



NORMALIZING THE NEED FOR SUPPORT After Guardianship and Adoption Has Been Finalized



Too often, adoptive and guardianship families don't reach out for support until they are struggling.

These families may think that their early concerns are not worth addressing, may worry about how their child welfare agency will respond, may not know where or how to access support, or may feel shame about their inability to meet their children's needs without assistance.

As Young and Rabiner (2015) reported, fear of the stigma associated with needing help has been a longtime barrier keeping families from accessing mental health services for their children, especially for families of color. Hartinger-Saunders and Trouteaud (2015) found that families of color, families who have adopted a relative's child, families who have adopted older children, and families who have adopted from private agencies are more likely than others to be underserved by post-adoption support programs. When seeking to normalize the need for post-adoption support services, a child welfare agency would do well to pay special attention to these underserved populations.

The agency has an important role helping all of its adoptive and guardianship families to understand that needing support at various times throughout their journey is normal. Below are strategies that agency staff can use to normalize the need for post-permanency support.

Share information about important issues involved in adoption and guardianship.

During training and outreach, share information to help parents understand key issues including grief, loss, rejection, identity, the impact of trauma, etc. Providing information about what to expect at different developmental stages can help parents to anticipate changes in their children over time. Sharing information of this kind early and often will improve parents' ability to care for their children while they learn that encountering challenges over time is normal. Be sure to include information that is designed especially for relative adoptive and guardianship parents, as well as those who were not related before the placement.

Share data on the percentage of children and families in adoption and those in guardianship who may need to reach out for support.

If child welfare agency staff members collect data on the percentage of families who use post-permanency services, they can share this data in outreach efforts and messages about the agency's post-permanency program. Agencies can refer to the results of research studies showing that the need for some form of post-permanency assistance is normal for adoption and guardianship families and that it should be expected. Examples of relevant data include:

- All children who have been adopted or placed in guardianship have experienced loss.
- Hartinger-Saunders and Trouteaud (2015) found that almost 75% of adoptive families

Vermont Develops a Post-permanency Guide

During its work with the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG), Vermont developed a post-permanency guide called [The Continuing Journey of Children and Families: An Informational Guide for Those Parenting by Adoption or Guardianship](#) (2021). This document includes information common to adoptive and guardianship families. It focuses particularly on developmental stages and the impact of trauma. It also highlights the unique dynamics of families in which the adoptive parents or guardians are relatives of the children as well as families in which the parents are of a different race or culture from their children. As part of its outreach efforts, Vermont mailed a copy of this guide to all adoptive and guardianship families known to the state, including those formed through private domestic and intercountry adoption. The guide is now provided to all families moving toward finalization of adoption or guardianship.

in a national survey had needed at least one post-adoption service. They also noted that service use increased over time. They cited a longitudinal study of California adoptive families that found that 9% of families surveyed had used clinical services by two years after adoption and that 31% had used such services by eight years after adoption. Use of other post-adoption services had increased from 31% by two years after adoption to 81% by eight years after adoption.

- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) (2011) found that more than 70% of children in foster care had experienced complex trauma and that youth who have experienced complex trauma have significantly more mental health and behavioral problems than those without such histories.
- [Keeping the Promise: The Case for Adoption Support and Preservation](#) (2014) notes the following: 30 to 46% of adopted children and youth receive mental health services; at least 40% of youth adopted from foster care have chronic behavioral or emotional challenges; and 20 to 30% of adoptive families will face serious problems. The report also notes that up to half of adopted children who have experienced trauma and loss will face ongoing developmental challenges, especially during adolescence.
- In a [survey of children adopted from foster care at ages 8 and older in 13 states, conducted for the Wendy's Wonderful Kids® program](#) (2021), 79% of the respondents said that they had experienced at least one adoption-related challenge such as anger, conflict with siblings or difficulty managing birth family relationships.
- [Adoption USA. A Chartbook Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents](#) (2009) reported that 39% of all adopted children and 54% of children adopted from foster care have a special health care need.

By sharing data such as this with adoptive parents and guardians, agency staff can help them to realize that many families parenting children who have experienced the impacts of trauma and loss will need help post-permanency.

Florida

Florida's [Explore Adoption website](#) presents information about post-adoption services next to the information for parents wanting to adopt.

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Department of Children and Families [web page about adopting from foster care](#) features two sections: "What Would You Like To Do?" and "What You Need To Know." The first section has a link to apply to adopt; the second offers a link to resources for adoptive parents, including financial support, health coverage and post-permanency services.

Delaware

The Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families [adoption web page](#) features a link to post-adoption services below the text that explains that children are waiting for adoption through its Division of Family Services.



Ensure that all informational resources about adoption and guardianship make clear that families should expect to need some level of support during their journey.

If the agency includes information about post-permanency services in its resources about the adoption and guardianship processes, current and prospective parents can begin to see the connection between placement and support. Recruitment materials also need to present information about children waiting for adoption, the unique needs of adoptive families and the post-permanency services available.

Ensure that families understand that post-permanency services are supportive and voluntary, not punitive.

Many adoptive and guardianship parents may be afraid to reach out to their child welfare agency if they are not feeling successful as parents. For relative caregivers who have seen child protection services up close or families of color who are aware of child welfare disparities for families of color, these concerns may be especially serious. To allay these concerns, the agency's messages need to stress that post-permanency services are voluntary and involve a supportive partnership with families.

Make sure that staff members responsible for recruitment, home study and training fully understand the post-permanency supports that the agency offers and the importance of sharing this information.

Staff members engaging with prospective adoptive and guardianship families need to be familiar with the post-permanency support program so they can share information about it while working with these families. These staffers can reassure parents early on that support is an integral part of the adoption and guardianship journey. This is a great way to set or to change expectations.

Warm Hand-offs in North Dakota

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 regional, post-permanency support worker and to learn about the services available. This occurs either during the last child-family team meeting before finalization or, if that isn't possible, during an in-home visit or a meeting in the community. After an adoption or guardianship is finalized, a post-permanency program staff member checks in with the family one month later and then every six months for the first two years. The staff member can extend these regular check-ins beyond the two-year period for families needing additional support. During these check-ins, the post-permanency coordinator finds out how a family is doing, reminds family members about the services offered and seeks to build a relationship that will reduce barriers to accessing supportive services. (*Learn more from the [North Dakota Post Adopt Network Program Manual](#), page 18).*

Share information about post-permanency support services with all families in each stage of the adoption and guardianship processes.

Agency staff can share this information regularly — at orientation, during the home study, during pre-service training and during the process of matching a family with a child or children. The information needs to become more detailed as prospective parents move through the process. By the time that a family is considering a specific placement, agency staff can offer information about the supports that the child is receiving and the supports that can continue through the post-permanency program, if needed.

In addition, post-permanency program staff members or volunteers can come to orientation and training sessions to explain the supports available. This will help to personalize the services and to reinforce the fact that needing support is expected.

Tennessee Hosts Special Events for Support

In Tennessee, an Adoption Support and Preservation/Guardianship Support and Preservation (ASAP/GSAP) program hosts [social events across the state](#) to provide fellowship, support and connections for families in an accepting environment. Events are staffed by professionals with lived expertise as adoptive parents. The ASAP/GSAP program also offers [family camps and day camps](#) for children and youth; these camps include therapeutic and recreational activities.

Oklahoma Develops a Flyer

Oklahoma has developed a flyer for new adoptive parents that mentions several times when their children may struggle, such as:

- One to two months after an adoption is finalized
- When other relationships are lost
- Holidays and changes of seasons

The handout also offers advice about finding adoption-competent support and includes links to the state's [post-adoption program](#).

Make a “warm handoff.”

After a family has finalized adoption or guardianship, the child welfare agency can connect the family directly with post-permanency program staff by setting up an in-person meeting or making a virtual introduction. This “warm handoff” connects family members with the post-permanency program so they understand and are familiar with the services offered before they need them.

Conduct outreach regularly.

Develop, implement and evaluate a culturally responsive [outreach plan](#) to keep the agency connected with adoption and guardianship families, starting shortly after finalization and continuing over time. A set outreach schedule for each of these families and periodic messages normalizing the need for support will remind families that they are not alone and that it's okay to reach out for help. Because of the diversity of families in a community, one method of outreach may not work for all families. Therefore, the outreach plan needs to include specific strategies for reaching families of differing characteristics and backgrounds.

Minnesota Funds Private Contractors to Facilitate Support Groups

Minnesota, as part of its Permanency Services program, funds a private contractor to facilitate support groups across the state. These include a virtual support group for adoptive parents with home study approval who are waiting for placements. The While You Wait group helps prospective parents to learn the value of peer support and to stay engaged while they wait as well as to learn about trauma-responsive parenting and other important, adoption-related issues. Because this group is offered by one of the state's post-permanency support providers, participating families are well-connected with the support program by the time they receive their placements.

Share information about times when more support is often needed

In written materials and during training, the agency can help adoptive and guardianship parents to understand specific times and situations in which support may be necessary. These include when a child starts school, during adolescence, during transitions and around holidays. Sharing specific times and stories helps these parents to know that they are not alone when they experience similar challenges.

Offer specific support services to families before they receive a placement.

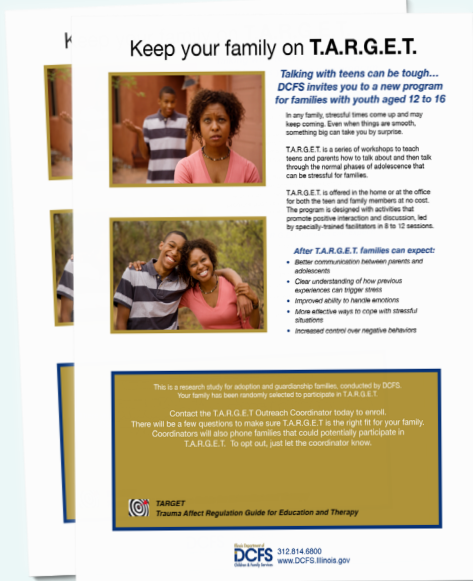
If prospective adoptive and guardianship parents are connected with post-permanency services before placement, they may feel more comfortable reaching out to the agency for help if and when they need it. Offering support groups or events for waiting families or buddy programs that match prospective parents with experienced adoptive and guardianship families can help parents see other families needing and accessing support. Such services also help to develop parenting skills and keep waiting families engaged during what can seem a long process.

Offer social or recreational activities.

One way for providers of post-permanency support to connect with adoptive and guardianship families is to invite them to recreational or social events. Parents reluctant to come forward for support may want to have their children connect with others and may want to celebrate achieving permanency. Families whose children have significant needs may be particularly interested in social or recreational events attended by other families in similar situations and by program staff whom they can trust to meet their children's needs. At these events, parents can chat informally with these other families and with program staff to learn about the support services available. To ensure that the agency reaches a diversity of families, consider partnering with various community-based organizations and holding events in different neighborhoods and regions.

Illinois Prepares an Outreach Flyer

As part of its work with the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG), Illinois 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 parents, 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.”



Use social media to highlight the value that the agency places on supporting parents.

Many families remain connected with their child welfare agencies through social media. Likewise, many individuals and couples considering adoption or guardianship may check social media to learn whether an agency seems a good fit for them. By posting social media messages about post-permanency supports available, an agency can help prospective parents and those with recently finalized adoptions and guardianships to see that needing support is expected. These postings can empower parents well past finalization to reach out to the agency also. Messages about the partnership between the agency and its adoption and guardianship families can help to reduce families’ reluctance to access support. In social media postings, feature a diversity of families in messages conveying that the agency’s services are culturally responsive.

Use language that makes clear that supports are for all adoptive and guardianship families.

Agency outreach materials need to make clear that its support services can help families to prevent future problems, to prepare for them and to address smaller issues. Some families may delay seeking help if they think that post-permanency services are only for those families having a hard time.

By taking some or all of the actions recommended above, child welfare agencies can help families to understand that challenges are inherent in adoption and guardianship and that needing help is normal. By making clear that seeking support is expected and by finding ways to maintain contact with families after finalization, agencies can help families to address concerns before they become serious.

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