



WHAT ADOPTIVE PARENTS NEED IN POST-ADOPTION SUPPORT

Adoption is often considered to be a solution or an end goal for a child in foster care who is unable to reunify with their biological parents. Yet, adoption is not the end of the journey; in fact, it is just the beginning.

Adoptive parents and adoptees both have expressed a number of supports they believe are critical after the adoption is finalized. In a qualitative study that asked adoptive parents about their experiences in adoption adjustment and post-adoption support, they shared a common feeling: “*After adoption, you are alone*” (Goodwin et al., 2024, p. 16). In this article, the need for post-adoption support as well as a variety of helpful formal and informal supports will be discussed.



When does the need for post-adoption support begin?

Most professionals believe that support for children and families transitioning into adoption should begin before legal finalization. This can include training specific to how adoption is different than foster care for foster families who are planning to adopt the child or children they have been caring for in their home. Understanding the differences and what to expect after adoption finalization is critical to helping families successfully navigate this significant adjustment (Goodwin et al., 2024). In fact, unrealistic expectations of parents in adoption have been identified as one of the most significant factors associated with a higher risk of adoption breakdown (Palacios et al., 2015; Palacios et al., 2019; Smith, 2014). Therefore, training and support to prepare for and understand the transition into adoption must begin prior to legal finalization.

Adoptive parents report that although the finalization of the adoption of their child is an event that is often celebrated, it also brings some significant emotional and behavioral challenges for both parents and children (Goodwin et al., 2024). Finalization can bring with it a host of thoughts and feelings due to the realization that this process confirms a legal change in the family and the identity of the child. Both parent and child may experience fear or a feeling of being overwhelmed with how this may impact their future. One parent described the impact:

“It was kind of interesting because [the children], I think, felt a little out of control [at finalization], and it was new. It was new for all of us. For the adults, we knew that this was what our purpose was, and this is forever. But then, as adults, we thought, ‘Oh man, what if it gets to be too much? Or they push too far?’ I don’t have any way of saying this is too much for me because they are officially and legally our children. If they do something, this is on me.”

What do adoptive parents need at finalization and after?

Adoptive families experience a wide range of unique and complex challenges after adoption due to different types of family structures, socioeconomic demographics, parent and child characteristics, and the age and development of the child at the time of adoption (Merritt & Festinger, 2013). Parents and children both face different emotional and relational challenges due to previous experiences prior to adoption. Research consistently highlights the need for professionals who understand adoption and what it entails is one of the greatest unmet needs in post-adoption (Atkinson et al., 2013; Goodwin et al., 2024).

Adoptive parents reported feeling on their own seeking the best information to help

them understand the unique needs of their children while not always knowing the best questions to ask to find the right information and support (Goodwin et al., 2024). Parents felt that often mental health providers knew less than they did and that they needed to train their provider on the impact of adoption on their family (Atkinson et al., 2013). When adoption-competent services are available, they are often challenging to access due to long waitlists or families having to travel long distances (Goodwin et al., 2024).

Adoptive parents reported needing other types of adoption-specific supports as well, including adoption-focused support groups, respite care, crisis intervention, and aid in navigating financial, legal, and other healthcare services (Madden et al., 2016; Merritt & Festinger, 2013; Selwyn & Meakings, 2015). Parents stated that one of the most helpful informal supports were the relationships and communication they have with other adoptive parents – *“You’re changing your whole family, so having those random questions answered by someone who’s living it was very helpful”* (Goodwin et al., 2024, p. 18). Additionally, community groups that provided recreational activities for their child or childcare, tribal connections for Indigenous families or children, and open relationships with their child’s biological family members were reported as helpful post-adoption supports (Goodwin et al., 2024).

Six Parent Factors Parents Reported as Helpful During Adoption Adjustment

In the qualitative study (Goodwin et al., 2024), adoptive parents reported six specific factors they believed positively impacted their adjustment after adopting.

- 1. Willingness to seek help when needed —**
“You know, you just don’t know what to do sometimes. I think when you just admit, ‘Hey, I really don’t know how to do this.’ ...then you kind of open yourself up to being vulnerable and to getting help from people.” (Goodwin et al., 2024, p. 10). It is important for parents to remain in a position of openness to seeking and receiving knowledgeable help when challenges increase after adoption. Furthermore, parents reported a positive impact on their relationship with their adopted child when they were able to be open about their need for support and demonstrate humility and openness with their child.



- 2. Being purposeful and intentional in building a strong relationship with their adopted child —** Building a strong relationship with another person takes time and meaningful connection. Adoptive parents stated how critical this was to their relationship with their child after adoption. Parents reported a positive impact when they would pay particular attention to the activities their adopted child enjoyed and joined in with them to share the experience. Parents also shared that this intentional relationship-building included spending extra time to be present and respond with care when their children faced fear or anxiety. One parent reported sleeping on their child’s floor numerous nights due to his frequent nightmares. Other parents reported their decision to quit their jobs to focus more on building their relationship with their adopted children, especially when their children had just moved into their home.
- 3. Structured and flexible parenting —** Adoptive parents understand that their adopted children are significantly impacted by the events that happened before they joined their family. Early traumatic experiences change the way children experience the world around them and navigate relationships with others, especially those close, most meaningful relationships of family. Adoptive parents reported the importance of balancing routine and structure with close attunement to the emotional needs of a child who may be dealing with triggers of previous painful and scary experiences. “Parents reported that when they were able to have empathy to see the connection between their children’s behavior and the challenges they had experienced in their past, they responded with compassion instead of consequences” (Goodwin et al., 2024, p. 11).

4. Maintaining an environment of open and honest communication in the home — Adoptive parents shared that creating and nurturing an environment of open and honest communication among all family members was critical for their families. When parents practiced being open with their child and able to communicate honestly, it fostered an atmosphere where children felt safe to reciprocate and talk openly about their feelings and experiences. Parents stated that this openness and honesty also matter in the communication and relationship between caregiving partners in the home – *“I think our communication, being able to communicate with each other as well as we do, has made a huge difference in us getting to where we are [as a family]”* (Goodwin et al., 2024, p. 12).

5. Personal or professional experience working with people with mental health challenges or physical disabilities — Adoptive parents reported feeling supported by any previous training and experience they had gained in their professional work with mental health or physical disabilities prior to adopting. Similarly, parents mentioned that they felt more prepared to care for their adopted child if they had had previous personal experience with mental or physical health challenges, or if they themselves had been adopted. One adoptive mother stated, *“I understand how sometimes you don’t feel the same as your family. Like it’s hard to feel like you fit in, and you feel like you have to connect with your biological family”* (Goodwin et al., 2024, p. 12).

6. Strong commitment to never giving up — *“I don’t care if I have to fight you...I’m going to take care of you and protect you and love you. And that’s it”* (Goodwin et al., 2024, p. 13). Adoptive parents reported that one of the main reasons they believed they were finding success after adoption was their unwavering commitment to parenting their child, no matter how challenging things would get in the home. Parents often shared this commitment with their child, even when their child expressed a desire to separate from them or rejected their attempts to bond or connect with them. Adoptive parents reported that they felt it was essential to continually show their child that they were planning on sticking together, especially in light of the losses their child had previously experienced in foster care.



It is clear how essential post-adoption support is for adoptive parents and families, beginning before legal finalization and extending long after. Parents can benefit significantly from connecting with each other to encourage each other, help each other understand what is typical for children and youth adjusting to or living out life being adopted, and understand what are some of the most helpful tools, strategies, and resources to help along the way. Additionally, child welfare and community support systems can step in

to fill the gaps and needs in post-adoption so adoptive parents do not feel so “on their own.” Adoption-competency training is critical so that parents don’t feel the need to seek information on their own or feel pressure to train the professionals who are supposed to be helping them. Adoptive parents expressed a clear need for professional, knowledgeable, and accessible post-adoption support, both formal and informal, becoming more available and widespread in their communities.

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



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