

# How Child Welfare Systems Are Providing Family Support: Respite Care Services

Parents raising children who have experienced trauma or who have disabilities often face significant parenting challenges. Children and youth may also need a break from their parents, especially if their parents are stressed or if the children are feeling pressure being part of a new family. Although everyone in the family may need a break, it can be difficult for parents to find appropriate, skilled child care providers who can give parents and children time apart safely. Respite care—whether planned or for crisis situations—provides a needed rest for both parents and children and can take many forms. In some cases, respite programs give children the chance to build relationships with other children in adoptive, foster, and kinship families and to participate in meaningful activities that increase their skills.

## Categories of respite care

Although respite care can come in many forms, it can be helpful to think about two broad categories:

- 1. Planned respite** — This service provides planned short-term relief necessary to enhance caregivers' ability to parent the child or youth successfully.
- 2. Crisis or emergency respite** — Families or caregivers can access emergency short-term relief when a family needs a break to keep everyone safe or parents or a child or youth

is feeling unable to cope with their current family situation.

Across those two categories, child welfare systems provide respite care—or provide families resources to enable them to get respite care—in many ways. In some cases, respite care is a specific service offered to families. In other cases, respite is a component or an additional benefit of other services and activities (such as recreational or support events for youth that give youth and their parents time apart). Below we provide brief information about some of the ways child welfare systems ensure foster, adoptive, and kinship families have access to respite care. Many of these approaches can be used for both planned and crisis respite.

## Forms of respite care

Below we briefly highlight the various types of respite care and examples of programs that are implementing them.

- **Support network development** — Helping parents identify and develop their own network of supportive adults, including family, friends, neighbors, and other foster and adoptive parents, gives them a natural support system that can provide ongoing assistance and respite care. Child welfare system staff can work with parents to help them think about who in their lives can be part of this support network and ways to engage and prepare those other

supportive adults. This approach can take multiple forms, including helping parents build their support networks through in-person or online support groups and other targeted events connecting families that may be able to trade respite care with one another.

- **Special events** — Parties, picnics, and other special gatherings for families often provide multiple benefits, including creating opportunities for families to meet other foster, adoptive, and kinship families; to celebrate foster, adoptive, and kinship parenting; and to offer welcoming environments for parents and children to have fun. In addition, these kind of events can provide respite opportunities when organized in a way that has separate activities for children and for parents. Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections offers a variety of informal gatherings for adoptive families to get to know and support one another, including holiday parties, family fun days with children’s activities, movie nights, skating or bowling parties, picnics, and three- or four-hour respite events.
- **Specific respite events** — In addition to events that have respite as one of their multiple purposes, specifically planned respite events enable foster and adoptive families to take a break while children and youth spend time together. The Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis, MO, holds three- to six-hour sessions—hosted by the agency’s Junior Board and Foster Friends volunteer group—that include outings to the circus, movies, and gymnastics.
- **Recreation** — Similar to special events, activities for children who are in foster care or in adoptive or kinship families can provide respite care opportunities while also offering children

the chance to have fun, participate in sports, games, or camping to build relationships with peers. As part of its kinship program, Edgewood Center for Children and Families offers Saturday recreational activities and provides transportation for children and youth to attend. In addition, the agency is sometimes able to provide scholarships so children can attend camp or join recreation programs in the community.

- **Hub homes/dedicated respite families** — Through the Mockingbird Society, foster parents are able to access respite care from a licensed foster caregiver who is part of their supportive community. In the Mockingbird Family Model, a licensed foster or respite family (known as a hub home) provides support to 6 to 10 satellite families caring for children in or at risk of entering foster care. Together the hub home and satellite families are known as a constellation that serves as a mutual support network. In this model, the hub home can provide both planned and crisis respite care for children in the satellite families. Planned respite is available almost 24 hours per day, seven days a week. This model also allows families to access emergency respite thanks to the availability of the built-in support network of adults living nearby. The Mockingbird Family Model is being implemented in multiple communities in states and at least one tribe across the country.
- **Camps or retreats** — Support services for families in adoption, foster care, and kinship care often include periodic special events such as camps or retreats that serve the entire family, just the parents, or just children and youth. When the event serves only parents or only children and youth—or serves both but separately—it can have a dual purpose:

providing the planned therapeutic, educational, peer-building, or fun activity, while also offering respite. Retreats for parents can also be an important way for caregivers to learn to take care of themselves as they take care of their families. Retreats are most often offered on a weekend, while camps may be weeklong sleepover camps or day camps held for a set period of time. Tennessee's Adoption Support and Preservation network hosts an annual R.E.S.T. (Respite Education Support & Training) retreat that provides parents an opportunity to spend a weekend learning from one another while also enjoying leisure time.

- **Training and maintaining directory of respite care providers** — Developing a pool of adults who are specifically trained to provide respite care helps ensure that families can find appropriate respite care options through an organized list and that they can trust that the respite care provider will be prepared to work with their child. FosterAdopt Connect certifies, trains, and makes referrals to respite providers who can provide adoptive, foster, and kinship caregivers a needed break. Working with parents to identify family members and friends who want to be trained as respite care providers can help build a pool of trained respite care providers while tapping into families' existing support networks. In a partnership in Iowa, the Allison Area Foster Parent Support Group and the Iowa Department of Human Services certified respite providers after providers received 12 hours of training adapted from a curriculum for foster parents, passed a background study, had criminal and child abuse records checked, got fingerprinted, and completed trainings in CPR, first aid, and mandatory child abuse reporting.

- **Flexible funding to families** — Providing funding to families—directly or through reimbursement—allows families to access support services they need, including respite care in various forms. Bridges to Health, a Medicaid-waiver program operated by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, provides funding through which children, youth, and caregivers can access an array of needed services, including both planned and crisis respite care. In Oklahoma, the Department of Human Services offers vouchers for paid respite care for eligible caregivers of children with developmental disabilities. (Read [more about this program](#) at the Oklahoma DHS website.)

## Ready to learn more?

Our guide, *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families* (2 MB PDF), provides detailed descriptions of these and other programs, along with guidance on using support services to help with both recruitment and support of families, suggestions and tools for assessing the support needs of families, tips on using data to demonstrate the value of support services, and information about ways to implement support services successfully.

You can learn more about any of the program ideas listed above in the *Support Matters* guide:

- Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections: page 83
- Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis: page 130
- Edgewood Center for Children and Families: page 125

- Mockingbird Family Model: page 161
- Tennessee’s Adoption Support and Preservation network: page 78
- FosterAdopt Connect: page 157
- Bridges to Health: page 96

Read about the Allison Area Foster Parent Support Group on page 23 of [Creating and Sustaining Effective Respite Services \(1.2 MB PDF\)](#).

## Additional resources

AdoptUSKids has several publications and resources that can help you get in-depth information about respite approaches, ways to design and implement respite services, and insights from other child welfare systems from their experience implementing and sustaining respite services.

This comprehensive publication highlights successful family support efforts throughout the country. Read this guide to find the following information:

- Detailed profiles of 31 support programs in states and tribes
- Guidance on using support services to help with both recruitment and support of families
- Suggestions and tools for assessing the support needs of families

- Tips on using data to demonstrate the value of support services
- Information about ways to implement support services successfully

[Taking a Break: Creating Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Respite in Your Community \(2 MB PDF\) / en español \(1.4 MB PDF\)](#)

Read this publication for step-by-step guidance for how to develop a respite program and to get sample forms that groups can use in the day-to-day operation of respite programs.

[Creating and Sustaining Effective Respite Services: Lessons from the Field \(1.2 MB PDF\) / en español \(1.6 MB PDF\)](#)

Read this guide for descriptions of how parent groups and child welfare agencies partnered to implement and sustain respite care services, including details on how programs were designed, funded, staffed, and evaluated. The guide provides information specifically on how groups were able to sustain their respite services after an initial grant ended.

Also see the website of [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#) for information about respite care models, ways to access respite care locator services, and additional resources on respite care funding and guidelines.

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



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