



## POST-PERMANENCY SERVICES: A Worthwhile Investment

There are many reasons why states, tribal nations and territories need to invest in supporting adoptive and guardianship families. By addressing the unique and often significant challenges facing these families, post-permanency services help to ensure child well-being and permanency, two of the primary goals of the child welfare system. Having services in place also helps to reassure prospective adoptive and guardianship families, making recruitment and retention efforts easier. Over time, post-permanency services can save governmental funds as well.



### Services address common challenges in adoption and guardianship.

Specialized adoption and guardianship support services are particularly important because these families face more—and often different—challenges than other families experience. While adoption and guardianship can offer tremendous opportunities for safety, stability and permanency, they also present unique complexities that often result in a need for ongoing support. As Brodzinsky and colleagues (2022) explained, the experience of adoption itself, due to the primacy of this significant loss and identity shift, can be destabilizing and even traumatic for some adopted people. Other challenges often relate to the child’s prenatal experiences or history of trauma and loss. Children adopted from the child welfare system, as well as those adopted from institutional settings, typically have histories of maltreatment, adversity and inconsistent

caregiving. Hartinger-Saunders and colleagues (2019) reported that 70% of children and teens in foster care have experienced at least two traumatic situations.

**Researchers have identified challenges more likely to be encountered by children and families in adoption and guardianship than by other families:**

- Penner (2023) noted that children in foster care and children who were adopted have more emotional and behavioral disorders than their peers, and their families are 3 times more likely to seek clinical support than families formed with children by birth.
- In their national survey of adoptive families, Vandivere and colleagues (2009) found that 39% of adopted children had special health care needs (compared with only 19% of the general population), with 26% of those needs being moderate or severe.
- Bramlett and colleagues (2007) reported that special health care needs, moderate or severe health problems, learning disabilities, developmental delays or physical impairment, and mental health difficulties are disproportionately high among adopted children.
- In a survey of 4,200 adoptive parents, Hanlon (2022) found that almost 40% of adopted children had an educational accommodation, including almost 60% of those adopted from foster care and almost half of those adopted from another country.

The adoption and guardianship experience can be isolating and stressful for families. Barrett and colleagues (2021) found that adoptive parents often feel judged by their friends, neighbors, and strangers with respect to their children's behaviors or their parenting. Moyer and Goldberg (2017) found that "...children's unanticipated characteristics seemed to exacerbate [parents'] need for support, especially when their children had unexpected behavioural needs" (p. 19).

In many cases, the biggest difficulties happen years after placement, when the children are adolescents. A 2022 report using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) found that 10% of adoptees experienced formal instability, with 8% reentering care and 2% experiencing either termination of their adoptive parents' rights or emancipation before age 18. About 30% of study participants experienced informal instability such as running away, leaving home before age 18 or living with another relative. Rolock and colleagues (2022) reported, "One study looking at instability outcomes for 52,000 children from one large Midwestern state found that 2% reentered foster care after two years, but about 12% reentered foster care after 10 years" (p. 3).

**Services can improve well-being and stability, ensuring true permanency for children.**

While these challenges can be significant, research has found that robust, adoption-competent post-permanency services can make a positive difference. Such services help to increase child and family well-being, to increase family cohesion, to reduce placement instability and disruption, to reduce problem behaviors and to help parents cope when challenges remain.

**Specific research studies have found the following:**

- Waid and Alewine (2018) reported, “Families who are able to access mental and behavioral health care, engage in adoption education, advocacy, and caregiver support groups fare better than families who cannot access these services during the post-adoption period (Hartinger-Saunders, Troteaud & Johnson 2015)” (p. 214).
- In their study of adoptive parents who used adoption preservation services in Illinois, Zosky and colleagues (2005) reported that the services helped families:
  - cope with the challenges of raising a child with disabilities and other challenges
  - understand their child better
  - diminish the child’s negative behaviors
  - maintain the adoption
- Ryan and colleagues (2009) reported that post-adoption services resulted in fewer adjustment problems, fewer disruptions, higher family functioning, and fewer child emotional and behavioral problems.

- Liao (2016) cited research that found post-adoption services have reduced children’s behavior problems and placement instability and increased family cohesion and parent satisfaction.
- Clark and colleagues’ research (2006) emphasized the importance of helping families to stay committed when challenges are ongoing:

“[T]his study suggested that children’s actual functioning may have less impact on successful adoption outcomes than parental perceptions of those behaviors. This conclusion is consistent with Rushton et al.’s (2000) finding that behavioral difficulties per se do not present a major risk for disruption provided the family develops a format in which the behaviors can be managed. For adoption workers, these findings give hope for the placement of children displaying difficult behaviors. Working with families on strategies of coping may increase the likelihood of success” (p. 191).

**Placement instability causes further harm to children.**

Reducing placement instability is critically important to prevent further trauma to children. While research on the specific emotional impact of adoption disruption and dissolution is rare, research on foster care placement instability has shown its negative impacts on children:

- A [Child Welfare Information Gateway publication](#) notes that “... children with multiple placements experience more delinquency, aggression, depression, and trauma symptoms during adolescence compared with those with more stable placements (Mishra et al., 2020)” (p. 2).



- Newton and colleagues (2000) found that, for children who had originally scored in the normal range for behaviors, the number of placements was strongly correlated with increasing behavior problems.
- Rubin and colleagues (2007) also found placement instability had a significant negative impact on children’s well-being.

Post-placement instability that results in children coming back into care has a grave impact on child welfare systems too. Staff will need to find a new placement for a child in a crisis, which can be more time-consuming and challenging. In many such cases, the child will need a higher level of placement, which is costly and can be difficult to find. Staff also will have to start again to seek a new permanent placement for the child, which takes a lot of time and expense. In addition, the child likely will require additional clinical services due to the added trauma of a failed permanent placement.

## Post-permanency programs help to support recruitment efforts.

Supports for adoptive and guardianship families also help the child welfare system to achieve its placement goals. In a 2018 [bulletin on post-adoption services](#), Child Welfare Information Gateway noted that providing supports can increase the likelihood of parents moving forward with permanency:

“There is some evidence that the availability of services, subsidies, and supports following adoption plays a role in the decision to adopt from foster care among prospective adoptive parents (Freundlich & Wright, 2003; Hansen, 2007; AdoptUSKids, 2016). By assuring prospective adoptive parents that they will have access to needed support and services, child welfare systems can help alleviate a concern that might otherwise prevent people from adopting children from foster care” (p. 6).

### Research has reinforced this idea over the years:

- In their [national study of barriers to adoption](#), McRoy and colleagues (2007) reported that both prospective and current adoptive parents and adoption professionals saw a lack of post-adoption services as a barrier to adoption from foster care. Forty-two percent of staff members in the survey said that lack of post-adoption services was a major barrier in the adoption process. Of the families who experienced a disrupted adoption, 29% cited lack of services as one of the few top barriers.
- In interviews conducted as part of the [Wendy’s Wonderful Kids evaluation](#), Ellis (2011) found that the most common reasons why prospective adopters decided not to adopt included concern about their ability to meet the child’s needs, challenges integrating the child into the family and worry about a lack of supportive services to help them meet the child’s needs.



- In their analysis of research on the adoption of children with developmental disabilities, Haugaard and colleagues (2000) wrote, “Postadoption services remain critical to family recruiting and to effective family functioning after placement” (p. 92).

## Adoption and guardianship stability can save governmental funds.

In addition to supporting child and family well-being, post-permanency services can save governmental funds. Smith (2014) reported that the costs of foster care are higher than those for adoption, estimating that the federal government spent an average of \$27,236 each year for a child in foster care covered by federal funding, compared with just \$5,043 annually for a child receiving federally supported adoption assistance. She also noted that when adopted children reenter care, the costs can be especially high. She cited these reasons:

- These children are 3.5 times more likely than other children in care to be placed in more expensive residential or group settings.
- These youth are also 3.5 times more likely to age out of care than other youth in care, meaning that governments incur the higher costs for a longer period of time.
- The likelihood of reunification is lower than for other children, with only 36% reunifying, compared with 52% overall.

In a [2013 report](#), the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies in New York State estimated that if only 5% of the 2,300 children adopted from that state’s foster care system in 2012 returned to care, the costs of caring for those 115 children in care would be \$11 million per year. The same report estimated the costs of residential treatment at \$100,000

to \$140,000 per child per year in New York. A 2018 Minnesota benefit-cost analysis projected that the cost of each foster placement averaged \$28,000 over a six-month period, with placements in residential facilities costing 3 times as much as family foster care.

Preventing expensive foster care reentry is just one side of the cost savings. Supporting successful recruitment of adoptive and guardianship families is another way that post-permanency services can save governmental funds. Two economic analyses reported significant savings when comparing long-term foster care with adoption. Hansen (2006) found that each adoption from care saved from \$90,000 to \$235,000 in public costs, even more in private costs. Barth and colleagues (2006) estimated that the 50,000 adoptions from U.S. foster care each year saved from \$1 billion to \$6 billion over time.



With respect to their study of Illinois’s post-permanency services, Zosky and colleagues (2005) concluded, “During times of budgetary constraint and fiscal retrenchment, one could extrapolate that adoption preservation services are cost-effective in preventing threats to adoption stability that ultimately would be more costly to address” (p. 22).

The bottom line is that investing in adoption-competent, comprehensive, post-permanency services is good for children and their adoptive and guardianship families. It also can prevent governmental agencies from spending more on services when children who have achieved permanency reenter the child welfare system.



**To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:**

[www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library](http://www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library)



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