

Integrating Family Support from Inquiry Throughout Placement

The concept of support for foster, adoptive, and kinship families often makes people think of services or activities only at certain points in a process (such as between licensure and placement, after placement, or after adoption finalization), but family support should happen every step of the way—from first inquiry and throughout the family’s experience.

Effective support throughout a family’s experience helps families better meet children’s needs, keeps foster placement stable, and supports permanency for children. Beyond the direct benefits to children and families, providing support can help child welfare systems meet system-wide goals related to recruitment, safety, placement stability, and permanency.

In a review of states’ Program Improvement Plans, the Children’s Bureau cites support of foster parents as a strategy to improve safety in foster care. Assessment of needs and provision of services were also associated with better permanency outcomes and more placement stability.¹

Providing support from the beginning also helps strengthen relationships between your organization and families and normalizes the experience of accessing support so families may

Resources found on adoptuskids.org/professionals (search by publication name)

- *Evaluating Family Support Programs*
- *How Child Welfare Systems Are Providing Family Support: Respite Care Services*
- *How Child Welfare Systems Are Providing Family Support: Support for Youth*
- *How to Keep Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parents Engaged Before Placement*
- *Making the Most of Your Recruitment Efforts: Effective Response System Strategies*
- *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*
- *Using Customer Service Concepts to Enhance Recruitment and Retention Practices*

¹ Children’s Bureau, “52 Program Improvement Plans: Strategies for Improving Child Welfare Services and Outcomes” (2012), accessed August 1, 2018, www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/52_program_improvement_plans.pdf

be more likely to seek support when they or their children need it later in the process.

Providing post-placement services also helps agencies develop families to meet the needs of the children and youth in care. Organizations that offer both pre-placement preparation and post-placement support report that the ongoing contact their staff have with families improves their ability to prepare other parents to care for children who have experienced trauma. For example, post-placement support staff are able to report trends in service needs so the agency can shape the type and length of pre-placement training it offers.

Organizations offering both pre- and post-placement support services have also been able to increase the depth and intensity of the information and support they provide to prospective parents as a result of their in-depth knowledge about what families need shortly after placement and for years to come. The availability of ongoing support services—and the satisfaction of parents receiving these services—also helps agencies recruit prospective caregivers and parents.

What support looks like during each part of the process

Ideally, having an integrated approach to family support means that families will be able to access support in seamless ways. However, the specific forms of support that you provide for families may look different based on their needs and where they are in the process.

Between initial inquiry and application

When prospective parents contact a child welfare

system, they are often in an information-gathering process and may not even know they need support or what questions to ask. However, as your system responds to these families, you have a significant opportunity to help them learn about the value of accessing support.

There are several ways to provide support at this stage:

- Have an effective response system that welcomes people and lets them know how to move ahead in the process at their own pace. (See our tip sheet, *Making the Most of Your Recruitment Efforts: Effective Response System Strategies*.)
- Follow up promptly with those who inquire and keep in touch with them periodically and consistently. Use this opportunity to begin developing a relationship with prospective parents and to share information about the process, children's needs, and where they can learn more.
- In addition to answering people's specific questions, share details about the children in foster care, the characteristics of successful families, the long-term effects of trauma on children, what to expect in general in the application and licensure process, and available services and supports.
- Share insights about what other families have found helpful to consider when deciding whether to pursue foster or adoptive parenting. This will help people have a better understanding of ways to frame their decision-making and to consider all of the information they're gathering.

Between application and licensure

This is a good time to help parents continue to develop their knowledge and understanding of the needs, strengths, and experiences of children in foster care as well as the expectations of foster or adoptive parents. You can provide helpful support at this phase in several ways:

- Share more detailed information about what to expect in the licensing process, including an overview of the process, timelines, and roles of various staff or units.
- Have a navigator or liaison help prospective parents understand the licensing or approval requirements. Let them know what kind of information they need to compile for the application process and how long each step may take. This support role can be particularly helpful in alleviating prospective parents' concerns about being assessed and whether what they're experiencing and feeling is a normal part of the process.
- Provide tips on what prospective parents can do during this time as they decide whether foster or adoptive parenting or kinship care is a good fit for them. Useful tips to offer include: learn more about children in foster care, prepare information and paperwork for the application and licensing process, talk with family and friends, and begin to develop a support network.

Between licensure and placement

Once families are licensed and awaiting placement—whether for foster care or adoption—they may feel a particular sense of urgency to move to the next step of parenting. You can help them manage this waiting phase in several ways:

- Offer while-you-wait support groups. This can help them connect with peers who understand their emotions, learn how to prepare for having a child placed with them, and see the benefits of being part of a support group—both at this phase and once they have a child placed with them.
- Connect families to other support groups and communities (including online) of current resource parents.
- If you have prospective parents provide respite care or other support for children in foster care or adoption, have debriefing discussions with them to help them explore their experience and reflect on their questions and concerns (including insights about how they can meet children's needs, changes in their thoughts on which children they can parent, and forms of support available to families).

For more information about supporting families during this phase, see our tip sheet, *How to Keep Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parents Engaged Before Placement*.

Between match and placement (for adoptive families)

During this important time, it is particularly helpful to connect the family with targeted training, information, and resources related to the specific child's physical or mental health needs, developmental stage, behavioral needs, and other characteristics and experiences.

Parents may also have additional questions or concerns as they prepare to integrate the child into their family. You can help them by responding to their questions and connecting them with a support group or an experienced buddy or mentor

family, perhaps one with similar children, who can share insights and provide emotional support.

After placement

Once a family is about to have a child placed with them, it is critical to ensure that they have services and support in place to help ensure that the placement is successful and stable. Supporting foster families at this stage also helps them be better positioned to continue foster parenting in the future, which means having less foster parent turnover that your child welfare system has to address.

You can support families during this period in many ways:

- Provide opportunities for peer support and relationships, including through in-person or online support groups and buddy or mentor families. Provide child care whenever possible to encourage attendance.
- Connect families with respite care. This can include providing information on how to access respite care (such as providing a directory of providers or details on how to pay for and get reimbursed for respite care) and creating and supporting networks to help families connect with other families to access respite. (See our tip sheet, *How Child Welfare Systems Are Providing Family Support: Respite Care Services*.)
- Offer ongoing training and skill-development opportunities, including learning events on topics such as parenting strategies, understanding and managing the impact of trauma, and specific special needs.
- Ensure access to needed mental health services for the entire family.

- Provide options for crisis outreach and help families develop their own crisis plan.
- Share information through web sites, newsletters, or email updates on key issues in adoption and foster care, including the effects of trauma, common disabilities and challenges, and effective parenting tips.
- Provide support specifically for children and youth. (See our tip sheet, *How Child Welfare Systems Are Providing Family Support: Support for Youth*.)

For more detailed information on forms and program models of family support, see our tip sheet, *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*.

Tips for implementing support throughout the process

- **Be guided by your data.** Develop and use consistent approaches for collecting, reviewing, and interpreting data to help you determine what forms of support to offer, where to provide it, and in what formats (in person, online, print materials). Incorporate data on areas such as children and families' needs, patterns of use of support services, calls for crisis-level support, and trends on the needs of children entering foster care. Get input directly from families—including from youth whenever possible—on what kind of support they need and what they find most valuable.
- **Normalize the experience of seeking and accessing support.** Help families see that getting support is a normal, important part of family preparation before licensure and

placement and stabilization after placement. Incorporate information into your orientation and pre-service training, as well as in the licensing or home study process, about the benefits of support so families develop an understanding early on about both why and how to access it.

- **Ensure that your support approaches are family-friendly and engaging for both parents and youth.** Involve parents and people who personally experienced foster care or adoption as staff and volunteers to incorporate family perspectives and voices and to help make other families feel welcome. Use customer service principles and family engagement approaches to guide all your family support services. Identify formal guiding principles and customer service standards that apply to your support services, whether you provide them directly through your staff or through contracted service providers.

For more details on establishing customer service principles and standards, see our publication *Using Customer Service Concepts to Enhance Recruitment and Retention Practices*.

- **Offer varied support approaches.** One size does not fit all. Some families may value in-person support groups and respite care, while others can only access phone or online support and don't want others to serve as caregivers to their children. Ensuring a comprehensive program with support tailored to families' needs will result in the best outcomes for children and families.
- **Promote collaboration and connections across staff, units, and contracted agencies.** Connecting your support service staff and providers—including private agency partners—will give you a big-picture view of the full range of support your system provides, where there may be gaps, ideas for coordinating services families receive from multiple units or agencies, and opportunities to streamline the experience for families. Have specific staff responsible for ensuring coordination across units and providers involved in supporting families at various stages in their process and let families know how to connect with a central point of contact if they aren't sure who to contact for specific services.
- **Review and update—if needed—official and unofficial eligibility criteria for families to receive support services.** Remove barriers to prospective, waiting, or current families accessing various forms of support (for example, allowing pre-licensure families to attend some support group meetings and providing support to families who adopted from other states).
- **Evaluate your support efforts.** Build in processes for making needed adjustments based on the results of your evaluation findings. (See our tip sheet, *Evaluating Family Support Programs*.)
- **Develop processes for obtaining ongoing input from parents and young people about what forms, timing, and frequency of support services are most helpful.** This will allow you to share that information with prospective and waiting families and other current families.

Shifting your approach and organizational culture

Taking an integrated approach to family support may require your agency to shift how you think about support, moving from focusing on providing set services in specific formats for certain categories of individuals to viewing prospective and current families as resources to be treasured and developed continually by offering a wide range of support. Truly supporting families involves providing—and encouraging use of—both formal and informal support throughout a family’s

journey with the child welfare system, including long after placement.

By viewing families in this way—as a valued partner in providing placement stability, safety, love, and permanency for children—and providing connected and integrated support in a way that aligns with that view, you can increase the impact of family support services. Your agency can shape its organizational culture to emphasize the need to ensure families are supported wherever they are and provide services in a way that meets their needs from inquiry throughout their journey.

Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org to find out about our capacity-building services to help you strengthen your support for adoptive, foster, and kinship families.



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