

Providing Peer Support for Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families

As a result of the challenges their children face—from their past experiences and their ongoing needs—foster, adoptive, and kinship families frequently express a need for support services. An important avenue for support is peer support—where parents and children and teens spend time with others in similar situations or with similar experiences. Peer support enables those with more experience to share wisdom and encouragement and provides a safe, non-judgmental place for children and parents to ask questions and share insight into their experiences.

Forms of peer support

There are a variety of forms of peer support, including:

- **Support groups (in-person or online)**—providing opportunities to connect with other parents and caregivers and to get information, ideas, and emotional support
- **Mentoring and coaching**—connecting families with experienced parents and caregivers who can provide tips and insights and help them develop their skills (e.g., parenting techniques, ways to understand children’s behaviors)
- **Navigation services (such as kinship navigator programs)**—helping parents and caregivers get information and assistance working with various systems and service providers

- **Peer liaisons**—connecting parents and caregivers with services, community resources, and information and referral to other helpful contacts
- **Activities for children or whole families**—helping families connect with other children or families with similar experiences as part of more structured activities, such as recreation and cultural events
- **Direct support**—with experienced peer parents serving as a resource to families by providing suggestions, information, emotional support, respite care, and other forms of support
- **Peer advocates**—to help parents and caregivers address their needs or challenges with various agencies and systems (e.g., advocating with schools to meet their children’s needs)

Many support programs also engage experienced youth and parents as professional care providers and staff, incorporating the benefits of peer connections and support into other forms of family support.

Why peer support matters

Peer support helps parents and caregivers connect with people who understand their situation—both the joys and the challenges—and who have experience that can provide useful insights, parenting strategies, and other expertise. Peer support

normalizes the experiences of children, teens, and parents as they make connections with others living in similar circumstances. These services can reduce isolation and stress and provide parents with hope and encouragement even as their children continue to face challenges. Peer support can also help families access additional forms of support, such as getting respite care from other families they meet.

Parents may feel most comfortable receiving services designed and offered by their peers. There is often an increased level of trust with people who have walked a similar path and know the challenges that can occur when parenting children and youth who have experienced abuse, trauma, and neglect. At a 2014 AdoptUSKids national convening, one director of a statewide support organization said that many parents only want to be served by other parents and feel less comfortable if agency staff are present.

Post-adoption researchers Smith and Howard report that peer support, such as in support groups, is particularly effective at helping parents and caregivers understand, manage, and cope with their children's challenging behaviors. They explain: "One important aspect of groups is that they can place issues in context, helping members move from seeing their problems as particular to their child and family to understanding them as common and, in light of their children's pasts, expectable. Thus, group participation can normalize feelings."^{*}

Children also benefit from peer support. Connecting with other young people can help young people build relationships, feel understood, and gain new perspectives. Peer connections can also help young people develop social skills and increase self-esteem as they hear from other people who truly understand their experiences.

Tips for providing peer support

- **Value the expertise of experienced parents and caregivers**—Recognize the extensive knowledge that parents bring and treat them as professionals. This may involve paying them (as staff, as contractors, with stipends) as well as developing processes for handling data-sharing approaches, supporting their ongoing development, providing them with needed tools and information, and respecting their roles.
- **Engage experienced parents in designing peer support**—Learn what parents and caregivers find helpful, ways to conduct outreach about available peer support services, and how to empower and support experienced families to provide peer support.
- **Use your needs assessment**—Conduct a community needs assessment (or use results from an existing needs assessment) to develop a deeper understanding of what kinds of support families in your communities need, what their preferences are for accessing services, and other details to help you implement and target your peer support effectively.

^{*} Susan L. Smith and Jeanne A. Howard, "No Longer All Alone in the Twilight Zone: Support Groups for Children and Parents" in *Promoting Successful Adoptions: Practice with Troubled Families*. (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, 1999).

- **Prepare and develop your peer supporters**— Don't forget to offer training to your peer supporters even if they have a lot of experience. Provide information on your program's values, policies, and procedures (including data privacy and confidentiality). Share information on maintaining boundaries, self care, and key issues in adoption, foster care, kinship care (such as the impact of trauma, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, birth family relationships).
- **Prepare for and address the needs of the peer supporter**—Keep in mind that individuals who are providing peer support will also need support themselves, including getting breaks. As experienced parents and caregivers provide support to other families, they may experience triggers or have their own trauma issues arise. These peer support providers may also continue to face challenges in their own families at various times and may need to prioritize meeting their families' needs, which may require stepping back from supporting other families.

Examples from the field

Adoption Network Cleveland, Ohio

Adoption Network Cleveland uses peer support in multiple ways to assist families both before and after adoption. In its Adoption Navigator program, experienced adoptive parents, called adoption navigators, provide one-on-one support to guide prospective adoptive parents through the adoption process and provide information, support, and referral to other services. Navigators continue to support families after an adoption has been finalized. It also provides multiple peer support services, including a monthly post-adoption support group, a men's support group, a transracial

family support group, workshops on health and wellness for adoptive mothers, and various social activities for adoptive families.

Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections (APAC)

Through this statewide program, APAC offers peer support in multiple forms. Twenty monthly groups throughout the state provide adoptive parents an opportunity to support one another and receive emotional and informational support from trained therapists. Children have separate groups, also guided by trained therapists. Adoptive parents who prefer private, one-on-one information and support over group meetings or counseling can also be matched with an adoptive family mentor, experienced adoptive parents who provide support by phone.

Children's Home, Florida

Through its Kinship Care Program, experienced kinship caregivers ("kinship navigators") provide peer-to-peer support to caregivers either in the home or by phone. Navigators have access to an interdisciplinary team with expertise in education, legal services, substance abuse treatment, public benefits, child welfare systems, and health care. The team works with the navigator to help caregivers negotiate the system and address key issues the family is facing. Over time, the navigator partners with particular members of the team to provide targeted services. Navigators also have laptops and access to a web portal to help caregivers apply for public benefits.

FosterAdopt Connect, Missouri and Kansas

As part of its wide range of support services for parents and youth, FosterAdopt Connect runs

a group called Connect Class-Rookies that meets both in person and online. In this group, experienced foster and adoptive parents work with new foster parents and kinship caregivers—in their first year in that role—to address any issues that come up and common parenting topics.

Mockingbird Family Model, Washington State and other locations

In the Mockingbird Family Model, a constellation of six to ten foster, kinship, birth, or adoptive families (satellite families) receive support from an experienced foster family (the hub home) and from one another. The hub-home family offers multiple services, including the following peer assistance:

- Peer mentoring and coaching
- Planned and crisis respite care for children in the satellite families
- Help accessing other support and services the children, youth, and families need (system navigation)
- Coordination of planned and impromptu social activities
- Support for the implementation of a child's permanent plan

North American Council on Adoptable Children Adoptive Foster Kinship Connections

In Minnesota, the North American Council on Adoptable Children operates Adoptive Foster Kinship Connections, which provides peer support to adoptive, foster, and kinship parents and

youth statewide. Parents can access support through more than 30 in-person parent groups, retreats, and one-on-one phone and email support from experienced parents around the state. But the most accessible—and popular—peer support is provided through Facebook support groups serving more than 2,000 parents across the state. These private, staff-monitored groups give parents the opportunity to provide mutual support on their own schedule. Parents ask questions, offer advice, make referrals, and provide emotional support day and night, rather than having to wait for the next in-person support group to happen. Young people in adoptive, foster, and kinship families can participate in youth groups, family activities, and family camps.

Seneca Family of Agencies' Adoption/Permanency Wraparound

The program offers wraparound services to families for up to 18 months. Each family is assigned to a family team consisting of a facilitator, a parent partner, a family assistant, and sometimes a youth partner or other community members. The family partners, caregivers who have experienced similar challenges as the client families, provide peer support and behavioral coaching to increase the parent's skills and capacity.

UCLA TIES for Families, California

The UCLA TIES for Families program provides multiple forms of support for families and youth across three phases of support: 1) preparation and support of prospective adoptive parents; 2) pre-placement assessment of children and consultation with families; and 3) early intervention during the first year of placement and beyond.

The program includes peer support for both parents and youth through monthly support groups. Parent group topics include coping with children's challenges and behaviors; maintaining contact with birth families; and talking with children about their histories. Older youth discuss feelings of isolation, rejection from peers, feeling different from other youth, or missing birth or former foster parents.

Youth receive mentoring from undergraduates or graduates of UCLA who have spent time in foster care or who were adopted. Parents who are going through the process of adopting from foster care or who have adopted can also get additional support from peer mentors.

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org.

