



## What Makes Tennessee's Post-Permanency Program so Effective?

For about 30 years, Tennessee has been supporting families who provide permanency to children in the state's foster care system. The state's post-permanency support program — [Adoption Support and Preservation/Guardianship Support and Preservation](#) (ASAP|GSAP) — offers a robust array of services for families who need support related to their adoption or guardianship. These services include:

- training for parents transitioning to adoption or guardianship
- in-home counseling services, including crisis stabilization
- support groups
- educational advocacy
- coaching for parents
- training about key issues in adoption and guardianship for parents and professionals
- social and recreational events for children and parents
- information and referral

The program is operated by [Harmony Family Center](#), which has been providing post-permanency support services since 2004. On average, 2,000 families participate in the ASAP|GSAP program every year, including approximately 400 who receive in-home counseling. A parent recently told ASAP|GSAP staffers about the difference their services had made: “Thank you so much for opening my mind, eyes and heart to what really might be happening with my son! I am so grateful to have been a part of this learning experience!!!”

Allison Douglas, MS, IECMH-E®, Harmony's Resource Center Program Manager and Parent Coach, believes that connecting with families is particularly important during their transition to adoption or guardianship. She explains that during the program's Adoption and Guardianship Preparation Training, “We dive deeply into what to expect in adoption and guardianship. We make sure that parents understand that changes to the family are lifelong and that they may need to parent differently.”

Allison also notes that connecting with adoption and guardianship families at this stage of the process helps them to understand that their eventual need for support is normal and expected. She adds, “During training, we introduce the need for ongoing support for families. People worry that something is wrong with their family if they need help. Our staff really normalize the need for support for children who have experienced trauma or who have experienced attachment breaks. We create comfort for the family.”

The program's social events and support groups also help to reduce any reluctance that families may have about reaching out for more in-depth support. Allison says, “These are fun, typical, family events; but many also have an educational component related to adoption and guardianship. We talk about the fact that there are typical times and circumstances when families



may need support. We've found that if parents are aware of possible challenges before those happen, it's easier for them to cope and to ask for help."

The centerpiece of the ASAP|GSAP service array is in-home counseling. Families who seek counseling services do so most often due to their children's behavioral challenges or because parents are having a hard time connecting with their children. Allison explains the two most common times when families seek support: "Many are adolescents who are struggling with their identities or with understanding their personal stories, which can result in behavioral problems. Another big group is younger kids with prenatal drug or alcohol exposure who are having challenges as they enter school or just before they are due to start school."

ASAP|GSAP therapists begin services by conducting an in-depth assessment of each family's strengths and challenges during a series of sessions. Then the therapists develop a family-specific treatment plan. Services vary based on each family's plan; but every plan involves master's level, adoption-competent clinicians providing in-home, family counseling. ASAP|GSAP therapists are trained in a host of trauma-sensitive, attachment-based, neurodevelopmentally informed interventions and modalities. The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT™), which gives insight into sequential neurodevelopment of the brain, provides the lens through which ASAP|GSAP staffers approach their work with each family. Besides working in joint sessions with the child and parent(s), ASAP|GSAP staff members prioritize the following objectives in parent-only sessions:

- Provide psychoeducational instruction.
- Explore the caregiver's attachment history and how that affects the caregiver's relationship with the child.
- Explain co-regulation.
- Offer therapeutic parenting strategies.
- Help with relief team development, support and referrals, as needed.

Families may participate in the counseling services for up to nine months; and they have opportunities to reenter counseling afterward, if needed.

One family recently came for services after moving back to Tennessee from out of state. The mother sought services for her 10-year-old daughter, who was having meltdowns when stressed and was resisting going to school. ASAP|GSAP provided the family with counseling and parent coaching during which the mom learned about therapeutic parenting and explored why her daughter was having such a hard time. Her therapist and coach offered suggestions, including ways to help the daughter to stay regulated. A few months into receiving services, the mother called to thank her parent coach for the help. She explained that when she had seen her daughter start to lose emotional control during a family event, she had been able to offer sensory and regulatory techniques. She reported, "I have done what you suggested, and I can't believe how quickly it helped her to de-escalate and to calm down. I felt empowered. I felt like I knew how to help my child in this moment."

After counseling services end, families may continue to access other services such as support groups, parent coaching, educational advocacy and events. Day camp, one of those events, is a great service for families whose children have additional needs. Allison explains that many of the children served by ASAP/GSAP cannot handle a traditional summer program and that quite a



few have been asked to leave community-based programs. She notes, “In the seven years we’ve been offering day camp, we’ve never had to ask a child to leave the program.” ASAP|GSAP is able to meet children’s needs by ensuring that the young persons have a high adult-to-child ratio and by providing all adults in the day camp program with training about NMT™ and the impacts of trauma. Allison adds, “We do a lot of preparation about what we’ll do if a child has a challenge, and we debrief at the end of each day to discuss what might need to change for the next day.” The day camp offers typical camp activities — crafts, hiking, swimming, cooking as a group — balanced with rest and plenty of food. Children at camp are always able to opt out of activities, and staff members are able to flex as circumstances change. Allison recalls one girl who announced, “I’m not going to do what you say.” When Allison had responded that that was fine as long as the girl was safe, the girl had been surprised that she wasn’t able to start a conflict. After that, the girl participated in activities; she has come back to participate in other events since then.

The program’s emphasis on ensuring that all staff members are adoption competent helps them to meet the needs of children and their families. Allison explains, “Our staff works exclusively with children in adoption and guardianship, so we make sure that everyone is trained to understand the impacts of trauma and how it can show up in behaviors. The training also includes how we can help families respond to those behaviors.”

Another reason why ASAP|GSAP works so well is the value that the program places on peer support and parental expertise. Harmony was founded by an adoptive parent, so the organization always has had a strong commitment to peer support. Every staff member in the program’s resource center is either an adoptive or a guardianship parent, and each has at least five years of experience. Staffers lead the support groups and plan and attend the family events. Parent coaches also are experienced caregivers who can help adoptive parents and guardians to understand and to embrace therapeutic parenting. Allison notes that the voices of young people who have experienced adoption or foster care are critically important to the program as well. The Adoption and Guardianship Preparation Training infuses youth voice through videos, articles and other resources. Some of the most powerful learning moments happen when parents hear from young people telling their stories.

Harmony’s leadership team also understands the importance of supporting professionals who are helping families. Its leaders are aware of the toll that this type of work can take, so they have made supporting their staff a high priority. Staff members may work flexible hours; and they receive four self-care days each year in addition to their regular, paid time off. The organization recently instituted reflective supervision, which is helping to reduce staff burnout. Reflective supervision promotes and supports professional development for those engaged in relationship-based work. It also provides time, space and safety for staff members to explore their feelings, responses, beliefs and values and to regulate their internal experiences while still considering the experiences of those in their caseloads.

Due to ASAP|GSAP's success, Tennessee recently decided to invest additional funds in the program. With this fresh funding, Harmony is planning to add a couple of therapists. In addition, staff members plan to continue to build their community connections. Allison explains, “We are becoming increasingly aware of our role in training community mental health agencies and



helping people to find programming after their time in ASAP|GSAP is up. We are enhancing our focus on strengthening community providers' adoption competency and partnering with those who can provide ongoing support to adoption and guardianship families.”



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