

# Families Considering Foster Care and Adoption

As a foster parent, you act in the best interests of the child in your care, which means providing consistency and stability and supporting the best permanency goal for the child. While reunification is typically the primary goal of foster care, foster parents are often asked to prepare to adopt the child in their care if safely returning to the birth family isn't possible. This parallel process is called "concurrent planning."

According to the national [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System](#) (AFCARS), in fiscal year (FY) 2017, 51 percent of children adopted from foster care were adopted by their foster parents.

Deciding whether foster parenting and/or adoption is right for you and your family can raise a lot of questions. This factsheet provides information on factors to consider when making that decision, including the benefits of foster care adoption for children and youth in

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foster care and family qualities for successful foster care adoptions. It also provides a list of resources that are useful for families who are considering parenting or adopting a child or youth from foster care.

To provide foster and adoptive parents the training, knowledge, and ongoing skills they need to effectively parent children and youth from foster care, the Children's Bureau awarded a grant to Spaulding for Children to develop the [National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#) (NTDC). NTDC has identified several areas of knowledge and skills that will help foster parents support children in their care as well as the children they adopt. Several of these skills are discussed throughout this factsheet. The curriculum is in development and will be pilot tested and evaluated in various States and a Tribal community. The final curriculum will be available for free across the United States in 2022.

## **HOW DOES A CHILD BENEFIT FROM FOSTER PARENT ADOPTION?**

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

Even infants may grieve the loss of familiar sights, sounds, and smells as well as the touch of family members when they are moved to

a different setting. Being adopted by foster parents means the child or youth won't have to disrupt those bonds and leave familiar foster family members, friends, pets, their school, or their home. The most significant outcome for adopting a child from foster care is being able to provide them with the security that comes with having a permanent family and home. Additionally, as a foster parent, the following are likely:

- You know about your child's background and experiences and what behaviors to expect. This may enable you to understand and respond to his or her needs in a positive and appropriate way.
- You have met with and know your child's birth family and see them as real people with real strengths and challenges. You may have kept in contact with the birth family to work toward reunification.
- You understand your role and maintain an established relationship with the child welfare agency and your caseworker.

While children and youth may benefit the most from foster parent adoption, it can offer advantages for adoptive parents and birth families as well.

- **Adoptive parents:** One of the greatest advantages of adopting your child or youth from foster care is seeing them achieve permanency and complete the placement process. Children and youth in foster care don't always stay with one family and can't always be reunited with birth families. When you adopt a child or youth who is in your care, you and the child are granted the permanent protection of your new family relationship.

- **Birth families:** Foster care adoption also benefits birth families, including siblings and other relatives, by allowing them to know who is permanently caring for their loved one. Birth families may have ongoing contact with the child or youth and opportunities to maintain relationships and share family histories.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN DECIDING TO BE A FOSTER OR ADOPTIVE PARENT

When you become a foster parent, you are informed about the likelihood of both reunification and adoption for the child that you take into care and must consider whether you are willing to live with not knowing whether that child will ultimately return to the birth family, be adopted by a relative, or be adopted by you (Families Rising [formerly North American Council on Adoptable Children], 2017). You are trained to manage anxiety, stress, and loss as well as assess your available supports from family and friends. Your caseworker will also assess whether your family is the best fit for adopting the child, if adoption becomes the permanency goal. Although you may feel that your family is a good fit, the professional team will consider whether you can meet all of the child's needs and make a final determination based on the child's best interests.

Being a foster parent involves a responsibility to support the birth family of the child in your care rather than act as a substitute for his or her parents. This responsibility extends to adoptive parents of children from foster care as well. It is important for adoptive parents to maintain a connection with the birth family for the child's well-being.

If your training, preparation, and relationship building with your child's birth parents culminates in adoption, you'll find that the roles of foster parent and adoptive parent are significantly different. As you prepare for adoption, it's critical that you fully understand the emotional, financial, and legal changes in your parenting role. This section addresses significant considerations for planning to adopt a child who has been in your care.

### EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Adopting a child is a lifelong commitment, and challenges may arise at any time as the child grows. Parenting children and youth who have experienced separation and loss involves identifying your parenting strengths and understanding that some of your techniques may need to be adjusted to meet the emotional, developmental, social, and physical needs of children and youth. (The NTDC training plans to address knowledge and skills that relate to these strengths and techniques.) You may need to adapt your expectations and think of yourself as a healer of your child or youth's past hurts.

Parenting skills identified by NTDC include recognizing when a child displays avoidance, triggers that cause the child to react, and the reasons behind rejection and testing as well as understanding how a child's challenging behaviors may be coping strategies caused by underlying issues related to foster care and adoption. In some cases, children recover quickly from adverse experiences with no lasting harm. However, for many children, being separated from their birth parents may interfere with forming attachments and other normal development. (See the Resources section of this factsheet for more information on dealing with attachment issues.) Building

and maintaining contact with the birth family or other important connections may help ease some of the child or youth's feelings of loss or grief.

Recognizing behaviors that may result from separation, grief, and loss as well as understanding the ways in which your child grieves and deals with loss, are NTDC-identified skills and may require adoption support and preservation services. These services can help you and your family provide a safe and compassionate home for your child to grow and thrive. Therapy, for example, is a useful support that can help address your child's needs as he or she adjusts to the new position in your family. As your child grows, he or she may face emotional challenges, especially during the teenage years. Researching services that are available to address your child's needs throughout his or her lifetime can play a central role in your commitment to parenting a child from foster care. For these, and other reasons, it is important to connect with the adoption support and preservation services in your State as you consider adoption.

Building relationships with other adoptive families before you adopt may also help you learn about available services, making you better prepared if or when the need arises. Adoptive parents often hesitate to talk to their families and friends because they may be concerned that their family and friends may think negatively about the adoption or the child they are planning to adopt. Relationships with other adoptive families can reduce feelings of isolation, validate your experiences, and enable you to share resources and solve problems together.

## **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 goals—e.g., adoption or placement with a legal guardian (often a relative)—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.

Concurrent planning aims to accomplish the following:

- Promote the safety of children and youth
- Achieve timely permanence
- Reduce the number of moves for children and youth
- Allow for continued growth of significant relationships between the child and his or her birth family and between the adoptive and birth parents (National Center for Child Welfare Excellence, n.d.).

As of 2016, 38 States and the District of Columbia have laws 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 in the Information Gateway publication [Concurrent Planning for Timely Permanency for Children](#).

Moreover, many State agencies offer pre- and postadoption trainings that provide important preparation and planning information and can introduce you to other adoptive families who may eventually become part of your support network. If you have multiple options for support, including emotional support for yourself, you will know where to turn and how to access these important services.

Information Gateway's publication, [The Impact of Adoption](#), provides more information.

To learn more about core issues that affect children and birth and adoptive families, see the following resources:

- National Council for Adoption's "[The Impact of Adoption on Teen Identity Formation](#)"
- American Society for the Positive Care of Children's [Impact of Adoption](#)

### **UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF SEPARATION, GRIEF, AND LOSS**

All children in foster care have experienced abuse and/or neglect or dependency. For many children, the transition to a permanent home and the termination of their birth parents' rights may trigger intense feelings of loss and grief. These feelings are natural and often occur at different stages throughout the lifelong journey of adoption. Grief that is not addressed may display itself in problem behaviors, self-medication, anger, or denial. Children and youth in foster care or who are adopted may need help labeling their feelings and understanding that they are grieving.

The initial experience of separation from parents may also evoke a sense of rejection in children, even if they are very young. Youth who are adopted from foster care

often project their feelings of rejection onto their adoptive parents. This behavior may be a sign that your child is experiencing trauma—an emotional response to a past event that threatened him or her or caused physical or emotional harm. For some children, separation from their birth families can be traumatizing, especially if they don't understand why they're being removed from their homes.

For information to help your child deal with grief and loss, AdoptUSKids' video shares tools and strategies: "[Addressing Grief and Loss in Your Support of Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Families](#)".

To read about adoptive parents' experiences helping their children heal from grief, visit Families Rising's "[Helping Children Recover From Grief: Support Is Essential](#)".

Children or youth who have experienced abuse and/or neglect may have a harder time managing transitions, such as transitioning from foster care to adoption. Information Gateway has several factsheets for families to help address some of these issues:

- [Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption](#)
- [Parenting Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Abuse or Neglect](#)
- [Parenting a Child or Youth Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)
- [Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma](#)

## **FAMILY QUALITIES FOR SUCCESSFUL FOSTER CARE ADOPTIONS**

Certain family qualities may contribute to a successful adoption experience. All families and children are different, but certain parenting traits can ease the process of adopting children who have been in foster care. Some qualities identified by NTDC include a willingness to commit the time needed to be attuned and present for children and youth, to blend family traditions to honor and/or include siblings and extended family, and adapt expectations based upon the unique developmental needs of children and youth.

According to [NTDC's Training for Families](#), successful foster and adoptive parents may need to develop the following characteristics:

1. **Flexibility**—Learning and using a new set of parenting skills and strategies to support youth who have experienced separation and loss
2. **Patience**—Working on developing healthy attachments over an extended period of time
3. **Nurturing**—Seeing discipline as an opportunity to support children and youth in learning and growing rather than as a punishment
4. **Compassion**—Using strategies to convey compassion and having compassion for birth parents and the challenges they may face
5. **Adaptability**—Understanding the importance of adapting parental expectations

6. **Sense of Humor**—Using humor to manage stress, express feelings, and de-escalate tense situations and being able to laugh at one's self and not take everything seriously

You may need to change your approaches to parenting to understand and validate the overlapping identities and lived experiences of your child. It will be helpful for you to identify your existing parenting practices that may need to be adjusted to meet the emotional, developmental, social, and physical needs of children and youth who have experienced separation, loss, and other forms of trauma.

Families Rising provides information about what children who are adopted from foster care need in their parents and how you can develop those traits. See the web page [Developing the Characteristics of Successful Foster or Adoptive Parents](#).

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Personal considerations that involve the child you adopt, your role as a parent, and your family characteristics may enhance the transition from foster care to adoption for the child in your care, your family, and you. This section addresses external considerations, including the benefits and challenges of social media, financial aspects of adoption, and the legal responsibility entrusted to adoptive parents.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET CONSIDERATIONS**

Social media and the internet have changed the way we communicate. If your child is a regular user of social media, you may want to explore positive ways to use Facebook and other sites for healthy and ongoing

communication 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 and contact each other through these sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that this is a growing trend.

It's important to know how your child is using and spending time on social media and the Internet and to teach them how to stay safe online. Refer to the Information Gateway factsheet [Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers](#) for more information on the benefits of social media use in foster care and tips to help youth use it safely.

## FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a foster parent, you receive a stipend or reimbursement for the care you provide. With adoption, that assistance changes. You no longer receive the stipend or reimbursement, and you will be responsible for everyday financial obligations (e.g., child care and extracurricular activities) that you did not pay for before. Other types of financial assistance may be available to you, however, as an adoptive parent of a child in foster care. You aren't expected to carry the financial load alone.

One of the misconceptions about adoption is that it's expensive. Foster care adoption is very affordable and often free (AdoptUSKids, n.d.). In many instances, Federal and State assistance programs are available during and after the adoption process. According to the [FY 2017 AFCARS report](#), 93 percent of children adopted from foster care received some form of adoption assistance. These programs may include help with college tuition, and most children and youth in foster care are

eligible for Medicaid, depending on State laws. Medical assistance through Medicaid is also available for adoptive parents raising a child who has special needs for medical, mental health, or rehabilitative care.

In adoption, the term "special needs" extends beyond children with medical, mental health, and rehabilitative needs to children who may face difficulties finding an adoptive home. Each State defines "special needs" differently, but common characteristics include the following:

- Being an older child
- Being of a particular racial or ethnic background
- Having siblings needing to be placed together
- Having physical, mental, or emotional disabilities
- Having other medical conditions

For children with these special needs, adoption assistance may include monthly payments, Medicaid coverage, and reimbursement for one-time adoption costs.

For more resources on adopting children who have special needs, visit the [Special Needs Alliance](#).

For more information on the costs of foster care adoption and adoption assistance, refer to the following resources:

- [What Is the Cost of Adoption From Foster Care?](#), an AdoptUSKids webpage
- [Adoption Assistance by State](#), an Information Gateway resource collection
- [What You Should Know About Choosing Adoption](#), by the National Council for Adoption

- [Health Care Access for Children in Foster Care](#), a Medicaid and CHIP Payment and Access Commission publication
- [U. S. Adoption Assistance/Subsidy](#), a Families Rising web page.
- [Eligibility and Benefits for Federal \(Title IV-E\) Adoption Assistance](#), a Families Rising webpage

## LEGAL AND DECISION-MAKING CONSIDERATIONS

Adoption is a lifetime legal and emotional commitment. As a foster parent, you have no legal parental rights, and decision-making is shared by the agency, you, and perhaps the birth parents. However, when you adopt, you acquire the same legal rights and responsibilities for your child as birth parents have for their biological children. When a child or youth is adopted from foster care, he or she has the same family rights as a biological child. Once adopted, the child becomes a full, legal member of your family and is no longer in the State's custody. 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.

## CONCLUSION

As you become a foster parent, it's important to learn as much as possible about concurrent planning and the potential adoption process you may experience if your child in foster care does not reunite with his or her birth family and you choose to adopt. Your caseworker can help you build and maintain a relationship with your child's birth family to ease some of the emotional issues you may experience and have a positive impact on the child's well-being. Ask your caseworker or agency about

resources and training, and make sure you are connected with other adoptive families and various types of support.

All children deserve loving, permanent homes. Making your family the permanent family for a child or youth in your care is a lifelong commitment that requires careful consideration but offers exciting and joyous opportunities for you, your family, and the child or youth in your care.

See the Resources section for additional materials to aid you in your considerations.

## RESOURCES

Child Welfare Information Gateway offers the following resources with helpful information:

- [Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted From Foster Care](#)
- [Adoption](#)
- [National Foster Care & Adoption Directory](#) including lists of foster care and adoption support groups in each State

AdoptUSKids, a project of the Children's Bureau, offers the following resources:

- [About Adoption From Foster Care](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions About Adopting From Foster Care](#)
- [Support for Parents Who Adopt From Foster Care](#)

Information on the [Federal adoption tax credit](#) can be found on the Families Rising website.

The [Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption](#), the only public nonprofit in the United States that focuses exclusively on foster care adoption, provides free resources for families considering adoption.

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## **REFERENCES**

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