every sense of the word.
- **Children:** Even very young infants may grieve the loss of familiar sights, sounds, smells, and touch of a family when they must move. Being adopted by foster parents means the child or youth won't have to leave familiar foster family members, friends, pets, school, and home. The biggest change for the child is the security that comes with having a permanent family and home.
- **Birth families:** Foster parent adoption also benefits birth families, including siblings and other relatives, by allowing them to know who is permanently caring for their loved one. Depending on the openness of the adoption, birth families may have ongoing contact with the child or youth and opportunities to maintain relationships and share family histories.

WHAT IS CONCURRENT PLANNING, AND HOW DOES IT BENEFIT A CHILD?

Concurrent planning is a process of developing one permanency goal, usually reunification, while simultaneously working toward other outcomes—adoption or placement with a legal guardian (often a relative)—in order to move children and youth more quickly from out-of-home care to a permanent family. Essentially, concurrent planning is a plan with several alternative options.

The goals of concurrent planning are to:

- Promote safety of children and youth
- Achieve timely permanence
- Reduce the number of moves for children and youth
- Allow for continued growth of significant relationships (National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections [NRCRFC], n.d.)

As of 2009, 42 States and the District of Columbia have statutes that address the issue of concurrent planning with language that ranges from general authorization to providing elements that must be included when developing a concurrent plan.

More information on concurrent planning can be found on Information Gateway's website: http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/concurrent.cfm

- **Society:** Society as a whole benefits when permanence is attained in lieu of youth aging out of foster care. Many youth transition out of foster care with few connections and little access to support, increasing the risk of negative outcomes such as jail, homelessness, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy (Kirk & Day, 2010). Research also shows that unemployment and underemployment are two common experiences among former foster youth. For instance:
 - A study of employment by youth who aged out of foster care, youth with a history of foster care who were reunited with their parents, and youth from low-income families found that those who aged out of foster care earned less money than their peers in both the other groups, their earnings well below the poverty line (Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2009).
 - Less than 2 percent of former foster youth obtain a bachelor's degree compared to more than 22 percent of all young people (Fernandes, 2008).

WHAT IS AN OPEN ADOPTION?

Open adoption, in which some kind of contact is maintained between the adoptive and birth families, may help the child adjust to being adopted (Riggs, 2007). Maintaining contact with the child's relatives may help a child understand the realities of the birth family's situation and ease his or her worries about them. By acknowledging the importance of that relationship, foster/adoptive parents build the child's self-respect and help the child open up about past experiences and start to heal old wounds.

For more information about open adoption, visit the Information Gateway website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/contacts.cfm>

Strategies for Foster/Adoptive Families

What are some approaches or strategies that may contribute to a successful adoption experience? All families and children are different, but there are some things you can do to smooth the adoption process.

What the Research Shows

A 2007 report from AdoptUSKids explored characteristics of successful adoptions and barriers to adoption of children with special needs by surveying and interviewing

adoptive parents, prospective adoptive parents, and adoption professionals. For the purposes of that study, the “special needs” designation referred to children who were over age 8, members of sibling groups, had specific ethnic or racial backgrounds, or children for whom agencies had difficulties finding adoptive families (McRoy, 2007).¹

To identify characteristics of successful adoptions, 161 parents who had adopted 1 to 14 years earlier reported on their experiences. Parents volunteered the following factors as contributing to a successful adoption:

- They were committed to the child and the child’s adoption into the family.
- They were able to fully integrate the child into the family and not treat the child differently.
- They developed and practiced good parenting skills, including patience, consistency, and flexibility.
- They sought out resources, information, and training when they needed help.
- They had a network of social support.
- They had realistic expectations of the child.

These adoptive parents also reported on postadoption services and supports. The most common were financial support, such as adoption subsidies and financial help with medical and dental care. The majority of families also noted that services such as

counseling, therapy for the child or family, support groups, and training were helpful.

Conclusion

It’s important to learn as much as possible about the child you want to adopt and the adoption process. Ask your caseworker or agency about resources and trainings, and make sure you are connected with other families and supports.

All children deserve loving, permanent homes. Making your family the permanent family for a child, children, or youth currently in your care is a lifetime commitment that requires careful consideration but yields a host of advantages.

See the Resources section on the next page for additional materials to aid you in your consideration.

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¹ States have different definitions of “special needs.” To find out about your State, read Child Welfare Information Gateway’s “Special Needs” Adoption: What Does It Mean? at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/specialneeds>

Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway offers the following resources:

- The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, including lists of foster and adoptive support groups in each State: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>
- Information on adoption assistance by State: http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance
- Information on adoption costs: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/expenses.cfm>
- *Selecting and Working With an Adoption Therapist*, with additional information on attachment: http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm
- Information on attachment and attachment disorders: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/impact/development/attachment.cfm>
- Adopting Children through a Public Agency (Foster Care): http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/foster_care.cfm
- After Adoption from Foster Care: http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/foster

More information on the Federal adoption tax credit can be found on the North American Council on Adoptable Children website: <http://www.nacac.org/taxcredit/taxcredit.html>

Information on the benefits of foster care adoption can be found on the National Council for Adoption's website: https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/NCEA_ADOPTION_ADVOCATE_NO35.pdf

A webinar on bridging the gap between foster and birth parents can be found on the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections website: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/webcasts/18.html>

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