



STAYING CONNECTED:

Proactive Outreach to Adoptive and Guardianship Families

Families often need support long after finalization of their adoptions or guardianships. As a result, child welfare systems need to develop and to implement outreach plans so they can stay connected with these families over time.

Effective plans encompass outreach to all adoptive and guardianship families and additional, more focused outreach to those families who may be at higher risk of instability. When thinking about enhancing outreach efforts, child welfare systems need to consider carefully their capacity to serve families who respond to these efforts requesting some type of assistance.

Questions to address include:

- Does the post-permanency program have enough capacity to serve new families?
- Does this program offer a full array of services?
- Do the services offered meet the adoptive and guardianship families' language and cultural needs?
- Does the post-permanency program have the capacity to adapt services offered to meet the unique needs of relatives who adopt or obtain guardianship?

Developing an Outreach Plan for Adoptive and Guardianship Families

An effective outreach plan needs to include details about the demographics of families who adopt or obtain guardianship, how best to reach them, how often to reach out to them, which outreach methods to use (well-being letters, telephone calls, flyers, emails, etc.) and which entity to assign responsibility to do the outreach.

Below are recommendations for child welfare agencies to consider when developing their plans to reach out to adoptive and guardianship families.

- **First, form a planning team.**

Put together a team of staff members and people with lived expertise to help prepare the outreach plan. Be sure that their combined expertise covers the full diversity of the families in the community. Incorporate feedback from adoptive families and guardians about the types of outreach efforts most likely to elicit a positive response from them.

- **Make sure that the outreach is culturally responsive.**

In a diverse society, a single method of outreach is not likely to work for all families. So, tailor outreach efforts to the intended audience. This includes translating materials into different languages, using different images for persons from different cultural backgrounds and choosing the most effective ways to meet families of different types. For example, would partnership with community-based organizations in the LGBTQ2S+ communities be the most effective way to make connections with adoptive and guardianship families in those communities? If outreach efforts aren't culturally responsive, these families may not respond to them.

- **Consider families formed by intercountry and private domestic adoption.**

If post-permanency services are available to these families, the families likely will need broad and different methods than used for families already connected to the public agency. The efforts can include meeting with or sharing materials with private agencies, adoption attorneys, support groups and other organizations that serve these families. Another option for reaching these families (and all other adoptive and guardianship families) is to share program materials with service providers that help families in need, such as school counselors, mental health care providers and associations, hospitals and other medical care providers. Agencies can

North Dakota Checks In With Families

Before an adoption is finalized in North Dakota, child welfare staff do a warm handoff to connect the family with the private agency contracted to provide post-permanency support. Family members get to meet their post-permanency support worker and to learn about the services available. Afterward, the post-permanency program staff member reaches out every six months for the first two years to check in with the family. The staffer finds out how the family is doing, reminds family members about the services offered and seeks to build a relationship that will reduce barriers to accessing supportive services.

also encourage parents to share outreach materials through their own networks of adoptive and guardianship families.

- **Be clear and concise.**

Write outreach materials in clear, friendly and easy-to-understand language that normalizes the fact that many families need ongoing support after finalization of their adoption or guardianship, especially around adolescence. Personalize letters and emails whenever possible. Let a diverse group of adoptive parents and guardians review the materials before they are distributed. Be clear that post-permanency services are available to guardianship families as well as adoptive families, including those formed by relatives of the children involved. Some families may feel excluded by program names or materials that refer only to adoption support or post-adoption services. If the program serves families who have adopted through private or intercountry adoption, make that clear also in websites, brochures and other program materials.

- **Consider whether messages would be received more favorably if coming from someone other than the public child welfare agency.**

Many families, especially those struggling to meet their children's needs, feel intimidated by public child welfare agencies. Consider whether private contractors or experienced adoptive and guardianship parents can do the outreach more effectively. This may be particularly important when planning outreach to families of color because many of them have had much more negative experiences in the child welfare system than other families. ([Learn more about these disparities.](#))

- **Use a variety of methods, and repeat messages.**

No single type of outreach works for everyone, and research shows that people often need to receive a message multiple times before they will act on it. Ensure that the outreach plan includes a variety of methods, such as email, text, postal mail, social media, community connections and more. Continue to ask adoptive parents and guardians which outreach methods would work best for them and what frequency of contacts they would recommend. The agency staff might have to dig deeper to find methods that will reach underserved populations more effectively.

- **To guide future efforts, track which outreach tactics work best.**

When families first access the agency's services, record how they found out about the services and which messages resonated with them. This data will help the agency to refine future efforts. Examining outcomes by demographic group is important to determine if certain tactics are succeeding with some population groups or characteristics of families, but not with others. For example, a flyer from the public child welfare agency may have worked better for Asian American, White and LGBTQ2S+ families and families of teens while community-based partnerships may have been more effective at engaging with Black families, families who adopted from another country and families who adopted long ago. Analyzing this data will allow the agency staff to craft a plan that works for the full, diverse range of adoptive and guardianship families in the community.

If an outreach message isn't working well, review its language with stakeholders. As part of its work with the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG), the Illinois child welfare system prepared an outreach flyer that read, "TARGET is a unique approach to preventing disruptions and helping families prepare as teens who have experienced trauma move through what can be difficult adolescent stages." Few responded to this outreach message. After checking with adoptive parents and guardians, the state agency staff learned that it did not resonate with families who were doing fine, even though they could have benefited from the service. The outreach team revised the flyer to read, "In any family, stressful times can come up, especially during the teen years. Even when things are smooth, big and small life stressors can take you by surprise. We want to ensure that your family has supports that can be helpful during your child's teen years."

The Value of Risk and Protective Factors in Outreach Planning

Research shows that most adoptive and guardianship families do well after permanency, but a significant percentage struggles. ([Learn more.](#)) Given limited resources, child welfare agencies may find that it makes sense to add to their general outreach by investing in more frequent, personalized or intensive efforts to reach families at highest risk of struggling. If an agency collects data on adoption instability locally, its staff can use that information to identify risk factors when planning more focused outreach. If such data is not available, agency staff members can apply findings of research studies about risk factors to develop a tailored outreach approach.



RISK FACTORS

Research has shown that the following factors increase the likelihood of instability in adoptive and guardianship families:

Child factors

- Being an older child at the time of finalization
- Being a teen or a preteen
- Having had a high number of placements in foster care
- Having experienced sexual and emotional abuse
- Experiencing behavioral challenges, especially acting out sexually and exhibiting other externalizing behaviors, particularly when behavior problems were happening early during a placement
- Having attachment challenges
- Having experienced instability in a previous placement (such as running away or living in an out-of-home placement)

Family factors

- Diminishing caregiver commitment
- Having unrealistic parental expectations
- Being a single parent
- Being a more distant relative
- Having a rigid style of parenting
- Having a poor parent-child relationship

Agency factors

- Placements with inadequate sharing of information about the child's history
- Inadequate subsidy for adoptive parents or guardians (or their perception that their subsidy is insufficient)
- Inadequate preparation prior to finalization
- Placement of four or more siblings together
- A match outside of the adoptive parents or guardians' original parameters (for example, a child who was older or had greater needs than the family originally had planned to adopt)

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Some protective factors are the opposite of risk factors (e.g., a married couple being adoptive parents or guardians, a child having fewer behavioral challenges or being very young at the time of placement). Additional kinds of protective factors also may be helpful for agency staff to consider when developing a focused outreach plan. Analyzing results of research done by the QIC-AG, the Vermont child welfare system identified many protective factors, including:

Child factors

- Engagement in social enrichment activities (sports, music, volunteering)
- Acceptance of the child by siblings in the home
- Acceptance of the child by friends and schoolmates

Family factors

- High levels of motivation and commitment to parenting
- Ability to accept help
- Adequacy of natural supports
- Flexibility of family members
- Positive parenting style
- Understanding, acceptance and nurturance of the child's self-identity
- Openness in communicating about the adoption or guardianship

Information about the child and the family is needed to determine the presence or absence of many of these protective factors. Having placement or post-permanency staff members gather and track this information can be helpful for outreach planning. For example, the Michigan child welfare system uses a “Child Factors To Assess Discontinuity Risk” form and a “Caregiver Items To Assess Discontinuity Risk” form during post-permanency program intake. Such information can help agency staff members to prepare their treatment plans while also informing the agency's planning for additional outreach down the road.

Community factors

- Access to high-quality, adoption-competent, trauma-responsive childcare and schools
- Access to high-quality, adoption-competent, trauma-responsive medical and mental health services
- Community support for children who have been adopted and children who have been placed in guardianship



Vermont Uses Survey as Planning Guide and Outreach Tool

As part of its work with the QIC-AG, the Vermont child welfare system conducted an [extensive survey of its adoptive and guardianship families](#) to learn more about their needs and their use of its child welfare agency's services. Although survey results were not tied to individual respondents, the electronic version of the survey offered families the chance to provide their names and contact information if they wanted to be contacted by someone in the agency's post-permanency support program. More than half of the families receiving adoption and guardianship assistance from the state agency responded to the survey. Approximately 19% of those respondents asked to be contacted. To enhance its outreach to families, the state agency later mailed a copy of [The Continuing Journey of Children and Families: An Informal Guide for Those Parenting by Adoption or Guardianship](#) to all families providing their contact information who were receiving adoptive or guardianship assistance as well as to families who had adopted private domestically or intercountry.

Gathering More Information

Child welfare systems don't always have access to families' protective and risk factor information, especially for adoptions and guardianships finalized years ago. Conducting a periodic survey of their adoptive and guardianship families is one method for systems to gather more of this information (see box containing sample survey). Information gained from these surveys can help staff plan for focused outreach. By including information about the purpose of the survey, agencies can also inform families about available services and to normalize the fact that many families will need help over time.

Survey results can point to the need for immediate follow-up with those families whose responses indicated that they were at highest risk. For example, agencies could make a personal phone call to follow up with parents reporting serious problems. The results also can reveal the need to plan more regular communication with families whose responses expressed moderate risk.

Sample Survey

How is the relationship between you and the child or children you are caring for through adoption or guardianship?

☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Okay ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

Please rate your child's/children's current behavioral challenges.

☐ Very high ☐ High ☐ Moderate ☐ Low ☐ Very low

How would you describe your overall family bond?

☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Okay ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

How is your family's stress level related to your adoption/guardianship?

☐ Very low ☐ Low ☐ Moderate ☐ High ☐ Very high

Have your support needs related to your adoption/guardianship have been met?

☐ We have all of the support we need.
☐ We have most of the support we need.
☐ We have some of the support we need.



Applying Risk and Protective Factors To Develop a More Focused Outreach Plan

Child welfare agencies can apply the list of risk and protective factors outlined above to focus outreach efforts on families who may be at greatest risk. Outreach to these families could be more frequent, more intensive or both. For example, families with instability risk factors could receive phone calls and personalized letters rather than just a flyer or a quarterly email that goes to all adoptive and guardianship families. Alternatively, these families could be sent a more specific email as well as a quarterly email. In addition, experienced adoptive parents or guardians could conduct outreach to the families at high risk.

Agencies can apply the risk and protective factors in a variety of ways to develop a focused outreach plan.

Here are some examples:

- **Consider individual factors.**

An agency can increase the quantity or intensity of its outreach to any family in its care who exhibits one or more of the risk factors for instability. For example, each family caring for a child who has experienced sexual abuse could get a phone call from an experienced adoptive parent every other month. In contrast, a family with the protective factor of caring for a 4-year-old with no known behavioral challenges could receive an email once a year. The agency could mail letters to all families in its caseload who have a child turning 12. These letters could explain common issues that may arise as children enter the teen years and could describe the various support options available.

The agency also could send personalized emails to each family identified as having a particular risk factor; these emails would include specific information about why the agency is reaching out. (Here's a sample message: "We know that families who adopt or take guardianship of older children sometimes have extra challenges. Because

you adopted an older child, we want you to know that we are here to help if you need us.") Such messaging helps to normalize the struggles that these families may be experiencing, thereby reducing a barrier to their seeking support.

- **Assess multiple risk factors.**

An agency also can plan its outreach based on the number of risk factors that a family may be facing. Perhaps the agency could reach out monthly to each family with three or more risk factors while sending information quarterly to families with fewer risk factors. The outreach could be more specific and personal to those families with the most risk factors. For example, families with five or more risk factors could receive phone calls and personalized letters rather than emails.

- **Use risk and protective factors to determine frequency of outreach.**

More sophisticated efforts to focus outreach may require formal tracking of information gathered during placement, through surveys or during families' participation in post-permanency support programs. Such data can serve to alert agency staff members to make more frequent contacts to families who score high in risk factors and low in protective factors. It's important to keep in

mind that some risk or protective factors may be important than others. Agencies can track the results of their outreach to refine the scoring system over time.

- **Plan follow-up contacts based on specific circumstances.**

The agency also can use a highly specific risk factor to identify families needing tailored outreach. For example, given that a perception of an inadequate subsidy is a risk factor for instability, the agency could consider special follow-up with any family that has requested a change in adoption or guardianship assistance payments, especially if the request has been denied. Instability itself is another indicator that the agency needs to conduct specialized outreach. For example, if an agency staff member knows that a child ran away or lived in out-of-home care recently, the staffer can offer extra check-ins with the child's family in the weeks and months following the child's return home.

Child welfare agencies can apply risk and protective factors in many ways in their development of post-permanency outreach plans. The key to an effective outreach plan is the ability to implement it consistently and to apply the information gathered to enhance outreach efforts to families most at risk of challenges.

Vermont Applies Risk and Protective Factors To Schedule Outreach

In Vermont, child welfare staff members track the risk and protective factors of each family in their system, gathering information as they work with the families. Post-permanency support staff then have a plan to reach out more often to families with high combined risk scores, reminding them about the supports available. The state's child welfare agency is committed to ensuring that families know that needing support is normal. Staff members hope that their more frequent outreach will encourage families to get help before they are in crisis. ([Learn more in How Using Risk and Protective Factors Improves Outcomes for Children.](#))

To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:
www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library



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