



CREATING EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES FOR CHILDREN WAITING TO BE ADOPTED

December 2017



Adopt US Kids

Together we hold their future

Table of contents

- 1. Introduction..... 2
- 2. The case for strengths-based child narratives..... 5
- 3. What to include 7
- 4. What to consider carefully.....15
- 5. What not to include 23
- 6. Samples of well-written public narratives..... 32
- 7. Checklist for public narratives..... 37
- 8. Writing tips for improving waiting-child narratives..... 43
- 9. Gathering information for public child narratives 48
- 10. Using private narratives to share additional information51



Introduction

For decades, photolistings, *Wednesday's Child* features, Heart Galleries, and other public profiles of waiting children and teens have been an integral, valuable part of efforts to ensure that adoption professionals find permanent, loving families for children in foster care. These activities have helped make adoption a reality for thousands of children and have considerably raised awareness among the public about the fact that every child needs a family of their own.

The world has changed dramatically since the launch of these efforts, yet much about these public profiles of waiting children has remained the same. Since these public efforts were first used, the internet was created and became commonplace, the federal government passed laws highlighting the need to protect confidential medical and educational information, and cyberbullying became all too common. Many jurisdictions have changed their waiting-child programs and policies with the times, but as a whole, the adoption field has not acknowledged how these substantial changes in our world can and should lead to a change in how we portray children who need families.

The AdoptUSKids national photolisting is the only service of its kind fully funded by, and operated on behalf of, the US Children's Bureau.* We decided to take a close look at how we and others in the field feature children who need families and what we can do better to ensure that they have the best possible chance of being adopted while we protect their safety, dignity, and privacy. Over a period of many months, AdoptUSKids:

- Convened focus groups of adoption professionals, young people who had been in foster care, and adoptive parents
- Surveyed and interviewed prospective adoptive parents, frontline caseworkers, and others in child welfare
- Reviewed thousands of narratives of waiting children
- Researched many jurisdictions' photolisting practices and policies
- Considered laws related to privacy and data protection

* The AdoptUSKids photolisting includes narratives and photos provided by child welfare professionals around the country. As a result, we have an opportunity to see a great diversity in what photolistings include in various jurisdictions. Although we don't develop or control what is posted on our photolisting, we are committed to working with the field to improve the narratives featured on our site and others.

A new paradigm

As a result of this research and in-depth internal discussions, we are calling on the adoption field to embrace a new paradigm related to public portrayals of children who need families—a paradigm that:

- Puts a high priority on children’s safety, dignity, and privacy
- Acknowledges that information-sharing happens on a continuum—with only positive information provided to the public, more general information about diagnoses and challenges provided to prospective parents who have a home study, and more specific information provided to those seriously considering placement (see graphic below)
- Frames public profiles as an introduction to children who need families, using strengths-based narratives with positive, descriptive information and up-to-date, appealing photos
- Embraces the idea of a private narrative, shared only with home-studied families who have signed a confidentiality agreement, through which more information about challenges and disabilities is shared

The information-sharing continuum



Although it is not spelled out in the graphic above, some photolistings have different levels of access for professionals as well. At AdoptUSKids, for example, workers have access to private narratives so that they can search for families who may be a good option for children on their caseloads. Select professionals also have access to confidential narratives where they can learn even more about a waiting child to help them determine if a prospective family is a potential resource. These confidential narratives are available only to professionals—not to a family audience.

As noted earlier, some states and communities have embraced this philosophy for years and are ahead of the curve. For others, this paradigm shift will require significant changes at various levels. Regardless of where your system is in the process, we encourage you to read our guidance and think about how we can all work together to protect children and increase their chances of being adopted.

In this guide, you'll find information about how to craft compelling public child narratives, including what information to include and what not to include. You will also learn about information we believe can be shared through private narratives and how to best present that information to ensure the best outcomes for children.

2

The case for strengths-based child narratives

These days, it's common practice for social workers and recruiters to use public profiles of children to seek adoptive families. Profiles typically feature a photo and a description of the child or sibling group and may be on photolisting websites, in newspapers or on TV, at Heart Gallery displays, or in flyers handed out at public events. In general, public profiles of waiting children and youth have two primary goals. They:

- Help prospective adopters connect with a particular child, youth, or sibling group, by painting a picture of the child or children, establishing common ground, and enabling the adults to imagine these specific children in their family
- Present a strengths-based picture of the children who are waiting for a family, emphasizing their personality and unique qualities

In both cases, the ultimate goal of the public profiles is to reach many prospective adoptive parents and help them make an emotional connection with young people who need a family. To accomplish this goal, public narratives must present a strengths-based, positive depiction of the child. They should be designed to draw prospective parents in, rather than to narrow the field of potential parents. Full disclosure is important for adoptive parents. But it is only later in the process, through a private profile or one-on-one conversation, that professionals should begin to explain challenges and identify future support needs related to a particular child, teen, or sibling group.

Public narratives can be viewed by anyone who visits the photolisting website or picks up a printed flyer, and the potential audience includes birth family members, tech-savvy peers, the child themselves, and other community members who may know the featured child. Therefore, it is especially important to keep the following principles in mind.

Principles for public child narratives

If you keep the following three principles in mind, it's much easier to ensure that public narratives are positive, effective recruitment tools:

- 1. The first obligation is to protect the child or youth.** Think about preserving the safety, dignity, and privacy of the child. The public should not be able to find the child in person or online from the narrative, especially if they see the young person as someone they might be able to further victimize. Protection also extends to omitting anything the child would be embarrassed to have seen by their peers or that could be used to bully the child. Remember that if it's posted online, the information could live on in perpetuity, even if the profile is later removed or edited.
- 2. The goal of a public profile of a child is to encourage prospective parents.** Consider whether what you're including will make someone want to learn more about this child or these brothers and sisters. Is it easy to read, engaging, and compelling? Will it help prospective adopters understand that children waiting for a family are young people with distinct personalities, hopes, and dreams who are in foster care through no fault of their own?
- 3. The narrative should be positive, descriptive, and strengths-based.** Ask if what you've included in the narrative contributes to prospective parents' understanding of the child's strengths. The time for disclosure of challenges comes later in the process. For any item you're wondering about, consider how you would feel if someone wrote this about you or a child you love and shared it with the public. Does the narrative reflect that you or someone close to them engaged the young person in a discussion of their life and goals? Would they be proud to read the narrative and feel like it describes them?

By following the guidelines and examples outlined below, you should be able to craft a narrative that is detailed, descriptive, and—above all—strengths-based and protective of the child for whom you seek a family.

3

What to include

The following items can always be included in a child’s public narrative because they help paint a picture of who the child is. The examples are designed to show different ways of sharing information about young people that highlight what they are like and what they enjoy doing. It’s important, whenever possible, that narrative writers know the child or have access to information from people who know the child well.

Preferred first name*

Refer to the child by the name they prefer. If a child always goes by Bobby, use that rather than Robert. If it will help workers effectively respond when someone makes an inquiry, you might use Robert the first time and then switch to the nickname.

Robert, who prefers to be called Bobby, has a friendly, outgoing personality. He makes friends wherever he goes and never forgets a face. His social worker says she can picture Bobby as a successful leader one day, given his incredible ability to connect with others.

For a child who identifies as a different gender than the sex assigned at birth, it’s particularly important to use only the name (and gender) the child prefers. Make sure the photo is current and accurately portrays the child’s gender identity.

Positive personality traits

Is this child funny, outgoing, kind, quiet, thoughtful, or intelligent? Use adjectives that paint a picture of who they are and, whenever possible, give examples.

A thoughtful teen, Juana takes the time to listen to the other children in her foster family when they are having a hard time. She really gives great advice, and the other kids have learned they can trust her to care about them.

With a smile that lights up a room and wonderful sense of humor, Roderick loves to laugh more than anything. He recently did a stand-up routine at his school’s talent show that received rave reviews.

* Please note that we are not using the names of any actual children or youth in the examples provided throughout this document.

Strengths

The narrative should highlight anything the child does well or excels at. Many of the strengths may be covered in the different categories below, but it's important to make a concerted effort to identify strengths of many kinds.

Pablo, born in 2013, is great at sharing. He's always willing to let the other toddlers at day care play with his Thomas trains (although he'd prefer to keep Percy for himself). He can spend hours with his friends building elaborate tracks that take the trains over mountains and through valleys.

Destini loves to help her teachers at school. She often volunteers to pass out papers, clean erasers, and organize books. Her homeroom teacher can't say enough about how nice it is to have Destini in class.

Logan has been a great addition to his foster family. His nonstop grin helps keep the whole family feeling positive and smiling themselves. His foster mother reports, "When I return home after a hard day, his energy just lifts me up. The joy he feels is contagious!"

Miss Sunshine is what her foster parents and day care providers call Coco! She has a way with people and makes friends wherever she goes. What's most amazing is that she remembers everyone she meets, even briefly, the next time their paths cross.

Hobbies, interests, and favorite pastimes

The best narratives have specific information about what the child likes to do. Include details and examples that give the profile life and increase the odds of a prospective parent making a connection because of a shared interest. You can also combine information on interests and hobbies with future goals or aspirations.

Theo enjoys arts and crafts and is particularly proud of the piñata he made for his sister Laila's birthday. It was shaped like a guitar because they both love country music (Theo's favorite artist is Keith Urban; Laila prefers Meghan Trainor). On weekends, you can find Theo playing football at the local rec center or watching the Seahawks on TV.

Paulette loves taking care of the neighbor's two beagles—she walks them every afternoon and brushes their coats to a shine. After she graduates from high school, she thinks she might open a dog-walking business.

Reading is one of Rose's favorite things to do. She just finished the Harry Potter series and can't wait to tackle Lemony Snicket. But she has many other interests too. After school, she loves to go to the nearby park, where she'll toss a Frisbee or play on the playground as long as she's able. She loves to swing as high as she can, loving the breeze as she glides back and forth.

What they like about school and school successes

List the favorite subject or activity at school. If they are doing well, note that. Do not include information about challenges in school. As you can see from some of the examples below, you can talk about child's work ethic, interests, or enthusiasm even if they aren't getting the best possible grades. Discussions about a child's favorite subject can be a nice segue into what they might want to be when they are older.

Lamar is on the honor roll at school, where his favorite subjects are biology and language arts. In biology, he just finished a section on cell division, and he loves to share what he's learned with others. His teachers report that he's a pleasure to have in class.

Patricia, a dedicated student, likes to get her homework done as soon as she gets home. "She's self-motivated and I never have to remind her," her foster mother explains.

A stellar athlete, Precious enjoys her physical education class most of all. She'd love to be a soccer coach one day so she can share her love of sports with other kids.

Lexi loves to go to school, where she can see her friends and her favorite teachers. Every morning, she's ready to go in plenty of time to catch the bus.

Things that are important to them

Did the child have a recent accomplishment? Did they learn to play an instrument? Are there certain toys and other things that make them particularly happy? This information can be especially important for young people who are nonverbal or seriously intellectually disabled.

When Ellie's softball team won the regional championship, she slept with the trophy next to her bed for a week!

Hiking and fishing are Craig's favorite things to do. On a recent trip with his Boy Scout troop, he was thrilled to catch the largest bass he's ever seen. And he's still talking about the big one that got away!

Sophie loves SpongeBob Square Pants more than almost anything else. A smile lights up her face when her foster mother places her stuffed SpongeBob in the crib. She's also got quite a gift for technology. She loves to scroll through pictures and videos on her foster mother's smartphone and point at those she likes the best.

Gracie's excitement about everything she sees and touches will enhance your appreciation of the world around you! She soaks in new colors, figures, and shapes and is constantly asking "What's that?" or exclaiming "Wow!" and laughing with joy. If she sees something interesting, she points and grins. Everyone around her feels better as a result of her happy demeanor and positive attitude.

Answers to questions such as: What makes them laugh?

What makes them laugh? What is their dream day like? What makes them proud? Finding answers to these kinds of questions can add important detail to the child's narrative.

Becca's dream day would begin with extra time in bed to read The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. After she's finished her travels in Narnia, she'd love to take off on some adventures of her own—perhaps romping through the woods with her foster father's dog (who looks a little like Aslan if you have a good imagination). After a great hike, she'd love to come home and have a family dinner of lasagna and garlic bread with a side of carrots. A quick trip to the local ice cream parlor before bed would make the day just about perfect.

Jamal is a great writer and is proud that one of his poems was published in the school paper not long ago. He wrote beautifully about his pride in being African American and the challenges young black men face in the country today, and the whole school cheered when he read it aloud at a special assembly.

Ways they are connected to the community

If the child is involved in a religious or spiritual organization, volunteers for a local program, participates in scouting or other community groups, it's great to list that. This a good place to include career aspirations too, if they relate to the community activity or club, such a youth in the ROTC program being interested in joining the military. Be careful not to give location information (such as the South Bend YWCA or the Duluth Boys and Girls Club) that could enable someone to find the young person.

Joe has a wonderful voice and sings in the church choir. His faith is very important to him, and he'd like a family who will help him find a church where he can worship and sing.

At school, Vicky tutors younger children who are just learning to read. Her positive attitude really keeps the first graders interested and engaged. Vicky is pretty sure she'd like to volunteer for Big Brothers Big Sisters when she's old enough.

A Boy Scout since he was six, Donte is committed to becoming an Eagle Scout and a troop leader one day. He's already earned seven merit badges and is working on earning his First Aid badge now. He wonders if he'll be able to put his first aid experience to use as an emergency medical technician or paramedic in the future.

Information about cultural connections or languages they speak or use

If they are bilingual or multilingual or use sign language, include their primary or other languages. You can also include information about cultural or ethnic connections the child cares about.

Aron grew up speaking Spanish and is now fluent in English too. He is committed to staying bilingual and comfortably switches back and forth between the two languages when he needs to.

Her volunteer project with the Hmong American Partnership has been a real pleasure for Mai. “I love to listen to the elders and hear how they are working to preserve our culture and customs. I’ve been able to learn so much and help educate others in my neighborhood.”

Recently, Jackie has really enjoyed participating in local events hosted by the White Earth tribe, including storytelling sessions and sweats. She explains, “Getting to know my tribe and its traditions has really helped me. I take strength from knowing about my ancestors and all they have accomplished.”

Dreams for the future

A child’s wishes or hopes for their future can help prospective parents think about their ability to help the young person achieve those goals. When possible, integrate the future aspirations into information about the present.

Most weekends, you can find José riding and grooming the rescue horses on his foster family’s ranch. He’d like to be a vet and thinks he might major in animal science when he goes to college in a few years.

Coleen would love to travel to the moon one day, but for now she’ll settle for a vacation at the beach.

Fashion is his passion, and Paul makes or modifies his own clothes to suit his great sense of style. His favorites this season are skinny jeans with a colorful vest. Some day, he’d like to be on Project Runway and hear Tim Gunn tell him to “Make it work!” His success with design and fashion has really given Paul the confidence to pursue his dreams.

Liz and Bennett would love to open a restaurant together one day. They’ve planned the menu (featuring a mix of American classics and their favorite ethnic foods) and special events they’d host. She’ll be head chef, and he’s ready to be the most welcoming host their diners have ever met.

Quotes from the child

Nothing brings a profile to life more than the child's own words. Some of the best narratives include quotes about what is important to them, how they describe themselves, or why they want a family. If the young person is a poet, you might include a short verse as well. Some narratives are written completely by the young person themselves.

Although you can lightly edit a quote or narrative written by a youth, be sure not to include content you wrote as if the youth wrote it.

“I’m a great kid with so much to offer,” Quinton told his recruiter not long ago. “I love to play games, go to the park, and teach dogs new tricks. I recently taught Cassie—my foster family’s yellow lab mix—to roll over, beg, and pretend to sleep.”

Hannah explains, “I want a family of my own—a family who will love me, help me do well in school, and really prepare me for the future. And I want to be a part of something. I have a lot of love to give.”

Positive quotes or input from others in their life

A quote from a foster parent or caseworker can help make a narrative more compelling and highlights that this child has made connections with others.

Sarah’s foster father says she’s a great helper when he’s working on the family car: “She loves to see what I’m doing and hands me the tools I need to get the job done.”

“He is one of the sweetest kids I’ve ever known,” Edgar’s caseworker reports. “Edgar is always helping others. If his brother is having a hard day, he’ll do anything to make him laugh and feel better.”

Her mentor says Anna has the best time when the two of them go to the movies: “I can picture her being an actor or director some day. She really thinks about the craft of moviemaking and loves to talk about what worked and what didn’t after each movie.”

Interesting photos or videos

Prospective parents and recruiters report that one of the most effective ways of grabbing attention is with a great photo and video of a child. Whenever possible, include a current, compelling image that shows the child or sibling group in the best possible light. Because children change so often, it’s important to update the photos regularly. Videos can do even more to show who a child or teen really is and to engage prospective parents.

Important family connections

Be sure to note if the child needs a family who will support connections with brothers or sisters, birth parents or grandparents, foster parents, and others who have become important to the child.

Benny is very close to his grandmother, and his adoptive family will need to support their continued relationship.

Each week, Chris loves talking on the phone with his older brothers, who were adopted a few years ago. The brothers are very close, and Chris will need a family who supports their ongoing connection.

In profiles of siblings, how they relate to one another

For many young people in foster care, their relationship with their brothers or sisters is the most important and long-lasting relationship they have. Narratives can highlight these connections and raise awareness about the importance of keeping siblings together.

Thomas is so proud of his little sisters. When Kate and Liz learned to read, he announced it to anyone who would listen. They go to the library every month for reading group, and Thomas loves to brag about how smart his sisters are.

Tanya and Glenn had been separated but are now living together again. They are thrilled to be in the same family and are looking for an adoptive family who can ensure they never have to lose one another again. They call themselves the “Awesome Twosome,” and can often be found playing games, collecting beautiful leaves, and just having an all-around great time.

Birth year

Because the profile may be posted for some time, listing a birth year is usually better than including a child’s age. If you update the narrative regularly, using age is fine. With some online photolistings, the application may calculate the age for you. Of course, to protect the child’s identity, you should never use the child’s full birth date.

Michael, born in 2002, is an amazing kid. His creativity and imagination make him one of the best storytellers you’ve ever heard! If you ask about his day, he’d much rather tell you about his adventures on the high seas than what happened in math class. Sit back and relax and he’ll spin a yarn better than most books you’ve read. (And he will tell you about math class, too, if you let him get the adventures out of the way first.)

How a family might be a part of their life

The key is to include information that is important to the child without limiting the pool of prospective families.

A forever family is exactly what Frankie and Kayleigh have been waiting for. They are ready for the love and support that their family would provide.

Bettina wants a family that will encourage her love of music. She says it's okay if they can't sing or play guitar, but she hopes they come to her concerts and cheer loudly.

Gus thinks a family that loves to hike and camp would be ideal, and he'd love to take a weeklong trip to the mountains with a big family. "But if my future parent or parents don't like to camp or hike, that's OK," says Gus. "They can stay home on the couch while I get back to nature with my friends or a local club."

"I'd really like a family with a dog," Mike says. He's been training the foster family's dog and is great about taking the dog for a walk every day.

Appeals to families

Some of the strongest narratives include a heartfelt ask for a family. These can touch the reader and encourage them to act. When possible, include quotes from the child themselves. Appeals to family can be combined with the above item on how a family might be part of the child's life.

"I'm ready to unpack for the last time and move into my forever family home," Karla explains.

"I'd like a family who will make me feel at home and who will go on adventures with me. Will you consider being that family for me?"

If your family would like to help Maxine reach her full potential, you might be the right one(s) for her! She's looking for a parent or two who will help her become the best version of herself.

How to learn more

Unless your photolisting has an automatic inquiry system, don't forget to include information about whom prospective parents can contact to learn more. If you have a different inquiry process for families who have a completed home study and those who do not, explain that here as well. Information about how to learn more can also be effectively combined with appeals to families.

To learn more about whether Teresa is the right fit for your family, please contact Jane Doe at janedoe@dhs.state.us or xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Ben is looking for an adoptive family who will help him grow and thrive. If you can picture Ben as part of your family, contact Jane Doe at janedoe@dhs.state.us or xxx-xxx-xxxx to learn more.

Families with an approved home study should ask their worker to contact Diane at xxx-xxx-xxxx. Other prospective adopters can learn more about the adoption process and what next steps they can take by visiting www.yourstateadoptionprocess.org or by calling one of our staff at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

4

What to consider carefully

Below we explore those items in a child profile that should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis before they are included in a public narrative. If the information is included in the public narrative, it should be presented from a strengths-based perspective.

As you make these careful considerations, remember that a public narrative is potentially accessible to anyone, including the child themselves, their peers, birth family members, and even people who may want to harm children. Keep in mind the core question: does this information enhance the presentation of the child and make it more likely that they will find a family?

A general statement about long-term needs

For children who will have lifelong or serious ongoing needs, you may want to make reference to that in the public narrative. But don't disclose that the needs are medical, provide a specific diagnosis, or offer any details. The examples below show how it can be done respectfully.

A happy, playful, and social girl, Michelle is often smiling ear to ear. She needs a family who can keep her smiling and meet her significant needs now and in the future.

Tania needs a family who can meet her needs, which will continue into adulthood.

General information about ongoing support needs

All children, especially those who have experienced trauma, require ongoing support from their families. Because the need for support is universal, we recommend covering the need for additional or special support in general information about the adoption process and in introductions to the photolisting, rather than in an individual child's narrative. In some cases, though, workers may feel more comfortable if the narratives include references to the fact that the child will need support over time. In these cases, we suggest you keep it general and positive and don't disclose diagnoses or specific services. The following examples show how you can include a general statement about the need for ongoing support:

Rodrigo is doing really well in school this year! He loves his small classroom, and the extra support he receives is helping him get good grades.

Her adoptive family will likely need ongoing support to ensure Randi continues to heal from her past experiences.

There's never a dull moment with Elias around! He loves to play games, tell jokes, and converse with adults and kids alike. A family who will laugh at his riddles and keep up their end of the conversation would be a perfect fit. His family will also need to maintain the supports that are helping Elias do so well.

Discussion of appearance

Negative descriptions of a child's appearance or body should never be included. Although it is fine to talk about a child with a great smile, a fun hairstyle, or a love of clothes, in most other cases it's best to let the picture do the talking. Even neutral descriptions ("She's a tall redhead," or "He is of medium height and weight") can feel a little like a catalog description and may turn readers' attention to appearance rather than to the child's personality and strengths.

Very positive references to appearance can be problematic for several reasons—they can come across as marketing or even objectifying a child, and they can be seen as a contrast to a child who is not described as cute, beautiful, or handsome. We also don't want to make it seem like the child's being attractive is a reason for a parent to be interested in them.

For children who are profoundly intellectually disabled, however, descriptions of favorite clothes or hairstyle might give life to a more difficult narrative to write. For example:

Shawna's favorite outfit is a purple sweat suit that is soft and cozy. She smiles when she sees it and looks very stylish when she has it on!

Bradley loves to have his hair washed, brushed, and styled. He giggles at the mirror when his foster mother makes a funny mohawk or pulls it all to one side.

Detailed discussions of chores or how the young person might be helpful to the family

There's a fine line between describing a child as cooperative and including language that might harken back to the Orphan Train days. It's best to avoid long lists of chores or other activities that may make it seem like the child is going to be working rather than being a member of the family. You can convey the same messages with general statements about being helpful.

Better — *Jasper is helpful around the house and loves keeping his room tidy.*

Less effective — *Jasper performs household chores, such as sweeping the floor, washing windows, cleaning the bathroom, doing laundry, and making his bed.*

The young person's expressed preferences on types of families

As we discussed above, including a young person's wishes and dreams for a family can make a profile more appealing. But in identifying specific types of family a child wants, there's danger in turning away a good family who doesn't meet the stated criteria. It's best to include statements that relate to activities rather than family structure or other, more fixed categories.

Better – *Carl wants a family who will allow him to ride horses and take him to the rodeo.*

Less effective – *Carl would prefer a family who lives on a farm and has lots of horses.*

Better – *Fred has a wonderful voice and loves to sing. His Jewish faith is very important to him, and he can envision being a cantor and leading Shabbat services at his synagogue one day. He'd like a family who will support his faith and help him develop his many talents.*

Less effective – *Fred has a wonderful voice and sings at the synagogue. His faith is very important to him, and he wants a family who shares his faith and attends synagogue every week.*

In the better examples above, prospective parents who go to synagogue or who have a farm are likely to be interested, but others who are committed to helping a young person could still feel like they might be a good fit.

For those more fixed family attributes (marital status or family structure, race or ethnic background, other children in the home, where they live, etc.), we recommend including information on the youth's desires on type of family *only* if professionals have thoroughly discussed with the young person the limits and the reasons for them. Even in these cases, it's usually best to wait until later in the process to identify these preferences or restrictions. If the *agency* is looking for a particular type of family, be careful not to attribute any of those limitations to the child's wishes or desires.

Sexual orientation if the youth is out, wants the information to be included in their public narrative, has been well-informed about risks, and is engaged in the process of crafting the narrative

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) is nothing a young person should have to hide, and it's heartening to see how people have become much more accepting of LGBTQ youth in recent years. Sadly, though, LGBTQ young people are still at increased risk of bullying or abuse, so we suggest being cautious with including this information in public narratives. As a result, in general, we list sexual orientation and gender identity as items *not* to be included in public profiles.

We recommend against disclosing that a young person is transgender due to the current state of prejudice related to gender identity in some segments of the population. But we believe there are some cases where a youth's sexual orientation can be mentioned. If a developmentally mature lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth is out to their peers, family, and community and has been thoroughly prepared by child welfare professionals about how to respond to the potential downsides of disclosing sexual orientation publicly, we think the young person should get to decide. In these cases, the youth should be actively involved in writing, editing, or approving the narrative to be sure it reflects their own thoughts and beliefs.

When including information on sexual orientation, it typically reads better as an integrated part of the narrative, rather than a simple declarative statement.

Better – *Carlos is looking for a family who is openly supportive of the LGBT community*

Better – *A proud founder of the gay/straight alliance at his school, Carlos is active in the LGBT community and went to his first pride parade this year!*

Less effective – *Carlos, who is gay, is looking for a family who will support him and love him.*

Transgender children and youth

For children and youth who are transgender—meaning the gender they identify as does not match the sex they were assigned at birth—public photolisting or other recruitment can be more challenging. We firmly believe that youth should be described and listed as the gender they identify as. In a public narrative, that means using the youth's preferred first name, gender, and pronouns, and a photo that is approved by the youth and reflects their gender identity.

It's important to take care that a narrative doesn't accidentally out a transgender youth, which can easily happen if the child's gender identity changes after an initial listing. We recommend carefully reviewing the narrative, photo, and any database entries to be sure the gender is up to date and consistent, the current first name is used throughout, and any pronouns match the young person's identity.

Some young people don't identify as one gender or prefer to use non-gender-based pronouns (such as they or one). Before using they, their, or one, we recommend workers talk with the young person about the fact that these words may convey that they are transgender and supportively discuss the potential risks. A final decision on the language to be used can then be made based on the young person's wishes and the professional's understanding of the best option to protect the youth.

Given the increased threats transgender individuals face (including higher incidence of assaults and suicide), we recommend against noting that a young person is transgender in a public narrative—even if the youth is comfortable with the listing. The place for disclosure to prospective parents should come later, and only with home-studied families, and any prospective parents should be carefully screened to be sure they are equipped to support the youth and their gender identity.

The fact that the youth is a parent

We believe that statements about a youth's being pregnant or that a youth recently gave birth should *never* be included because they are medical information. We suggest that any discussion of a young person's being a parent be included *only* if the youth specifically wants the information in the narrative, understands the potential consequences, and has been involved in writing and reviewing it. In such cases, we strongly recommend keeping the narrative focused on the youth rather than their infant or toddler, making mentions of the young child brief and non specific, and reminding the reader that these young parents still need parents themselves.

We also suggest that caseworkers take care during the assessment process to ensure that prospective adopters are willing to help the youth succeed as a parent and to prevent any prospective parent from moving forward because they really want to parent the infant or toddler. As with the other items in this section, if you have any doubt, leave it out.

Better — *Travis is an amazing artist who can paint portraits, landscapes, and beautiful abstracts. He's learning to take photographs and has a great eye for a compelling image. He loves his music and art classes at school, and is doing well in all subjects. Travis is the parent to a two-year-old daughter (who is one of his favorite photo subjects), and he is committed to being the best father he can be. He's looking for an adoptive family that can take care of him and help him grow as a parent.*

Better — *Rachel is an avid reader, and is rarely found without a book in her hand. Her favorites are the John Green novels, but she loves classics and mysteries too. Rachel has a nine-month-old son, and she likes reading to him whenever she can. She's proud to be a good mother, but knows she still needs a parent herself.*

Less effective — *Rachel has a nine-month-old son named Darren. Darren is a bright, curious child and has just learned to crawl. He's exploring his home and learning new things every day. Darren also loves to smile and point at his favorite stuffed animals.*

Statements about the success of the current placement

It's wonderful to be able to write about how a child is doing well with their current family or that the caregivers think highly of them. But be careful not to go too far or it may be hard for prospective adopters to envision this child in any other family.

Better — *Luis gets along very well with his foster family and loves to hang out with his foster mother.*

Less effective — *Luis is completely happy in his foster home. He and his foster mother have an unbreakable bond.*

Better — *Denny’s foster parents are so proud of how he’s doing and enjoy having him around. They and Denny would like to stay in contact after he’s adopted.*

Less effective — *Denny is thriving with his foster parents and is very tightly bonded with them. A very slow transition to a new family will be needed.*

Race or ethnic background

In many cases, photolistings allow prospective parents to search by race or ethnic background. Checking off boxes that identify race and background is not a problem. But, like generic descriptions of appearance (she has brown hair or blue eyes), writing a child’s race into the narrative can fall a little flat. If a child is exploring their heritage, learning a language, or deeply connected to their community, include that information. Be careful not to suggest that only parents of a particular race or ethnic background will be considered, which could be a violation of the federal Multiethnic Placement Act.*

Better — *Lucia recently began to learn Spanish, and she’s excited to be able to talk with her grandmother in her native tongue. She hopes to be fluent one day, and can even imagine becoming a Spanish teacher in the future.*

Less effective — *Lucia is Latina, and her family is from El Salvador. She’s learning Spanish so she can talk with some of her birth father’s family. She hopes to be fluent one day, and can even imagine becoming a Spanish teacher in the future.*

Better — *Fred loves his history classes and is really enjoying learning about the civil rights movement right now. When he watched Parting the Waters, a documentary on the movement, he felt particularly proud to be African American and wondered how his family members may have felt during this time of critical change in the US.*

Less effective — *Fred is African American. He loves to study history and is learning about the civil rights movement right now.*

* The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) prohibits federally funded state agencies and entities from delaying, denying, or otherwise discriminating on the basis of the parent’s or child’s race, color, or national origin when making adoption or foster care placement decisions. It does allow an agency or entity to consider cultural, ethnic, or racial background of a child and the capacity of a prospective parent to meet the child’s needs when making a placement. Search for “major federal legislation” at <https://www.childwelfare.gov>.

The applicability of the Indian Child Welfare Act

For most prospective adoptive parents, listing only whether or not the Indian Child Welfare Act applies isn't very informative. It can be helpful to explain that the child's tribe has the authority to make placement decisions. Integrating information about the tribal role into the young person's cultural connections and own goals and desire for a family can make it more effective. We recommend against listing the tribe's name because some may be small enough that members can identify the child.

Better — *One of Darryl's favorite things to do is go to a powwow and watch the dancers. He'd love to learn the craft one day. The Indian Child Welfare Act applies to Darryl, and his tribe will be making placement decisions. All families will be considered, but the tribe will give preference to Native American families. More than anything, Darryl wants a family who will love him and care for him now and in the future: "I'd like a family who can help me accomplish my dreams. I know I can go far!"*

Better — *Darryl wants a family who will love him and care for him now and in the future: "I'd like a family who can help me accomplish my dreams. I know I can go far!" Because the Indian Child Welfare Act applies to him, Darryl's tribe will be involved in placement decisions. All families are welcome to inquire, although the tribe has a preference for a Native American family*

Less effective — *Darryl is looking for a family who will love him and care for him now and in the future. The Indian Child Welfare Act applies.*

Last initial

It's fine to include a child's last initial if it might help inquiring parents distinguish between two or more children with the same first name. Please note, though, that in a smaller community, a last initial could be identifying, especially if the first name is not very common.

Date of photo and profile

The best practice is to keep narratives up to date. If you are able to do regular updates, the date lets readers know the information is current. If you aren't able, though, a long-past date can suggest a child has been languishing in care, which could be discouraging to prospective parents.

Grade level in school

We recommend including the child's grade level in school only if the narratives are updated regularly and the child is performing at grade level for their age. There are two potential problems with including a child's grade in school. One is that it can become out of date quickly unless you update narratives regularly. If it's out of date, the grade level could suggest educational challenges, such as if a 12-year-old is listed as being in second grade. Even if a profile is up to date, if a child is much older than the others in their grade, we recommend omitting the grade level because it can suggest educational, intellectual, or developmental challenges.

An average photo, either in terms of actual photo quality or how it shows the child

A photo is often the first reason people want to learn more about a child, so including a picture is important. If the image isn't great, though, make an effort to get a better one. Staff with lots of photolisting experience say updating the photo is one of the best ways to get renewed interest in a child who has been listed for a while.

Consider state and federal privacy laws

As you work on public child narratives, be sure you know and follow your state's data privacy and disclosure laws and regulations and your agency's interpretation of potentially relevant federal laws such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). As noted earlier, we recommend keeping all medical and private educational information out of public child narratives and sharing this information only later in the adoption-placement process.

5

What not to include

Below are items we believe do not belong in a public child narrative because they could either identify the child or youth, dissuade prospective adopters, or reveal private or sensitive information about the child. Many of them can and should be disclosed later with home-studied prospects who are interested in this particular child, through a private narrative or other private communication.

Identifying information

Because children and youth in foster care are vulnerable to further abuse or exploitation, keeping their identity and location safe should be a top priority. The following are items that should not be included because they can allow people to find, or possibly exploit, a child who has been profiled:

- Last name
- Date of birth
- Name of school, school district, neighborhood, or local geographic markers (such as “*She likes to swim at the Duluth YWCA.*”)

Abuse, neglect, maltreatment

A child’s right to privacy related to the most intimate details of their history or birth family should not be lost simply because they need a family. Details about abuse, neglect, and maltreatment may evoke feelings of sympathy from prospective adopters, but this does not outweigh the violation a young person might feel if the information was shared at school or elsewhere in the community. Public narratives should not include:

- Information related to sexual abuse or sexual acting out, or references to the child as a potential perpetrator or victim, including code talk that might relate to sexual abuse (such as describing the child as overly affectionate with males, talking about the need to teach safe touch, or noting that the child should be the youngest in the family)
- Information that suggests the possibility that the child could be a victim, such as stating that the child has no boundaries or has no sense of danger
- Birth family history of abuse, neglect, physical or mental illness, domestic violence, criminal history, or substance abuse, including even brief references or allusions to a parent’s drug use or the child’s exposure to drugs or alcohol in utero

- Reasons for the young person's entry into care
- The child's trauma history

Placement information

Like information on abuse and maltreatment, data on a child's current or past placements is too personal to be shared in a public setting. Some placement details may reveal or suggest medical or behavioral challenges, for example. Others (such as length of time in care or multiple placements) may make a child seem like too big a risk for prospective parents to take. As with other elements of the profile, the key is to consider whether the information would likely make a prospective parent interested in learning more. We believe placement details never meet that level of scrutiny.

It's best to avoid all of the following in public narratives:

- Current placement type (such as residential treatment, group home, or juvenile justice setting)
- Placement history, including number of placements in foster care or re-entry into care, or other information taken directly from the child's case file regarding their placement history
- How long the child has been in foster care or how long they have been waiting for an adoptive family
- Information about why a foster family or relative is not interested in, or able to be, the child's permanent placement
- References to adoption interruption, disruption, or dissolution

Medical information

Since the passage of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in 1996, there has been renewed attention on the need to protect individual's confidential medical information. We firmly believe that the spirit of the law should be considered when creating public profiles of waiting children. As a result, we recommend against including any information about medical or mental health diagnoses or treatment in public narratives, including information about the child's level of medical need. As with many of the items in this section, we believe in careful, thoughtful disclosure to prospective parents later in the adoption placement process. Public narratives should not include:

- Medical or mental health diagnoses, medication, and treatment, including whether the child has or is attending therapy or counseling
- Statements that a youth is pregnant or has recently given birth

- Levels of, or statements about, a child’s physical impairments (While many photolistings have checkboxes or impairment levels to help match a child with prospective parents, we recommend that these functioning levels not be shared with prospective adoptive families until they have an approved home study and are registered on the site.)
- Reports or statements from doctors, mental health providers, or other health care professionals
- Reports or statements related to medical conditions or treatments from the child’s foster parent or other care providers
- Clinical information from the child’s case file

Behavioral challenges

Too often, narratives of waiting children include negative information about their behaviors or other challenges. While we know that the challenges facing these young people are real—and their parents will need to be prepared and supported to address them—the public narrative is not the best avenue to share this information. The public profile or photolisting is where we seek to engage prospective parents and to introduce the child’s best self. It can help to think about the public narrative as when we go on a first date or meet people at a party. We share the best parts of ourselves in such situations and, after we’ve developed a bond, may share some of the challenges we face.

We do recommend including information about the behavioral challenges in general information about adoption that is not connected to a specific child. This information can and should highlight that the challenges can be the result of trauma children in care have often experienced.

We recommend against including any of the following in individual children’s public narratives:

- Aggressive behaviors, including anger, fighting, or oppositional acting out
- Sexual behaviors, including the child as a current, past, or potential victim or perpetrator
- Information about delinquency or juvenile justice involvement
- Negative behaviors such as lying, running away, or stealing
- References to a child acting younger than or being more mature than their same-age peers
- Impairment levels related to a child’s behaviors

It’s a good idea to review the narrative to be sure that negative behaviors aren’t included in positive terms. For example, *“Stefan has improved his ability to control his temper and is doing much better in school,”* has positive framing but still includes negative traits. A more strengths-based choice would be to simply say: *“Stefan has been doing well in school, and he loves his algebra class.”* Similarly, *“Becky has recently learned to stop sassing her foster parents and teachers”* sounds positive but is really focused on the past negative behaviors. It’s better to focus on what Becky is doing right now: *“Becky is respectful of adults, including her foster parents and teachers.”*

Potentially painful or embarrassing information

As noted earlier, as you write narratives or review profiles, think about how the youth would feel if the information was read by their classmates or friends. Or how you would feel if the information was included in a public website or handout about you or a child you love. Below are examples of potentially painful or embarrassing information that should not be included in public narratives:

- Mention of bodily functions (including incontinence and bedwetting) or hygiene challenges
- Any descriptions of body type, including short, heavy, stocky, slender, or skinny
- The child's height or weight
- Negative descriptions of the child's appearance
- References to the child's fears or sources of anxiety
- Anything else the youth could be embarrassed by if their peers saw it, such as if they have been bullied, have trouble making friends, are clumsy or awkward, are messy or sloppy, cry easily or often, or don't do well at sports or in school

Things that limit potential families

In most cases, children are photolisted or otherwise described in public profiles because their agency has not been able to find a family that can meet their needs. A public narrative that limits or discourages families only makes the job harder and reduces the agency's chances of finding the adoptive family the child needs. There are, of course, very real concerns about which family is right for a child and whether the family can meet the child's needs and protect the child or others in their home. Rather than including such references in a public narrative, we think it's best to consider these situations on a case-by-case basis after an interested approved family has expressed interest.

We recommend against including the following in public narratives:

- Discussion about the child's reluctance to be adopted or emphasis on their unique need for preparation for adoption
- Statements that suggest the writer may not believe adoption is an option for the child
- Limits on the type of family who will be considered, including limits based on the parents' marital status or family make-up, race or ethnic background, number or age of other children in the family, religion, or other such fixed characteristics. We recommend against including statements such as the following:
 - › *A two-parent family would be best.*
 - › *We're only considering families in south Florida.* For those cases where there is a valid geographic restriction, you may want to choose outreach efforts only in or near those communities from which families will be considered.

- › *Paula would do best in a family with no other children.*
- › *Gregg would prefer to be adopted by a Caucasian family.* Please note that statements about the preferred race of the adoptive family, even if noted as the young person's preference, may suggest a potential violation of the Multiethnic Placement Act or the Interethnic Adoption Provisions. Even if they do not violate these federal laws, such statements are likely to turn away qualified adoptive parents.
- › *Gwen wants to be placed with a Baptist family.* Please see above for examples of how we think you can effectively highlight a child's faith and the importance of adoptive parents' supporting that faith without including an explicit limitation on families to be considered.

Decisions about whether a particular parent or couple can meet a child's needs should be made on a case-by-case basis, after identifying their strengths and support network and helping them explore if this placement is the right fit. There are many cases where a family who does not meet either an agency's or a child's expressed preferences has been exactly what a particular child needed.

Finding a family

When Tammy was photolisted, her narrative noted that she should be placed only with a two-parent family. She had experienced serious abuse in her early life and, as a result, had behaviors that her workers couldn't imagine a single parent handling on their own. In spite of the warning, Missy saw something in Tammy and pursued the adoption. The adoption was finalized eight years ago, and the two have built a strong, loving, successful family. Missy's network of other adoptive parents and post-adoption support services helped her when times were tough, and Tammy is now as close to her mom as any 20-year-old could be.

Intellectual ability or education challenges

Any references to school should be general or positive. Like HIPAA for health information, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was passed to protect access to private educational information. We believe that the spirit of the law should govern public child welfare information-sharing, so that no private educational information is shared in public profiles of waiting children.

Information about special services or challenges should be presented later to home-studied families who express interest in this child. Similarly, discussions about a child's IQ, intellectual or developmental disabilities, or cognitive challenges should be considered protected information until later in the adoption-placement process.

Don't include any of the following in a public narrative:

- Intellectual or educational challenges, including allusions to challenges or to a child being nonverbal

- References to special education status or an individualized education or Section 504 plan
- Specific IQ score or range, even if it is high
- References to specific disabilities that relate to school, education, or intellectual ability
- Statements about a child’s educational impairment level
- References about learning more slowly than or performing at a different grade level than their same age peers
- References to actual grades or scores on assessments, even if they are positive

Sexual orientation or gender identity

Public child narratives shouldn’t include:

- Anything that would convey that a youth is transgender, including mixing pronouns, a name and gender identity that don’t match, or switching names
- A statement about, or allusions to, the fact that the youth is lesbian, gay, or bisexual *unless all three of the following criteria are met*: (1) the narrative is for a teen who wants the listing to include their sexual orientation; (2) the youth has had thoughtful conversations with affirming adults about the potential positive and negative consequences; and (3) the youth has been involved in crafting the narrative and approves of how the information is presented

Other

- **Anything negative** — Neutral is okay, but negative is not. Review the public narrative to be sure that negative traits aren’t hidden or couched in positive terms. (For example: *Jason is remarkably polite, although he does talk back to his foster mother from time to time.* This would be better said: *Jason has very good manners.*)
- **Information about the young person’s being a parent** — You can make an exception if the young person wants the information included, understands the pros and cons, and has approved the description.
- **Specific information or details the child asked to have excluded from the narrative** — Involving young people in the creation of narratives contributes to having a positive, accurate narrative. During the process, we recommend you follow the youth’s lead about what to leave out of the narrative. And if a young person reviews a narrative and requests specific edits, we suggest you make those changes. If you feel strongly about including something, it’s best to discuss why with the youth and see if you can come to an agreement.

- **Language that promotes stereotypes based on gender, race, ethnicity, or other characteristics** — Some narratives will talk about a child as a “girly girl” or as “all boy.” Others may mention how the child is similar or different than others of the same gender or ethnic background. (For example: *Like most girls, Samantha goes crazy for pink and glitter. Although he’s of Mexican descent, Pedro doesn’t like spicy food.*) The best option is to focus on this individual child rather than comparing them to classes of people and potentially perpetuating stereotypes. (Better options are: *A gifted artist, Samantha uses a lot of pink and glitter in her work. Pedro loves macaroni and cheese and pizza above all else.*)
- **Things the child isn’t, doesn’t do, or doesn’t like** — Even when the narrative uses this technique with positive intent, the result doesn’t typically serve the young person well. For example, a narrative might read: *Simon isn’t aggressive and doesn’t talk back to his foster parents.* Raising the issue suggests that perhaps he used to be or that there’s something else to worry about. Or it can suggest other children in foster care all have this behavior. It’s better to write from the positive perspective: *Simon gets along well with others and is very respectful with adults.*

In other cases, language about what someone doesn’t like or do may feed into stereotypes. (For example, *She doesn’t like to shop like most teenage girls do.*) It’s much more effective to focus on what this child *does* like and what they enjoy doing.

- **Adoption assistance eligibility** — Informational pages about waiting children and the adoption process should certainly mention that most of the children adopted from foster care are eligible for ongoing support. But including it in the narrative may make the child—or their peers—feel like someone has to be paid to adopt them. Information about adoption assistance benefits is certainly something that should be shared with home-studied families who are looking for specific information about a particular child.
- **Status as legally free or not legally free** — There are three potential problems with including a statement that a child is legally free for adoption. First, many of those just learning about adoption will not know what it means, so it’s not of much use to them. Second, listing that a child isn’t legally free could be off-putting to potential parents, so they’d begin to look only at children who are legally free. Finally, it may read to a young person that it’s related to a financial transaction (like a sign for free kittens, for example). Information about a child’s legal status is best left for a private narrative or a conversation with home-studied prospects, during which questions can be answered. In some cases, photolistings may allow prospective parents to search by whether a child is legally free. It is not a problem to check off a box that identifies if the child is legally free.
- **Disclosure of sensitive or potentially identifying information about any birth family members or siblings not in foster care** — This could include criminal history, mental health or medical details, history of substance use, domestic violence history, immigration status, geographic locations, etc.

- **Links or references to a young person’s personal YouTube channel, web pages, social media pages** — Links to such websites may allow people to access identifying information or even contact the child. And even a reference might allow someone to search for and find the child. If the young person is proud of something they’ve created, find out if there’s a way to link to a version of it that is not connected to the social media site. Of course, it’s great to include *Wednesday’s Child* and similar videos and special social media efforts related to looking for adoptive families.
- **Outdated information** — The best profiles are updated regularly. Children and teens change quite a bit over time; a narrative of a 15-year-old that talks about his love of Thomas trains will read as dated, might suggest a developmental or intellectual delay, or present an inaccurate picture of the teen.
- **Spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors and poorly composed writing** — It’s not just content that can make a child’s narrative less than compelling. Errors, dull writing, and poorly worded phrases will not encourage prospective parents to keep reading, could cause them to misunderstand important details, or lead them to view the agency as less than highly professional. Whenever possible, have someone with strong writing and editing skills involved in the development of profiles. Regardless of who writes the narrative, be sure to have someone with a good eye for details proofread the final version before it’s released.

Photos

As noted above, using a good picture is one of the best ways to help prospective parents connect to a child. But a bad or old image can have the opposite effect and can cause prospective parents to simply look past a child’s listing. In other cases, photos can provide identifying information or invite the wrong kind of attention for a child.

In cases where the picture can’t be used, the first priority is to get one that can. When you don’t have a useable picture or the youth doesn’t want to have their picture posted, consider using some of the child’s artwork instead. Some young people have even chosen to draw a self-portrait to replace their profile photo.

Below are the types of photos that should not be included in a child’s profile:

- Blurry, pixelated, distorted, or otherwise low quality photos.
- Photos of the child that are years out of date.
- Photos that show the child’s name, a school name, a school team, residential treatment center name, a well-known building or landmark, or other location markers (such as a street sign or building with a specific name or address visible). We know that participation in sports may be very important to a young person and can be compelling to prospective parents. If an older youth strongly prefers to wear their team jersey in a photo, we suggest using image-editing software to remove or obscure the team’s logo.

- Photos showing clothing or backgrounds with pictures of weapons or words or pictures that suggest violence or crime.
- Photos with sexual overtones, including photos with suggestive posture, photos of youth with no shirts or significant cleavage, or photos of young people in clothing that has sexually suggestive statements or pictures.
- Photos of children who have a high profile because their story has received significant news coverage that included last names or other identifying information. If there is a serious safety risk or risk of exposure for a child with a high profile, you may want to consider whether public recruitment is the right option for this particular child.
- Photos of young people who do not want their picture included.
- Photos that include other children unless they are siblings the agency is seeking to place together.

6

Samples of well-written public narratives

Creative, well-written narratives

Max

Great Scott! There's a new superhero flying around the planet! It's Marvelous Max! This caped crusader wants to save the world one day, and if he had his way, he would also strap a giant piggy bank to his back and drop money off to charities. Of course, that's when he's an adult. As a kid, Max just wants to tackle the heavens from the ground through a love of science. "Sometimes," he says, "when it's windy, I like to fly some kites. And sometimes I just like to relax, lay in the sun and look at the clouds.... Sometimes at night I like to look at the stars" ... and perhaps wish upon one because Max wants a telescope one day, not to mention a forever family. "I would like to have a forever family who will provide me with a new home to live in and take me to Cossi!" Yes, this superhero/scientist might seem ordinary on the outside. After all, he likes listening to music and playing basketball and video games. But since when is saving the world "ordinary"?

Aaron

Aaron picks Florida as the one destination on Earth that he'd most like to visit. But forget about Mickey and killer whales and all those other attractions. He just wants to see the frothy blue ocean and bury his toes in warm white sand on a seaside beach. Indeed, Aaron loves life's simple pleasures. For instance, he enjoys playing outside and likes swimming and being in the water. In addition, he likes to play basketball. When he's indoors, Aaron enjoys watching television and movies, especially the animated film *Wall-E*. Like the ocean he wants to visit, blue is Aaron's favorite color. At supper, Aaron would savor some pizza and afterward he'd help clear the table and perhaps get ready to play Sorry, his favorite game. His simple pleasures carry over to Christmas, too, which he enjoys celebrating by helping to decorate the house. And the most important things Aaron wants people to know about him are that he's nice, kind, and has a great personality.

Kate

To say that Kate simply loves life understates her zeal, compassion and caring attitude toward others. For instance, she dreams of helping others through humanitarian efforts along the lines of Mother Teresa. "I want to run a missionary organization that helps people all around the world," says Kate. And perhaps her philanthropic pursuits will take her to the one destination that she most wants to visit—Papua, New

Guinea. “I want to learn their culture, see the beautiful sites, and have many adventures,” says Kate. However, no other interest tops Kate’s faith. She enjoys going to church, especially to celebrate Christmas and Easter. “I care a lot about my faith,” she adds, “and it is very important to me.”

Kate hopes for a future forever family who will support her strong faith and love of the outdoors. Her family must be strong advocates for the services she needs to thrive at home, at school, and in the community.

Jack

When Jack tinkers with technology, generally something electrifying occurs, such as the time he fashioned a light out of spare parts and a battery. This mechanically inclined, tech-savvy teen loves taking things apart and putting them back together and has shown a natural ability to figure out any type of electronic device. In fact, his worker describes Jack as “creative and imaginative in his ability to make things and build things.” “Mr. Gadget” turns into “Mr. Fix-It” when repairing things that are broken, which is another natural ability. Not surprisingly, Jack’s favorite subject in school is science, and he says he enjoys science experiments. This “Mr. Science” enjoys a good laugh too. “Jack has a good sense of humor,” says his worker, who adds that Jack uses sarcasm to joke around and laugh with others. Another worker describes Jack as a kid who “cares about others and immediately wants to share whatever he has with others.” Jack also likes to cook, and his favorite dish is chicken alfredo with carrot cake for dessert. In school, Jack does best with one-on-one attention. A family with pets would be ideal, says Jack, who also likes motorcycles, fishing, and being outdoors. He hopes his family will help him pursue his many and varied interests!

Narratives for children or youth with significant needs

Lexi

Meet Lexi! If you want every day to start with a smile, there’s no doubt Lexi (born in 2005) will bring one to your face. She greets everyone with a big smile and has been described as one of the happiest children you will ever meet. Her spirit is like no other, and the rewards of her love and smiles will be endless. A very social girl, Lexi loves to interact with children and adults. Lexi loves to be talked to! Lexi likes playing with soft baby toys and chewing on them and rolls around on the floor to get to what she wants. She can amuse herself by playing with toys (her favorites are toys with music and lights). Watching TV and animated movies are also fun for Lexi.

Lexi likes going to school and being part of everyday life. She enjoys outings and going to church with her foster family. Lexi has overcome many obstacles in her life, and the special family for Lexi must be willing to learn how to meet her needs and be willing to accept a lifetime commitment. If you are that family, please don’t miss out on another minute without this wonderful girl! Lexi is the kind of child that will enrich your life forever.

Sam

Samantha, who goes by Sam, delights everyone who comes into contact with her. She's a well-liked child who's very funny. One of her workers says Sam welcomes the attention she receives from others. "Sam is very affectionate and loves to be comforted and hugged," says the worker. One of Sam's favorite activities is playing with any kind of toy that lights up or plays music. She also has an artistic side. "Sam's favorite thing to do is paint," says her worker. Overall, Sam is a pleasure to be around, and her worker explains, "Everyone in the foster family likes Sam!"

Due to her needs, Sam requires supervision and care. She does well at home and in school, where she receives assistance to function at her best. Sam loves attending school and participating in the classroom. Her future forever family must make sure that Sam gets the services that will benefit her now and into adulthood. Finally, her family must support contact between Sam and her two siblings.

Narratives for siblings

Antonio, Juan, and Ignacio

Antonio, Juan, and Ignacio are active and fun-loving children with charisma and hearts full of hope. Their sibling bond is strong, and they consider each other teammates. They look forward to being with each other and having a family who will support their dreams and passions. All three love sports, riding their bicycles, and listening to Tejano music. Antonio and Juan are the oldest and are protective of each other and their younger brother, Ignacio. Juan and Ignacio are quite outgoing—Juan likes to make jokes and Ignacio loves to chat with others. More reserved Antonio takes a little time to open up. These brothers are uniquely talented and are looking forward to sharing their love with their forever family.

Marcus and Craig

Marcus and Craig are twins with very different personalities! Marcus is more outspoken, while Craig sits back and observes before stating his opinion. Craig loves music and will not hesitate to play and sing one of his original songs for you on his guitar. Aside from his love for music, Craig also likes to dance. Once he starts up, it almost always sparks a dance battle between the two boys. When Marcus and Craig are not trying to win the dance contest, you are likely to find them playing video games or playing with their cell phones. Marcus enjoys playing sports, including football, and listening to music. Both boys have a sense of humor that will surely make you laugh.

Marcus and Craig share a unique bond. The care and love they have for each other is shown daily through their one-on-one interactions. Whether it's your first time meeting them or you have known them for a lifetime, both boys will delight you with their charm. The twins need a forever family that will offer them plenty of love, time, and a sense of security. And we guarantee Marcus and Craig will bring fun, excitement, and spontaneity into their new family's home.

Narrative written by the young person

Rogelio

“My name is Rogelio and I am 19 years old. I am in high school, and have plans to go to a local college upon graduation. My focus will be graphic design and I hope to one day work for a gaming company in some capacity. I have varied interests—including woodworking, metalworking, art, history, and writing—that could also one day turn into a career. I am currently writing short stories with a goal of turning them into novels. I primarily write fantasy fiction, similar to *Lord of the Rings* or futuristic dystopian novels. In woodworking classes, I have made a keepsake box, a skateboard, and model houses.

On top of all of my possible career interests, I also have several hobbies. I love reading and re-reading *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series. My favorite books to read are in the same genre I like to write—futuristic dystopian societies. I love being around and caring for animals and even worked at a pet store. I especially enjoyed working with injured and disabled dogs and was amazed by their abilities despite their challenges.

I enjoy tinkering with technology by taking things apart, putting them back together, and attempting to repair them. I am also a big fan of video games and sleeping in occasionally. Growing up, I participated in Boy Scouts and especially enjoyed camping, hiking, and learning survival skills.

I would describe myself as very curious and often ask a lot of questions as a way to connect with people. I like to cook and would love to help make meals. My favorite thing to make is stir fry. I would love to have any kind of pet and would be happy to help take care of them. I am looking for a family who would support my creativity and desire to try and learn new things. In the last year, I have reconnected with my birth father and other family members, and would like to remain in contact with them. I am looking for a family who can help me gain the skills I need to become a successful adult.”

Narrative with a specific structure

Teddy

Teddy says that he is talkative, likes to try new things, and enjoys participating in choir as well as theater. He enjoys running, playing video games (especially *Call of Duty*), riding horses, playing basketball, and being a part of Boy Scouts. He really hopes to find a family who would support him as he continues with scouting.

At school, Teddy does well, and his favorite subject is biology. He recently enjoyed participating in the science fair, and he can envision himself as a nurse one day. He’s also proud to be the reigning spelling bee champion! Teddy loves to read, especially the *Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones* series. *Harry Potter* also tops Teddy’s favorite movie list. Teddy has an artistic side too. He likes drawing scenes from nature and soon hopes to get even better at playing his ukulele.

Teddy would like a family who loves horses, cats, and dogs. He is currently enrolled in the advanced equine program and would like to continue this training in any future placement. His favorite horse is an American Paint Horse named Tonka. Teddy would also like to be involved in church and go to a summer church camp.

What others say...

Teddy's caseworker says about him: "Teddy is a very kind, caring, and compassionate young man. He never fails to ask how my day is going and how my co-workers are doing. He has already decided that he wants a career in nursing and is a natural helper. This very outgoing kid makes friends easily. Teddy has an optimistic view on life and an upbeat attitude. He also has a good sense of humor and likes to tell jokes." Another caseworker says Teddy just "lights up" when he is able to work with the horses at his current home.

What you can do...

Teddy will need a family that is active in the community, allowing him to continue in his desire to participate in multiple extracurricular activities while providing appropriate supervision. He will also need a family that will support him with any ongoing needs.



Checklist for public narratives

Before you submit or publish any public child narrative, please use the checklist below to ensure you've included lots of positive information, but none of the negative. As you review the narrative, ask yourself if the information is strengths-based, if it could potentially be identifying, if it might risk the child's dignity or safety, and if it is reasonable to share with all members of the public, including the child's peers. In addition, we encourage you to have any child who is developmentally able review the narrative and provide feedback that you consider carefully.

Did you include the following?

- Preferred first name
- Positive personality traits
- Strengths
- Hobbies, interests, and favorite pastimes
- What they like about school and school successes
- Things that are important to them
- Answers to questions such as: What makes them laugh? What is their dream day like? What makes them proud?
- Ways they are connected to the community
- Information about cultural connections or languages they speak or use
- Dreams for the future
- Quotes from the child
- Positive quotes or input from others in their life
- Interesting photos or videos
- Important family connections
- In profiles of siblings, how they relate to one another
- Birth year
- How a family might be a part of their life
- Appeals to families
- How to learn more

Did you carefully consider...?

Please see chapter 4 for more information about how to make decisions about these items.

- A general statement about long-term needs
- General information about ongoing support needs
- Discussion of appearance
- Detailed discussions of chores or how the young person might be helpful to the family
- The young person's expressed preferences on types of families
- Sexual orientation, but only if the youth is out, wants the information to be included in their public narrative, has been well-informed about risks, and is engaged in the process of crafting and approving the narrative
- The fact that the youth is a parent, but only if the youth wants the information to be included in their public narrative and is engaged in the process of crafting the narrative, and the narrative focuses on the youth rather than the baby or child
- Statements about the success of the current placement, which could lead a prospective adopter to think the current family is better for the child
- Race or ethnic background
- The applicability of the Indian Child Welfare Act
- Last initial
- Date of photo and profile (only if it is updated regularly)
- Grade level in school (only if the child is on grade level and it's updated regularly)
- An average photo, either in terms of actual photo quality or how it shows the child

Have you—and another colleague—reviewed the profile to be sure it doesn't include any of the following?

Identifying information

- Last name
- Date of birth
- Name of school, school district, neighborhood, or local geographic markers

Abuse, neglect, maltreatment

- Information related to sexual abuse or sexual acting out, or references to the child or youth as a potential perpetrator or victim, including code talk that might relate to sexual abuse (such as describing the child as overly affectionate with males, talking about the need to teach safe touch, or noting that the child should be the youngest in the family)
- Information that suggests the possibility of child as victim, such as stating that they have no boundaries or have no sense of danger
- Birth family history of abuse, neglect, physical or mental illness, domestic violence, criminal history, immigrations status, or substance abuse, including even brief references or allusions to a parent's drug use or the child's exposure to drugs or alcohol in utero
- Reasons for the child's entry into care
- The child's trauma history

Placement information

- Current placement type (such as residential treatment, group home, or juvenile justice setting)
- Placement history, including number of placements in foster care or re-entry into care or other information taken directly from the case file regarding their placement history
- How long they have been in foster care or how long they have been waiting for an adoptive family
- Information about why a foster family or relative is not interested in or able to be the permanent placement
- References to adoption interruption, disruption, or dissolution

Medical information

- Medical or mental health diagnoses, medication, and treatment, including whether the child has or is attending therapy or counseling
- Statements that a youth is pregnant or has recently given birth
- Levels of, or statements about, physical impairments
- Reports or statements from doctors, mental health providers, other health care professionals, or caregivers about medical information
- Clinical information from their case file

Behavioral challenges

- Aggressive behaviors, including anger, fighting, or oppositional acting out
- Sexual behaviors, including current, past, or potential victim or perpetrator role
- Information about delinquency or juvenile justice involvement
- Negative behaviors, such as lying, running away, or stealing
- References to a child acting younger than or being more mature than their same-age peers
- Impairment levels related to their behaviors

Potentially painful or embarrassing information

- Mention of bodily functions (including incontinence and bedwetting) or hygiene challenges
- Any descriptions of body type, including short, heavy, stocky, slender, or skinny
- The child's height or weight
- Negative descriptions of the youth's appearance
- References to fears or sources of anxiety
- Anything else they could be embarrassed by if their peers saw it, such as if the child has been bullied, has trouble making friends, is clumsy or awkward, is messy or sloppy, cries easily or often, or doesn't do well at sports or in school

Things that limit potential families

- Discussion about their reluctance about adoption or emphasis on a unique need for preparation for adoption
- Statements that suggest the writer may not believe adoption is an option for the child
- Limits on the type of family who will be considered, including marital status, race or ethnic background, number or age of other children in the family, religion, or other fixed characteristics

Intellectual ability or education challenges

- Intellectual or educational challenges, including allusions to challenges and being nonverbal
- References to special education status or an individualized education or Section 504 plan
- Specific IQ score or range
- References to specific disabilities that relate to school, education, or intellectual ability
- Statements about educational impairment level
- References about learning more slowly than or performing at a different grade level than their same-age peers
- References to actual grades or scores on assessments

Sexual orientation or gender identity

- Anything that would convey they are transgender, including mixing pronouns, a name and gender identity that don't match, or switching names
- A statement about or allusions to the fact that they are LGBTQ unless it is for an older youth who wants the listing to include their sexual orientation, and they have had thoughtful conversations with caring adults about the potential positive and negative consequences, and the youth has been involved in crafting and approving the narrative

Other

- Anything negative
- Information about the young person's being a parent unless the young person wants the information in the narrative, has discussed the pros and cons, and has approved the description
- Specific information or details the child asked to have excluded from the narrative
- Language that promotes stereotypes based on gender, race, ethnicity, or other characteristics
- Things the child isn't, doesn't do, or doesn't like
- Adoption assistance eligibility
- Status as legally free or not legally free
- Disclosure of sensitive or potentially identifying information about any birth family members or siblings not in foster care, including criminal history, mental health or medical details, geographic locations, immigration status, etc.
- Links or references to a young person's personal YouTube channel, web pages, or social media pages
- Outdated information
- Spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors and poorly composed writing

Photos

- Blurry, pixelated, distorted, or otherwise low quality photos
- Photos that are years out of date
- Photos that show the child's name, a school name, a school team, residential treatment center name, a well-known building or landmark, or other location markers (such as a street sign or building with a specific name or address visible)
- Photos showing clothing or backgrounds with pictures of weapons or words or pictures that suggest violence or crime
- Photos with sexual overtones, including photos with suggestive posture, photos of youth with no shirts or significant cleavage, or photos of young people in clothing that has sexually suggestive statements or pictures
- Photos of children who have a high profile because their story has received significant news coverage that included last names or other identifying information (If there is a serious safety risk or risk of exposure with a high profile, you may want to consider whether photolisting is the best recruitment option for this particular child.)
- Photos of young people who do not want their picture included
- Photos that include other children unless they are siblings the agency is seeking to place together

8

Writing tips for improving waiting-child narratives

Below are some basic strategies for strengthening your narratives, including ideas for learning from others, and a few specific writing tips.

Read and share narratives you like

The best way to improve your child narrative-writing skills is to see what others are doing and learn from those you like. The following suggestions can help you learn from others.

- Spend time on adoptuskids.org, adoption exchange websites (the Michigan Adoption Resource exchange has creatively written narratives), and your state’s photolisting. Identify the narratives you really like and think about what’s appealing about them. Do they:
 - › Tell a story?
 - › Use more adjectives?
 - › Have lots of interesting details?
 - › Have more quotes from the child or their caregivers?
 - › Use the child’s own voice?
- Make a list of the items you like and want to include in your narratives—details, stories, adjectives, quotes—and make a plan for how you can get them. Use and adapt the sample interview questions we provide to gather more information.
- If you have colleagues who are also writing child narratives, share your favorites with each other—both narratives you’ve created and ones others have done. Save the best ones and look them over before you write each of your narratives.
- If you have a colleague who does a great job writing narratives, ask them to review your work and provide feedback. You’ll learn as you see how your narratives are edited and you’ll keep getting better and better. Do the same for others too—providing feedback to your colleagues will help them improve their narratives while helping you identify what you like and think about how you can achieve it.

Include adjectives and examples

One of the best ways to improve a narrative about a waiting child is to add details and adjectives that present a strengths-based picture of the child, emphasizing their personality and unique qualities. Whenever possible, narratives should be written by someone who knows the child well or who is working from information gathered by someone with a close connection to the child. The sample interview questions can be a great tool for getting information that makes a narrative come alive. But even without a detailed interview, a few simple questions can gather information that really makes a difference. For example, if you know a child likes to read, ask them or their caregiver:

- What type of books (mystery, science fiction, biography, etc.)
- Who are their favorite authors
- What are some favorite books or what are they reading now
- What do they like about these books

With these conversations, you can also pick up, and weave in, other details about a child's dreams or things they'd like to do.

These details can make a huge difference in a narrative and can also spark a connection with a prospective parent. Compare the following:

1. Isaiah loves to read, play outside, and watch movies.
2. An avid reader—especially of mysteries—Isaiah is making his way through the *Harry Potter* books right now. He can imagine going to Hogwarts and recently bought his own magician's kit. He's been practicing card tricks and takes his magic wand with him wherever he goes. When he's not reading, Isaiah enjoys being outdoors, where he likes to look for bugs and frogs, play basketball, and ride his bike. On weekends, he is a big fan of Friday movie nights with his foster family. Of course, he loved the *Harry Potter* movies, but his favorite movie of all time is *Shrek*.
1. Sammie loves clothes and even makes her own.
2. Sammie is a budding designer whose grandmother taught her to sew. She treasures her sewing machine and takes perfect care of it. Sammie has made several outfits for herself, including a beautiful blue dress she wears to church. All of her foster family members have gotten a handmade item or two, and her three-year-old foster brother loves the fleece blanket Sammie made for him.

Although details help make a profile stronger, don't include any information unless you're sure it's true. If a foster parent says the child *may* like Kendrick Lamar, don't include it until you know.

Vary the structure of narratives

Varying the structure of each profile you write will help prospective parents stay interested as they read several at a time. You can start one with a quote from the child, and the next with that child's favorite hobbies. Some may begin with what the child hopes to do with a new family, while others start with information about favorite subjects in school. Even if you have a fairly set outline for your agency's narratives, you can still make variations within the outline. Below is an example of how the same information can be framed differently.

“I’d love to be a country star one day and hope to join a band soon,” says this talented musician. Giselda learned to play the guitar a couple of years ago and is incredibly gifted. She loves to entertain her family by playing their favorite songs. Miranda Lambert is Giselda’s idol, and she’s got Miranda’s whole music catalog memorized. When she’s not playing and singing, Giselda likes to read science fiction and fantasy novels. In school, she’s doing well, especially in math and art. Giselda, who was born in 2003, would really like an adoptive family who will support her love of music, help her reach for the stars, and support her strong connections with her older sister.

Giselda, born in 2003, is doing well in school, where math and art are her best subjects. At home, music is her passion. She’s a gifted singer and guitar player who is hoping for an adoptive family who will support her love of music and her relationship with her older sister. Giselda knows all of Miranda Lambert’s songs and explains that she can see music in her future: “I’d love to be a country star one day and hope to join a band soon.” But music isn’t her only love. Giselda also loves to read, and science fiction and fantasy are her favorites.

Vary sentence structure and length

The best narratives use variable sentence structure. Play around with ways to change your sentences so that every one doesn't start with the child's name. Below are a few easy ways to mix things up:

- Nora loves to read and watch TV.
- Reading and watching TV are two of Nora’s favorite things to do.
- What really makes Nora happy is reading books by John Green (especially *Paper Towns*) and watching any TV show on Nickelodeon.
- Andrew is a math whiz and can see himself as a math teacher one day.
- Math is Andrew’s favorite subject, and he’d love to be a math teacher one day.
- This math whiz would love to help other kids learn math and can envision being a teacher one day.

Another way to add interest for readers is to use sentences of different lengths. Keep some sentences short and simple and have others with more detail and complexity.

Bennie is a cool kid! In his spare time, Bennie enjoys reading books about the moon and stars, and he'd love to be an astronomer one day. At school, he's interested in all of his subjects.

Jillian has started two clubs at school—one for young people interested in the arts and the other focused on reducing the school's carbon footprint. Her peers really look up to her! This budding activist is looking for a family that will love her unconditionally and support her passion for making the world a better place.

Use positive framing

When working on strengths-based public child narratives, it can be really helpful to think about ways you can reframe information to make it more positive and strengths-based. And if you can't come up with positive reframing, leave it out. The public narrative isn't the place to list challenges even if you've tried to make them sound positive. Because public narratives can be viewed by anyone who visits the photolisting website or picks up a printed flyer, the potential audience includes birth family members, tech-savvy peers, and other community members who may know the featured child.

Less effective — He can be very engaging and truly wants a family that would consider parenting him and his younger siblings. However, the siblings are being adopted by another family.

Better — His family also needs to support his desire to maintain his relationships with his siblings, who are with another family.

Less effective — He wishes to get close to others by touching, kissing, or smelling them.

Better — He really likes to be close to others and enjoys snuggling.

If you're working with colleagues who are also writing narratives, the idea of positive reframing is one you can work on together. As you review each other's work, keep an eye out for things that could be taken the wrong way or that might be better said with a few tweaks. Keep an eye out for the word "but"—it's often a sign that something negative has or will be introduced. Rewriting with a positive spin and the word "and" can often make a powerful difference.

Less effective — He has some friends, but not very many.

Better — He has two very close friends and loves to spend time with them.

Less effective — She loves science, but likes biology better than chemistry.

Better — She loves science, and biology is her favorite subject.

Proofread and review

When you're done, don't forget to proofread the narrative. Whenever possible, have at least one person read it to make sure everything is clear, communicates what you want it to say, and follows your guidelines. You can have them use our checklist to be sure you've not included any information that shouldn't be disclosed.

During this review, try to view the narrative through the eyes of the featured child or youth. Is it something they would be proud of? Would they feel it gives a sense of who they are and what's important to them? Is there anything in the profile that a schoolmate might make fun of? Does it have enough detail to be interesting and generate emotion?

As you and your reviewer read the narrative again, keep in mind that the goal is to make the best impression possible while including only accurate information. Public profiles are a place for truth, but not the *whole* truth. Think about these narratives like your resume or your online dating profile. None of us wants all of our challenges, flaws, or quirks on display publicly to people we hope to impress, and we should seek even more protection for young people who have already suffered so much. Full disclosure can and should come further along in the adoption placement process.

9

Gathering information for public child narratives

The information below can help you gather information for a child’s public narrative. The interview is a critical first step in the process of preparing the narrative, which should include—when developmentally appropriate—allowing the child to read the narrative and make changes. Because children change so much over time, you should also plan to repeat the interview regularly to update the narrative.

Please note that gathering information for narratives is just one part of the process of preparing children for adoption and should never be the child’s first introduction to the idea of adoption or adoptive family recruitment. You can find information and resources on preparing children for adoption in *Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption and Permanency* from Child Welfare Information Gateway.

Getting interesting, accurate information from the featured child or sibling group is the most important part of creating a compelling waiting child narrative. To get the best information, the interviewer should be someone the child or youth is comfortable with. If the recruiter or worker is new to the child, it might be best to have a foster parent, mentor, or another important adult ask the questions. Some agencies have other youth in care or those who have been in foster care do the interviews with teens. For children who are very young or who are nonverbal, the foster parent or caregiver is likely to have the most information.

If the child is going to write all or part of their own narrative, you can still use these questions to help them decide what to include. They can review the list themselves or you can ask questions and, once you hear their answers, make suggestions about what might be best to include in their profile. Another option is to ask them questions and have them dictate the information as they’d like to share it.

Conducting the interview

Don’t rush the interview. You may have to take time to let the child warm up to you or to the topic. Sometimes it’s best to play games with the child, read together, take a walk, or visit their room and just watch before you ask questions. When you see the child getting excited about a book or a dog or their artwork, you begin to know what matters to them and can ask some related questions.

Although the questions are simply listed below, remember that the best information will come from a conversation. When you ask about books, let the child think about their favorites and ask follow up questions about why they like what they like. To keep the conversation going, you can name some of your most beloved books from your childhood.

Depending on the child's age, you might just start by asking them what they'd most like others to know about them—about what they like to do, what matters to them, and how they see their future. An open-ended, stream-of-consciousness conversation can lead to great results.

When you're asking questions, it's great to start with those that have less chance of being emotionally loaded. It's important to know the child's history and to avoid anything that might be challenging. If the child has lost connection with all of their brothers and sisters, it might be best to skip that question. Or if the child isn't happy in their current placement, don't ask what they like about where they are living now.

When you're finished, if you have time, run through the answers with the child. This gives you a chance to get additional details or correct anything you misunderstood. Don't forget that whenever possible and developmentally appropriate, you should have the child review the narrative and make necessary corrections or additions.

Sample questions

1. What's your favorite thing to do outdoors?
2. What do you like to do in your free time?
3. What activities do you participate in (choirs, plays, clubs)? What activities would like to try in the future?
4. Do you have a favorite author or book? What types of books do you like best?
5. What type of movies do you like? Is there a TV show you watch regularly?
6. What games (board, card, video, etc.) do you like to play?
7. Do you like to draw or do other arts and crafts? What are your favorite types and subjects?
8. What sports do you enjoy playing? Are there others you like to watch? Do you have a favorite team?
9. Do you sing, dance, or play an instrument?
10. Who are your favorite musicians or groups to listen to? Do you have a favorite song?
11. What is your favorite food? What was the best meal you ever had?
12. Do you cook or bake? What are your specialties?
13. What would you like people to know about you?
14. If you had three wishes, what would they be?
15. What makes you laugh? Who makes you laugh the most?
16. If you could visit any place on earth, where would you go? Why?
17. What do you do during vacations from school? What things would you like to do if you had the chance?

18. What school trips or vacations have you gone on and especially enjoyed? What places do you dream of visiting?
19. If the child has siblings: What do you like most about your brothers/sisters? What do you like to do when you're together?
20. What are you really good at? What would you like to become really good at?
21. What are you most proud of? What is one thing you work very hard to do? (*For example, learning to do a cartwheel or helping your sister with her homework.*)
22. What do you like learning about (in school or out of school)?
23. What is your favorite class at school? Why?
24. Are you involved in clubs, community groups, religious, or other organizations? What do you like about them?
25. Are there ways you like to help others?
26. What holidays do you celebrate? What do you do for them? What's your favorite?
27. What would you like to do or be when you grow up? Do you know anyone who has this job already?
28. Do you plan to go to college? What would you like to study?
29. Who are your friends and why do you like them?
30. What do you do when you are with your friends?
31. Who are the important people in your life that you want to stay connected to?
32. Who helps you when you have a problem? Is there someone you wish could be there to help you?
33. What do you like best about yourself?
34. What is your favorite thing about where you are living right now?
35. What are some things you think you might do with an adoptive family? (*For example, would they help with homework? What would you do together for fun?*)
36. What is your dream day like?

10

Using private narratives to share additional information

Families who have completed classes to prepare them to adopt children from foster care, have completed the home study process, and are searching for a child need more information about waiting children than they can get in a public profile. To enable this information sharing while still protecting children from too much public disclosure, we recommend that jurisdictions develop a second *private* narrative that they share only with families who have an approved home study and have agreed to protect children’s privacy.

Different levels of access

Some photolistings have different levels of access for professionals. At AdoptUSKids, for example, workers have access to private narratives so that they can search for families who may be a good option for children on their caseloads. Select professionals also have access to confidential narratives where they can learn even more about a waiting child or youth to help them determine if a prospective family is a potential resource. These confidential narratives are only available to professionals—not to a family audience.

The goal of a private narrative is to share information that helps home-studied families decide whether to make a more formal inquiry. As outlined in detail below, the private narrative provides information about medical, educational, behavioral, and other issues that may be facing the child so the prospective parents can begin to consider if they might be a family that is able to meet this child’s needs. By providing this additional information through a private narrative, agencies can help ensure that families don’t submit a home study for children whose needs they cannot meet, which can be a drain on staff time and resources.

A private narrative can be part of a protected online photolisting displayed only to verified, registered families, or it can be a printed or emailed document shared with home-studied families who express interest in a particular child or children. Before prospective parents can access private profiles either online or in another form, we recommend that agencies have them sign—in printed copy or electronically—a confidentiality agreement that explains the importance of protecting children’s privacy and in which they agree not to share the information in any way other than

in discussions with people directly involved in the adoption placement process or with medical professionals, without any identifying information about the child, to assist the prospective family in determining the child's needs and their capacity to meet those needs. We suggest that agencies not share any additional information without such an agreement.

The AdoptUSKids online photolisting offers both a public and private narrative option. We encourage states that do not have a private option in their photolisting to learn more by contacting us at 800-901-6911 or support@adoptuskids.org.

When sharing this private information with home-studied families who have signed a confidentiality agreement, we recommend combining the public and private narratives so the family sees a more complete picture of the child—the positive, engaging information in the public narrative with additional facts and information in the private narrative.

In the private narrative, all information should be presented positively and respectfully, and should not be too detailed. The private narrative is still not the right place for full disclosure. Full disclosure is critically important, but should be only for families who are seriously considering a particular child for placement and should be part of ongoing conversations between the family and child welfare professionals who have the expertise to answer questions and explain the issues fully. The conversation should also include the types of supports available to the child and family to meet the child's needs.

Before you add anything to a private narrative, it's helpful to ask:

- Will this information help parents better understand this child's needs and whether their family might be able to meet them?
- Is the information presented respectfully and in a way that protects the child's dignity?
- Is this the right time or forum to share the information, or should it be presented later when a family has expressed a more serious interest in learning if they could be a good fit for this child?
- Is the information clear and concise? Are acronyms or medical terms explained but without going into too much detail? Is any medical or psychological information from a qualified professional rather than a lay impression of the child's needs?
- Could the information compromise the child's safety?

What to share in private narratives

The following items can be included in a child's private narrative. The examples are designed to show how to present the information in a positive and strengths-based way. Although we give separate examples under each category, many of the items are interwoven. For example, a child's medical diagnosis may relate to school challenges or supports needed, so all three may be woven together in the private narrative. (We provide sample narratives later in this section.)

Functioning or disability level

We recommend identifying a child's disabilities or challenges in an easy-to-review format, with levels such as none, mild, moderate, and severe in the domains listed below. With the levels provided in the private narrative, it's important to offer prospective parents a place where they can find general information about what the different levels might mean. You can find the AdoptUSKids guidelines for different levels of functioning at this end of this document.

- Physical disabilities
- Emotional disabilities
- Behaviors
- Developmental disabilities
- Cognitive challenges or learning disabilities

General, factual statements of diagnoses made by a qualified medical professional

Because private profiles are only shared with a smaller population who have an approved home study and who gain access to the private profile after they agree to keep children's information confidential, information about specific medical diagnoses made by qualified professionals can be included.

The private narrative can also include some information about ongoing treatment, but you should still avoid providing too many details, such as specific medications. Also omit any guesswork or supposition about conditions a child might have or medical or health-related comments from foster parents or other caregivers who are not qualified professionals. We recommend caution related to including any mental health diagnoses.

Brandon has been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, which is being managed successfully. He also has eczema and is sensitive to certain lotions and soaps.

Jasmine has been diagnosed with a seizure disorder and autism. She is high functioning and does well in school. She is on several medications. Jasmine is also allergic to peanuts, many animals, and grasses, and receives regular allergy shots.

Katie has had eye surgery to correct a congenital drooping eyelid (ptosis) and is expected to need another surgery in the next year. Now that she's had the first surgery, her vision is not affected.

Keith suffered a traumatic brain injury at an early age and has been diagnosed with resulting challenges, including developmental delays, a seizure disorder, motor skill delays, and cognitive delays. He has a tracheostomy tube due to an obstructed airway.

Derrick has mild cerebral palsy, and is able to do almost anything children without this disability can do. He loves to participate in sports with his peers.

Zana is pregnant and is excited about becoming a mother. She is taking prenatal classes and preparing for the future. She would really like an adoptive family who will support her and help her become the best mother she can be.

After a thorough assessment, Cody was recently diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and is receiving extra supports at school and home to address his needs.

Nancy was born with a cleft palate, and surgery has helped tremendously. She may need additional surgery and extra dental and orthodontic care later in life. She is receiving therapy to help with speech development.

Ongoing or long-term medical needs

As noted above, you can briefly describe the medical care the child is receiving and will continue to need, but do not disclose details of medications or medical procedures. We recommend caution related to any mental health treatment.

Pauli has Type 2 diabetes, and his family must help him monitor his blood sugar several times a day. He also sees a doctor regularly.

To treat his asthma, Willie uses an inhaler and receives regular nebulizer treatments.

Medication has helped Jeanette manage the symptoms of her seizure disorder.

Raquel is medically fragile and needs to be fed through a gastric tube. She also uses a wheelchair. Doctors expect that she will need significant medical and personal care throughout her life.

Specific disabilities that relate to school, education, or intellectual ability

As with other diagnoses, we recommend that intellectual disabilities or developmental delays be shared, but factually and briefly if diagnosed by a qualified professional. If the child is making progress or doing well, it's good to include that information as well. Please do not include specific IQ scores or test results.

Due to her prenatal exposure to alcohol, Wendi has difficulty processing multiple-step instructions and can be distracted. She needs extra time, quiet, and step-by-step instruction to complete her school assignments.

Francis has been diagnosed with an intellectual disability and attends special education classes for several periods of the day. He works with an occupational therapist to help resolve delays related to his fine motor skills.

A speech pathologist has been helping Mary overcome an expressive speech delay. She is now speaking more clearly and is doing better in school as a result. Mary loves to show off her newfound voice!

Special education status or individual education plan

In the private narrative, you can share information about the fact that a child has an individualized education plan (IEP) or Section 504 plan and brief information about what its goals, accommodations, or modifications are. Educational information in the private narrative might also include participation in special education classes. As with other challenges, we recommend keeping the information brief, respectful, and factual, and including progress and successes whenever possible.

Virginia's individualized education plan (IEP) has helped her get the extra time on assignments that she needs. She also has a paraprofessional to help her understand and complete her schoolwork.

Adam has Down syndrome and his individualized education plan (IEP) includes speech therapy and paraprofessional support. He is in special education, and attends some mainstream classes. While he has challenges in school, he can help his foster parents and teachers figure out their phones and iPads in no time at all.

Roger attends school for half days and has made great progress this year. He has learned to read and enjoys reading and doing his multiplication tables. His individualized education plan (IEP) helps address his auditory processing disorder.

Since she has had an individualized education plan (IEP) to help with her attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Melissa has been doing much better in school. The extra support and attention she receives during and after class have enabled her to focus and stay on track.

Carlotta has been diagnosed with dyslexia and is doing well with the accommodations provided by her school. As part of her Section 504 plan, she receives more time to finish quizzes and tests.

Performance or challenges in school

If a child has no specific disability but is behind in school or experiencing challenges, you can include that information in the private narrative. Positive school experiences and accomplishments should be included in the public narrative. As with other areas of the private narrative, note progress and success whenever possible.

Kayla is in ninth grade, but she is reading at the fourth grade level. She has made progress in the last year and is doing well in math. Her teachers think extra time with a tutor would help her catch up and improve her reading skills.

Joshua would do best in an active family who can help him burn off his energy in a healthy way. He's a wonderful kid who can keep moving from early morning to late at night.

Because of Ingrid's serious physical needs, a family with some medical background—or a willingness to learn—would be ideal. The family should live relatively close to a major medical center.

Ruthie would do best in a family that provides consistency and clarity and tons of kindness. She thrives when she knows just what is expected of her and doesn't have to guess. When she's confused, she may choose to ignore her caregivers or yell in frustration.

Carlos is very close to his grandmother and two older siblings and would like to maintain regular visits with them. As a result, we are seeking families in Pennsylvania and nearby states.

Carmelo needs a family who will be patient as he learns to trust them. He's experienced many losses and is slow to build relationships. However, once he sees that someone can be trusted, he's a loving, committed friend.

Tobie should be the youngest child in the family, as he would benefit greatly from the attention and positive example of older siblings.

Due to Claudia's very serious allergies, her adoptive family should not smoke or have furry pets. She would like to have a turtle or goldfish, though.

Kiki sometimes gets overly competitive with her foster siblings who are the same age as she is, so it may be best for her to be in family with older or younger children.

Due to his serious medical and emotional needs, Dylan's family should have plenty of time to devote to his medical and therapy appointments.

Jeremiah is a proud member of the Seneca tribe, and the Indian Child Welfare Act applies. The tribe is seeking a Seneca or Native American family first, although all families will be considered.

A child or youth's expressed desire on family type

If a child has specific requests for a family structure or type, you can include them here if someone has had a thorough discussion with the child on the pros and cons and the characteristics are truly important to the child. As part of the process of preparing a child for adoption recruitment and photolisting, it's important to help the child understand that many types of families can be right for them and help them be open to many possibilities. Other young people who have been adopted by diverse families can be particularly helpful in these discussions. When including desired family types, it's best to list these characteristics as preferences rather than hard and fast rules unless it is an absolute requirement.

Because Angel is not comfortable with men, she would prefer to be adopted by a single mother or two mothers.

Caroline would like to have a family with lots of kids—she gets along well with children of all ages and is a great babysitter.

Walter would really like to be in a family with a father because he'd love to have a strong role model.

Markus is Muslim and would like to be placed with a Muslim family.

That a youth is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender if the youth wants the information in the private narrative

We noted in the section on public narratives that a few young people will want to disclose that they are lesbian, gay, or bisexual in the public narrative. For those who don't, the private narrative could be the place to raise that a young person is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender as long as the young person wants to have the information disclosed here. This requires a conversation between the youth and a trusted adult who can explain the risks, and the information should not be included without the youth's permission. We recommend having the youth write or review the information so it is presented as they want to share it with the broader world. As noted earlier in the public narratives, we suggest special caution related to transgender children and youth given the additional discrimination and safety threats they face.

Anthony is gay and is looking for a family who is openly supportive of him and the LGBT community. He'd prefer to have two moms or two dads, but is open to all family types.

Marshall is a transgender boy, and his foster parents have been extremely supportive during his transition. He is beginning to take hormones and wants a family who can love the person he is and help him embrace his gender identity.

Adoption assistance eligibility

In the private narrative, please note if the child is eligible for adoption assistance. You may also want to include information about the types of benefits that may be available to adoptive parents in this state or county.

Brianna is eligible for adoption assistance benefits, which will likely include a monthly payment, Medicaid, and payment of nonrecurring adoption expenses. Specific benefits will be determined during negotiations during the adoption process.

Status as legally free or not

It's best to use similar language for all children with a particular status and to explain what the status actually means.

DeWayne is not legally free for adoption. His birth parents have voluntarily relinquished their parental rights, and the court will grant the termination once an adoptive family has been identified.

Miley's birth parents' rights have been terminated and she is free for adoption.

Serenity is not yet legally free for adoption. This county does not typically file for a termination of parental rights until an adoptive family has been identified.

What to be careful about including even in private narratives

Mental health diagnoses and treatment

We are recommending caution related to mental health diagnoses for a few reasons. First, we know trauma, abuse, and neglect can result in behaviors and challenges that sometimes mimic mental health conditions, making diagnosis difficult. In addition, many mental illnesses are difficult to diagnose definitively in children. Finally, there remains significant stigma related to mental health conditions and sharing information about such conditions in their narrative could affect a child's future significantly. As a result, we recommend that each jurisdiction develop its own written practice standard about including mental health information, especially related to diagnoses that may have more of a stigma. If you do disclose the illness—as with other medical diagnoses—keep information related to treatment to a minimum. In the practice standard, be clear that a diagnosis should only be shared if it is made by a qualified clinical professional. We do not recommend sharing therapy goals, specific medications, or comments from treatment providers.

Marla was recently diagnosed with a mental illness and sees a psychiatrist and a mental health counselor. She takes medication that is proving to be very effective.

As a result of her early life experiences, Maya has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. She has been participating in therapy for the last year, and is experiencing far fewer symptoms of anxiety and stress.

River has been diagnosed with depression and is responding well to medication and trauma-focused therapy.

James has obsessive compulsive disorder, and cognitive behavioral therapy has been effective in reducing his compulsions. He does well in school and the illness is well managed. His adoptive family should be committed to continuing this effective treatment.

Challenging behaviors

In the section of the private narrative where you discuss behavior challenges, we recommend including the impairment or functioning level noted at the beginning of the profile as a reminder. To give that level context, we suggest including general information about the types of challenges a family may need to address, but without going into great detail. Whenever possible, it's best to include information about progress the child has made or strategies that have contributed to successes.

We recommend excluding information about sexualized behaviors, self-harm, behavior that could be criminal, or similar behaviors in a private narrative. This is information that absolutely must be shared with prospective parents, but should be done during a conversation between child welfare professionals and prospective adopters who have expressed a more serious interest about this particular child. In cases where children have such behaviors, we recommend including a sentence

such as, “Billie has other behavioral challenges that will require special attention, which we’ll discuss with prospective parents who appear to be a good fit for her.”

Justin struggles to pay attention in school. His smaller class size and permitted breaks have really helped him do better recently. He thrives when he has structure and consistency.

Jessica is very shy and has had difficulty making friends. She recently joined a Girl Scout troop that has really expanded her social circle. She has other behavioral challenges that will require special attention from her adoptive family, which her agency will discuss with prospective adopters who appear to be a good fit for her.

When she is frustrated, Ashley can get angry and may need help to calm down. Her family has been working on helping her understand how to control her body and her mood and how to most effectively respond when the going gets tough.

With regular reminders about personal hygiene, Sal is able to take good care of herself.

Charlie sometimes uses attention-seeking behavior, but he does really well with his foster parents who know when and how to respond. He’s made great progress with them and now only acts out from time to time.

Kacie has struggled with staying focused in school and not distracting others. She can be argumentative at times. At school, she benefits from one-on-one attention and has done better in a special education classroom with fewer students and clearer expectations. At home, consistency and positive feedback have really helped reduce problem behaviors.

While Sue is hyperactive and can be disruptive at times, she is also very receptive to positive reinforcement and redirection.

Mick gets anxious and fearful. He needs a family that can be patient and understanding and provide him with the support and love he needs to overcome or manage his anxieties. When he is feeling confident, Mick is a loving and loyal friend who helps others and makes the world a better place.

Tommy has low self-esteem and needs a family who can give him consistent praise and encouragement. He needs to know he is loved and valued so he can learn to believe in himself and develop his talents.

Austin will sometimes hoard food. His foster parents have been able to use positive parenting techniques (such as having healthy snacks available 24 hours a day) that reassure him that he will always have access to food. As a result, this behavior has begun to improve.

In recent months, Crystal has really begun to improve her ability to express her feelings calmly and respectfully. She will sometimes still get mad when she is frustrated. A permanent family who can demonstrate effective communication skills will really be able to help her continue to improve in this area.

What not to share even in private narratives

We do not believe the private narrative should include:

- Identifying information such as last name, school, address, date of birth, specific places the child goes (such as a workplace or clubs)
- The child's immigration status
- The child's abuse and neglect history
- Anything that discusses or alludes to the child's potential to be a victim
- Information about sexualized, self-harming, or similar behaviors
- Information about the child's birth family's history of physical or mental illnesses, immigration status, criminal history, or other challenges
- Reason for the child's entry into care
- Whether the child is LGBTQ unless the child has agreed
- Information about the child's criminal or delinquent behavior or juvenile justice involvement
- Current placement information, placement history, details about the number of placements, or adoption disruptions
- Negative statements or beliefs about the child (e.g., "She is arrogant and rude and will test the patience of any parent.")

We think the information above does not necessarily help a family decide whether to make a formal inquiry about a particular child and is best shared with a family after they have made an inquiry, when information can be discussed and clarified. With respect to placement history, for example, in many cases, a child's placement history says as much about the child welfare system's challenges, including a shortage of foster families or unsupported placements, as it says about the child's needs. Giving information about length of time in care and multiple placements may suggest information about a child that isn't accurate and discourages potential parents from learning more. As noted earlier, details about placement history and birth family history should be shared once child welfare professionals are seriously considering a particular child for placement with a particular family.

(Please note that although we do not recommend sharing information about a birth family's history in the private narrative, if a child has a diagnosis related to prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol that information should be shared as a medical condition rather than as a discussion of the parents' actions or history.)

Sample narratives with private information

Below are two sample narratives that demonstrate how you might share some of the information above. Each begins with the public narrative and then presents the private information that could be shared with individuals who have an approved home study and who have agreed to protect the child’s confidentiality. These narratives are fictional.

Nikolai

Public narrative

This future scientist can see himself as a zoologist or marine biologist one day. Born in 2003, Nikolai loves his math and science classes (especially biology) and does well in school. In his free time, he loves to explore the outdoors, especially the two parks closest to his house. With his keen eye and interest in all living things, he often spots bugs and other critters that others never see. But spotting them isn’t enough for this kid—he wants to know what they are, where they live, and how they interact with the world around them. At the nature center near his house, Nikolai could spend all day talking with the volunteers about flora and fauna.

When he’s indoors, books, movies, and music keep Nikolai entertained. He’s a huge fan of Kendrick Lamar, but his musical taste is pretty diverse. He sings along with Andy Grammer and has learned to love the 80s music his foster mother plays in the car. Movies are also a huge hit with Nikolai—*Guardians of the Galaxy* is his current favorite. Nikolai reads every day and keeps a journal with his thoughts about every book he’s read. The *Ranger’s Apprentice* series has kept him reading in every free moment, and he’s almost finished the 10th book. A bit of a military buff, Nikolai also reads nonfiction about World War II, and was riveted by *Unbroken*. He’s hoping to take a trip to Europe one day to visit the places he’s read about. He’s particularly excited to see Dresden and see how the city was rebuilt after the destruction at the end of the war.

When asked about what his dream day might be like, Nikolai replied, “I’d start with my favorite breakfast of bacon and hash browns, with a side of blueberries. I can never get enough blueberries! Next I would meet my friends Jack and Antoine at the park, where we’d look for geckos and snakes. I like to find just the right spot where the snakes come to soak up the sun. After a few hours of that, I’d love to visit my grandma. Even though I know she doesn’t really care about reptiles, Grandma will listen to my stories and look at my pictures of snakes for as long as I’m willing to talk. Then I guess I’d end the day at home, reading or watching TV with my foster family. We like to spend time together after dinner, just hanging out. Sometimes we watch *Master Chef Junior* and make plans for what one of us might make the next night.”

Nikolai really wants an adoptive family: “I want a family who will be there for me and love me through thick and thin.” His family should encourage his love of science and nature and help him continue his relationship with his grandmother and two younger siblings.

Private narrative

Nikolai has the following functioning levels:

- Physical disabilities—mild
- Emotional disabilities—moderate
- Behaviors—mild
- Developmental disabilities—none
- Cognitive challenges or learning disabilities—none

Nikolai has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He has been participating in therapy for two years, and is experiencing far fewer symptoms of stress. Being active has really helped him manage the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He will occasionally get a little distracted in school; if you let him know, he is able to refocus. While he has several close friends, Nikolai can be a bit overwhelmed by huge gatherings or parties. He'd prefer to hang out with just a couple of people he knows well.

Nikolai is deaf in one ear but is not limited by this disability. He has an individualized education plan (IEP) that enables him to sit in the front row so he can hear the teachers. He has a tutor in Spanish.

Nikolai is legally free for adoption and is eligible for adoption assistance. He would likely do best in an active family who can help him explore the outdoors and burn off the extra energy he sometimes has. He is open to a single parent or gay or lesbian family. He would prefer a family who ensures he can continue to visit his grandmother and younger siblings.

Alexandria

Public narrative

A ray of sunshine is how her worker describes Alexandria, who was born in 2009. “This special girl really lights up when she has visitors and it just makes my day to see her smile!” She loves to listen when others read, and her foster brothers have started reading their books aloud to keep Alexandria entertained. When one of her brothers had to prepare for a speech at school, Alexandria was his practice audience. Her smiling face and congratulatory hugs gave him the confidence to continue.

The park and the zoo make Alexandria so happy! She looks at everything and points at her favorite animals. The giraffes get her most excited of all! At home, she really enjoys her stuffed animals and light-up toys. You can often find her grinning ear to ear as she pushes buttons on her favorite toy, which plays music and has colorful lights. When she goes to bed, she snuggles with her Blues Clues stuffed dog.

Due to her needs, Alexandria requires constant supervision and care. She does well at home and in school, where she receives assistance to function at her best. Her foster mother explains what a wonderful girl Alexandria is: “Her smile and happy personality make it easy to love and care for Alexandria! She’s a joy to be around.” Her future forever family must make sure that Alexandria gets the support she needs now and into adulthood.

Private narrative

- Physical disabilities—severe
- Emotional disabilities—none
- Behaviors—mild
- Developmental disabilities—severe
- Cognitive challenges or learning disabilities—severe

Alexandria has cerebral palsy and needs almost constant monitoring and supervision. She is nonverbal and uses a wheelchair. She is mainly fed through a gastric tube, although she can eat a little bit of regular food. Alexandria also has occasional seizures. Due to her disability, she will need lifetime care.

At school, Alexandria attends special education classes for children with very serious developmental and cognitive delays. Her individualized education plan (IEP) identifies goals such as increasing use of her hands and enhancing her ability to point at objects when asked. She has made significant progress at these goals in the last six months and is a willing and happy student.

When she can’t communicate her needs, Alexandria will occasionally get frustrated, but with a patient response, her foster parents are able to calm her down.

Alexandria will need a family who can provide the care she needs now and into adulthood and can advocate for her at school and in her medical care. Her adoptive parents will need to learn about cerebral palsy and how to best care for a child with serious physical and developmental challenges.

Alexandria is legally free for adoption and adoption assistance is available. She is also eligible for in-home services to meet her significant medical and personal care needs.

Sample information about children's levels of functioning

Please note that the information below is provided as examples and broad guidelines. A child with a particular level of functioning may or may not have the specific challenges listed.

Determining level of physical disability

Mild

Characteristics of individuals with mild physical disability may include:

- Requires no equipment for daily functioning
- Requires average or slightly above average medical care
- Can perform basic life-management functions appropriate for child's age and development
- Can use mainstream methods of transportation and communication
- Has a condition that is totally managed by medication
- Has a condition that is correctable or improves on its own with time
- Is delayed in physical development but has a prognosis of catching up

Moderate

Characteristics of individuals with moderate physical disability may include:

- Requires equipment but not life-support equipment
- Has a relatively stable condition (while not correctable, the condition is not progressive or degenerative)
- Requires moderate home modifications
- May require corrective surgery
- Requires up to weekly medical appointments
- Can perform basic life-management functions appropriate for child's age and development (feeding, dressing, toileting) with some assistance
- May require some assistance with transportation and communication

Severe

Characteristics of individuals with severe physical disability may include:

- Requires life-support equipment
- Has a progressive, degenerative, or terminal illness
- Requires significant home modifications
- Requires repeated or frequent hospitalizations or surgeries
- Requires two or more medical appointments per week
- Requires a parent or aide to perform basic life-management functions (feeding, dressing, toileting, etc.)
- Always requires special adaptations for transportation and/or communication

Determining level of emotional disability

Mild

Characteristics of individuals with mild emotional disability may include:

- Functioning well in school, at home, and with peers
- Symptoms, if present, are transient and may be a result of developmental stage or expected reaction to external stressors (such as anxiety, sadness, or behavioral difficulty related to introduction to new situations, losses, or changes in the child's environment)
- Able to communicate needs and understand rules as well as consequences of behavior (depends on developmental stage)
- May use substances
- Does not require medication or therapeutic mediation at this time but may benefit from counseling in dealing with emotions and behaviors that may be causing difficulty

Moderate

Characteristics of individuals with moderate emotional disability may include:

- Symptoms are present but child is able to function with some assistance in school, at home, and with peers

- Displays anxiety, depression, behavioral problems that can be mediated by medication, behavior therapy, or counseling as needed; these behavioral problems can include:
 - › Occasional panic attacks or severe anxiety that is not precipitated by external stressors
 - › Sexually inappropriate behavior, but not sexual abuse of others
 - › Episodic use of substances
 - › Some conflicts with teachers, peers, or others in authority
 - › Fighting; occasional theft or lying
 - › Depressed mood without suicidal ideation
 - › Encopresis or enuresis
 - › Poor judgment or impulse control
 - › Hard-to-manage behaviors that are not destructive or violent
 - › Isolating behavior
 - › Difficulty maintaining friendships
 - › Difficulty in communicating needs in an appropriate fashion
 - › Sometimes losing sight of consequences of behavior (depends on developmental stage)

Severe

Characteristics of individuals with severe emotional disability may include:

- Serious impairment in social and academic functioning
- Occasional to persistent danger of severely hurting self or others
- Recurrent violence that appears unprecipitated
- A pattern of cruelty to animals
- Fire-setting behaviors
- Inability to maintain personal hygiene
- Sexual abuse of others
- Gross impairment in ability to communicate (largely incoherent)
- Inability to see consequences of actions or show empathy for others
- Significant destruction of property

- Gross impairment in reality testing, judgment, and thinking
- Persistent use of substances
- Self-mutilating behavior
- Presence of hallucinations or delusions (that are not related to substance abuse or organic difficulty)
- May require repeated psychiatric hospitalizations or 24-hour monitoring
- Requires medication and consistent psychiatric assistance
- May have poor prognosis for adult level of functioning

Determining level of behavioral issues

Mild

Characteristics of individuals with mild behavioral disability may include:

- Redirectable
- Behavior will likely change with therapy
- Amount of adult attention is age appropriate
- Can be left unsupervised (at age-appropriate level)

Moderate

Characteristics of individuals with moderate behavioral disability may include:

- Displays acting-out behaviors, but not destructive or hurtful
- Has risky behaviors without the understanding of consequences
- Will benefit from therapy but likely will not show immediate progress

Severe

Characteristics of individuals with severe behavioral disability may include:

- Needs line-of-sight supervision
- Likely has one-on-one support or alternative school setting
- Has been physically and verbally aggressive toward adults and peers

- Has tendency to be a danger to self or others
- Would benefit from therapy, but it may not change behaviors

Determining level of developmental disability

Mild

Characteristics of individuals with mild developmental disability include:

- Has an IQ range of 50–75
- Will eventually be able to live independently, hold a job, and manage his or her life with some guidance

Moderate

Characteristics of individuals with moderate developmental disability include:

- Has an IQ range of 25–50
- May achieve partial self-support in a sheltered work place but will always need supervision and to live in a group home or family setting

Severe

Characteristics of individuals with severe developmental disability include:

- Has an IQ of less than 25
- May be able to partially contribute to self-care but will always need ongoing supervision and help with daily routines

Determining level of learning disability

Mild

Characteristics of individuals with mild learning disability include:

- Functioning well in school and at home
- Can be mainstreamed with help from a resource room or tutoring

Moderate

Characteristics of individuals with moderate learning disability include:

- Consistent difficulty in functioning in school and possibly at home
- May need long-term special education

Severe

Characteristics of individuals with severe learning disability include:

- Significant and pervasive difficulty in functioning in school and at home
- May have learning disabilities that cause permanent difficulty in academics, social and emotional functioning, or occupational functioning



Toll-Free
888-200-4005

Email
info@adoptuskids.org

ADOPTUSKIDS.ORG

AdoptUSKids is operated by the Adoption Exchange Association and is made possible by grant number 90CQ0003 from the Children's Bureau. The contents of this resource are solely the responsibility of the Adoption Exchange Association and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children's Bureau, ACYF, ACF, or HHS.

