



Finding and Using Postadoption Services



It is common for adoptive families to need support and services after adoption. Postadoption services can help families with a wide range of issues. They are available for everything from learning how to explain adoption to a preschooler, to helping a child who experienced early childhood abuse, to supporting an adopted teen's search for identity. Experience with adoptive families has shown that all family members can benefit from some type of postadoption support. Families of children who have experienced trauma, neglect, abuse, out-of-home care, or institutionalization may require more intensive services.

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Postadoption Issues That Adoptive Families Often Encounter

Adoption affects adopted persons and families in many different ways over the course of their lifetime. In response, members of adoptive families may need information, support, and other services. The following are some issues for which families typically seek postadoption support. Several issues—such as loss and identity development—affect all adoptive families, while others may differ depending on the child’s and family’s background and the type of adoption.

Loss and grief. All adopted children and youth, even those adopted as infants, experience some level of separation and loss. They may grieve as they come to understand the role that adoption has played in their lives. They also may struggle with feelings of abandonment as they try to understand why they were placed for adoption and how that affects who they are. These feelings may appear and reappear at different stages of life, even when their adoption is a positive experience. Adopted children and youth may need support in working through conflicting feelings, mourning their losses, and coming to terms with their experiences.

Trust and attachment. Any child or youth separated from birth parents has experienced a break in attachment. Adoption requires the development of new attachments and bonds. Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, out-of-home

care, or institutionalization often have not known consistent love and affection and may have difficulty trusting and attaching to their new family. These children or youth may need help building healthy relationships.

Identity formation. The process of identity development can be more complex for adopted children and teenagers, regardless of when they were adopted. This process may be further complicated if the child’s race or birth culture differs from that of the adoptive family. Teens, in particular, may experience identity confusion as they confront the primary questions of adolescence—“Who am I? How am I different from my parents? Which of their values will I take as my own?” Adopted youth also must try to determine how these questions relate to their birth parents.

Family dynamics and adoption adjustment. Adoptive parents may experience loss and grief issues of their own, which may relate to infertility. Some adoptive parents also wrestle with identity issues as they adjust to their new role as parents. Emotions can be intensified by the stresses of the adoption experience, particularly when the reality of adoption doesn’t match what was expected. For some adoptive parents, these issues may cause strains in their marriages or partnerships. For others, it may lead to postadoption depression. Counseling services can help family members work through concerns with a trained therapist, while support groups allow members to talk and share with others in similar situations.

Birth family connections. At some point in their lives, many adopted people want

information about their birth family and/or to reconnect with birth relatives. Today's technology, including the Internet, can provide easier and faster access to relevant information, while social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) connect people in new ways. While new media can help accelerate a birth relative search, this faster pace of contact can sometimes be emotionally overwhelming to participants if they are not prepared.

Difficulties that result from early experiences. Children who have been abused, neglected, placed in out-of-home care, institutionalized, or exposed prenatally to drugs and alcohol may have ongoing emotional, developmental, physical, or behavioral difficulties. Some of these difficulties are reflected in:

- **Effects of early childhood trauma.** Research shows that early traumatic experiences (such as abuse or neglect) can affect a child's early brain development, which can have later consequences for how a child behaves, expresses emotions, forms relationships, and copes with stress. (See <http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/impact/development/brain.cfm>) The effects of trauma on development vary from child to child and may not appear until years later. Counseling/therapy services can help a child or teen learn to address these issues. They also can help adoptive parents understand their child's behavior as it relates to early trauma and identify strategies to meet their child's needs and allow healing to occur.
- **Health issues and developmental delays.** Children who have been neglected or have spent more than a

few months in an institutional setting may have missed out on important developmental activities due to a lack of stimulation and proper nutrition. They may have difficulties with feeding, sleeping, speech, and forming healthy attachments. In addition, adopted children may have special health care needs as a result of their early experiences. Medical records may be incomplete. Adoptive parents are encouraged to seek an assessment by an adoption-knowledgeable physician and may need ongoing health services to support children or youth with developmental delays and health-related needs.

- **School issues.** Some adopted children and youth experience learning delays or behavioral problems that affect how they do in school. An adopted child, like any child who has experienced many moves and attended multiple schools, may have additional difficulties. If adoptive parents see their child struggling in school, they are encouraged to work with their child's teacher and other school personnel to help their child. They have the right to request that their child be evaluated for a disability and eligibility for special education services (see <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/evaluation>). Parents can support their child by learning about educational rights and advocating for appropriate services. For example, if a child is determined to have a learning disability and is eligible for special education, school staff must work with parents to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which identifies services that will be provided to help

the child meet educational goals (see <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep>). In navigating school issues, parents may seek assistance from an educational consultant, a child psychologist, or a lawyer (in extreme cases where services are not being provided). (For more information on adoption and school, see http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/school/)

Other issues related to types of adoption and child's needs. Different types of adoptions may raise additional issues and service needs. For example:

- **Open adoption.** Increasingly, families are participating in a range of openness in adoption in which a birth parent or other birth relative continues to have some contact with the adoptive family after the adoption. Adoptive families, birth families, and adopted children or youth may need agency support in building relationships among family members, navigating appropriate roles, and setting boundaries. (For more information, visit http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/adoption_openness.cfm)
- **Adoption from foster care.** Families adopting children and youth from foster care need information on parenting a child who has been abused and neglected, adopting an older child, or if they were foster parents, on making the transition from foster to adoptive families. (See Information Gateway's *Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child* at http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_transition.cfm) In addition, relatives and kin who adopt their relative children may need information and support around their changing relationships. (Find

out more at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/kinship/permanency/adoption.cfm>)

- **Transracial/transcultural adoption.** Many families adopt children from racial or cultural backgrounds that differ from their own. Given the importance of promoting their child's heritage and supporting their child's racial or cultural identity, parents may seek related educational resources, learning opportunities, or special events. They also may need assistance with building skills to cope with public scrutiny or racism. (For more information, visit http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/foster/transracial.cfm)

RELATED RESOURCES ON THE IMPACT OF ADOPTION

Information Gateway has a publication series and a specialized website section on the impact of adoption and common postadoption issues:

- *Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons* http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adimpact.pdf
- *Impact of Adoption on Adoptive Parents* http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/impact_parent/impactparent.pdf
- *Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents* http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_impact/f_impact.pdf
- Child Welfare Information Gateway, specialized website section http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_people/impact.cfm

Changing Needs for Support at Different Ages and Developmental Stages

Most of the time, adopted children and youth are not thinking about adoption and its complexities. Like other children and youth, they are busy with schoolwork, sports, and social events. But there are developmental stages as well as milestones and events that often trigger adoption issues.

Developmental stages. Children and youth understand and feel differently about their adoption at different points in their life. For example, children adopted as infants may first learn about their adoption story as toddlers or young children. When entering school, a child may become aware that most children were not adopted and may be challenged to respond to questions and comments from peers. During adolescence, as youth grapple with identity issues and independence, they may have new questions about their birth families and their relationships. Additionally, as adopted people become parents or become old enough to consider parenting, they may find themselves wanting to reconnect with birth relatives or know more about their genetic history. Consequently, an adopted person's questions, concerns, and needs often change over time.

Milestones and events that may trigger a need for postadoption support. In addition to developmental stages, the following milestones and events

can trigger adoption issues and tap into powerful emotions:

- Birthdays of the adopted child, siblings, parents, or birth parents
- Anniversaries of placement into foster care, an orphanage, or the adoptive family; or the date of adoption finalization
- Holidays (especially Mother's and Father's Days, but any holiday that involves family gatherings and sentiment, such as Christmas, Passover, or Thanksgiving)
- School projects in which a child is asked to talk about his/her family, such as "family tree" assignments or identifying inherited family traits
- A doctor's visit in which an adopted person is asked to supply medical history information
- Adopted mother's pregnancy, birth of a child, or adoption of a sibling, which may upset the adopted child's sense of security in a family
- Divorce of adopted parents
- Deployment of a military family member
- Death of a family member

During these times, parents should watch for signs indicating that their adopted child, or they themselves, need special support. Signs might include changes in mood, eating habits, or sleeping habits. Parents can prepare children and youth by discussing the possibility that these triggers may cause a reaction. Parents should let their children know that they understand what is happening and will be there to help and find other resources as needed.

Types of Postadoption Services

The wide range of issues that can be addressed with postadoption services means that the services themselves must be diverse. The following are the most common types of postadoption services, including those that families have identified as most helpful. The table on page 10 provides resources to help parents find these services in their local areas.

Support groups. Support groups can offer adoptive parents and youth valuable opportunities to interact and share with others who have had similar experiences. Groups provide members with support systems, social interaction, and information resources. Groups may restrict their focus to families or children who share certain characteristics (such as having been adopted from a specific country or having same-sex parents), or they may include all adoptive families in their programming.

- **Adoptive parent support groups.** Often organized by adoptive parent volunteers, support groups bring together experienced and new adoptive parents to share experiences in a nonjudgmental atmosphere. Parent groups offer a variety of services—discussion groups, social activities, family events, workshops, newsletters, websites, community referrals, and more. Groups exist throughout the country and vary extensively, from small community playgroups for parents of toddlers to large regional groups.

- **Children and youth support groups.**

For many adopted children and youth, a peer support group is their first chance to interact with other children and youth who were adopted and to see that their experiences and feelings related to adoption are normal. Groups provide a safe environment where children and youth can talk about their birth and adoptive families and share their fears and concerns. Some groups pair older adopted youth as mentors for younger children.

- **Online support groups.** Available 24 hours a day and bridging geographical distances, Internet support groups, blogs, and Facebook pages are increasingly popular. Participating in these groups, parents and adopted youth will likely find families and other youth who can relate to what they are going through and may be able to provide helpful suggestions. As with any Internet activity, precautions should be taken to protect safety and privacy.

Camps, social events, and heritage activities.

Overnight camps or retreats are a way for members of adoptive families to connect not only with others like themselves, but also with their own family members. Such events, which may take place over a weekend or a full week, often combine adoption and ethnic heritage support with traditional camping activities. Attendees frequently form powerful friendships with other adopted children and youth, and they provide each other ongoing support all year long. Other adoptive family activities may include picnics, group outings, recreational activities, and

celebrations of cultural events as well as heritage tours of home countries.

Therapy/counseling. As discussed above, members of adoptive families may need professional help as concerns or problems arise. Needs will differ from family to family and may include:

- Guidance on children’s attachment, trust, emotional, or behavioral issues
- Assistance in working through the impact of adoption on the family and strains in marriages or partnerships and other relationships
- Support in working through feelings when the reality of adoption does not match expectations

Timely intervention by a skilled professional often can prevent concerns from becoming more serious problems. The type and duration of therapy will vary. Some families need a therapist’s help only for a short period; others build a relationship over years, “checking in” for help as needed. There are many different types of treatment approaches and professionals offering adoption therapy. It is critical to work with a therapist familiar with the unique issues of adoptive families and one that involves parents in the process.

For information about adoption therapy, the kinds of issues that it can address, and how to find the right mental health professional, see Child Welfare Information Gateway’s *Selecting and Working With a Therapist Skilled in Adoption* (http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm).

Respite care. All parents need some time for themselves. This may be especially true for parents of children who require high levels of attention. Respite care offers parents a temporary break by a carefully selected and trained provider. It is meant for families with children who require more skilled care than babysitters can provide, foster parents whose program requires a licensed provider, and parents going through a crisis of their own. Respite care may be provided in the families’ home or another selected site. Respite may be available on a scheduled or crisis basis from a State postadoption unit or local adoption agency, or through a local adoptive parent group.

Educational and information

resources. Postadoption service providers may offer, or provide referrals to, useful information and resources that respond to adoptive family members’ questions and help them understand what to expect.

- **Books, magazines, websites, and other resources.** There are many helpful books, magazines, and websites on adoption for children, youth, and adults. Many of the children’s books explain the “whys” and experiences of adoption. Some may help as children begin to discuss their own adoption story. Some resources help parents look at the unique aspects of adoptive parenting. Others are written specifically for those who have adopted children with particular needs or who are parenting children from other cultures.
- **Workshops, seminars, and conferences.** Many adoptive parent support groups, adoption agencies,

and postadoption service organizations offer education in adoption issues. At an adoption workshop or conference, parents can learn about the adoption topics that are important to them, have questions answered by experts, socialize with other adoptive family members, and access adoption-related materials. Online webinars allow parents to listen to experts from the convenience of their own home.

- **Information and referral.** Since family needs will emerge and change over time, parents need to know where to go when they have questions or want services. Information and referral services may be offered through telephone hotlines, websites, directories, or one-on-one assistance.

Openness, search, and reunion. State agencies and other organizations may help adoptive parents, birth parents, and people who have been adopted negotiate postadoption contact agreements or access information and adoption records, in accordance with State laws. (See http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/cooperative.cfm and http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm) Some will provide additional services to arrange and prepare for reunions and mediate the relationships that may form. They also can answer questions and help adopted children and youth, adoptive family members, and birth family members deal with the powerful emotions related to search and reunion.

Organizations That Provide Services

Postadoption services are provided through various organizations, such as the following:

- Public adoption agencies (county or State offices)
- Private adoption agencies
- Specialized postadoption service organizations (these organizations offer services after an adoption, but do not place children for adoption)
- Adoptive parent support groups
- Community health and mental health organizations and service providers

The types of services offered will vary across organizations. In addition, some organizations may offer services only to certain groups (e.g., families who have adopted children through foster care), while other organizations may have no restrictions.

Finding Postadoption Services

Details about postadoption services in a particular area are available from local, State, and national information resources. In general, to find information about postadoption services, parents can do the following:

- Contact their State's Postadoption Services Contact. This is a staff member of the State's department of human services¹ and an expert on postadoption services and programs in a particular State or territory. Each State's Postadoption Services Contact, as well as the State's Adoption Manager (sometimes the same person), are listed in the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory. (Search <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/> by selecting a State and checking State Foster Care and Adoption Officials as the search category.)
- Call the adoption service provider that arranged their child's adoption and ask for referrals. Parents also may call other public and private adoption agencies in their area and ask to receive information on their postadoption events and services. (While some services may be restricted to families who adopted through the agency, many will be open to all adoptive families.)
- Contact parent support groups for information about their events and about local organizations that provide services.
- Find out if their employer offers workplace support groups, online networks, or referral services for adoptive parents.
- Search online national and regional postadoption databases and provider listings.
- Ask family doctors, other adoptive families, or parent support groups for recommendations.

¹ The State agency also may be known as the department of social services, department of children and family services, or other, depending on the State.

The following table presents useful online resources related to different types of postadoption services.

Finding Postadoption Services and Additional Resources

Service	Databases/Resources to Find Services	Additional Information
General Postadoption Services		
General information and referrals	Adoption Assistance by State (Question 7) http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance	Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/services/
Peer Support and Activities		
Support groups for adopted parents or adopted children and youth	National Foster Care & Adoption Directory (Check Foster Care & Adoption Support Groups) http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad Adoptive Families, Locate a Parent Support Group http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/support_group.php North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), Database of Parent Groups http://www.nacac.org/parentgroups/database.html	AdoptUSKids, Respite Care and Adoption Support Groups http://www.adoptuskids.org/for-families/post-adoption-resources#respite-care NACAC, <i>Developing a Parent-to-Parent Support Network</i> http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/parent2parentnetwork.pdf
Adoptive family and child events, camps, and heritage activities	Adoptive Families, Post-Adoption Family Events http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/calendar.php?cal=post Rainbow Kids, Adoption Calendar http://www.rainbowkids.com/Events.aspx	PACT http://www.pactadopt.org/app/servlet/HomePage
Respite care	ARCH, National Respite Locator http://archrespite.org/respitelocator	Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/services/respite.cfm
Health and Mental Health Services		
Therapy/counseling	American Psychological Association (APA) Psychologist Locator http://locator.apa.org/	Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/services/therapy.cfm <i>Selecting and Working With A Therapist Skilled in Adoption</i> http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.pdf
Health care support	Child Welfare Information Gateway, Health Services Locators http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/services/locators.cfm	Child Welfare Information Gateway, Developmental and Physical Disabilities Resources http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/services/disability.cfm American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Healthy Children http://www.healthychildren.org

Service	Databases/Resources to Find Services	Additional Information
Education and Information		
Training, workshops, & conferences	Child Welfare Information Gateway, Conference Calendar (Select Adoption under Step 3) http://www.childwelfare.gov/calendar/	Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/training.cfm Adoption Learning Partners http://adoptionlearningpartners.org
Books, magazines, websites, & other resources	Child Welfare Information Gateway, Parenting After Adoption http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/	<i>Adoptive Families</i> http://www.adoptivefamilies.com <i>Adoption Today</i> http://www.adoptinfo.net The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E), Resources http://www.adoptionsupport.org/res/index.php
Adoptive child background information	National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search (Check Accessing Adoption Records) http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad	Child Welfare Information Gateway, <i>Obtaining Background Information About Your Prospective Adopted Child</i> http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_background.cfm
Search and reunion	National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search (Check Support Groups for Adopted Adults and Those Searching for Birth Relatives) http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad	Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search/ <i>Searching for Birth Relatives</i> http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm
Openness		Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/adoption_openness.cfm
Material Assistance		
Financial assistance	Adoption Assistance by State Database (Questions 1–6, 12) http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance	Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/finassistance.cfm <i>Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted from Foster Care</i> http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_subsid.pdf
Medical assistance	Adoption Assistance by State Database (Questions 8,9,13) http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance	
Educational support (college)		Child Welfare Information Gateway http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/financial/

Paying for Postadoption Services

While many postadoption services are not free of charge, there may be some assistance available for some adoptive families.

Federal and State adoption assistance for children adopted from a public agency. Many children adopted from public agencies qualify for adoption assistance (subsidies), which can often be used to purchase postadoption services. An adoption assistance agreement should spell out the types of postadoption services (such as respite care or counseling) that will be reimbursed. State assistance may cover expenses not covered by Federal programs, particularly medical assistance (Medicaid); direct payments to meet a child's special physical, mental, or emotional needs; and emergency assistance. Eligibility requirements vary by State. For more information, visit http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/adoption_assistance.cfm

Health and mental health care benefits. Families with an adoption assistance agreement may be able to access Medicaid to cover certain health and mental health needs. In addition, some health insurance companies and health

maintenance organizations (HMOs) also may offer benefits that can be used for postadoption health or mental health services. Adoptive parents can check on their particular coverage with their insurance provider. Families must choose to use either Medicaid or their private health insurance, but not both. For more information, see <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/policy.cfm>

Employer-supported benefits. Some companies may provide employer benefits, such as information resources or referrals, and financial reimbursement for adoption-related activities. For more information, see Employer-Provided Adoption Benefits at http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_benefi.pdf

Conference, seminar, and educational event fees. Scholarships are sometimes available to help with the cost of attending adoption conferences and seminars. States may offer postadoption funding, particularly for families who adopted through public agencies. To find out about available support, parents can check with organizers about scholarship opportunities or contact their State Postadoption Services Contact. For contact information, search the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>, and check State Foster Care and Adoption Officials.

Advocating for Postadoption Services

If quality postadoption services are not already available, parents can advocate for them or start their own. Many postadoption services were founded by concerned adoptive parents. Parents might want to:

- Connect with a State or regional adoption advisory council. Adoptive parents who advocate for postadoption services are frequently represented on these councils. State Adoption Program Managers or Postadoption Services Contacts may be able to link parents with councils in their State. (For contact information, search the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad> and check State Foster Care and Adoption Officials.)
- Join together with other adoptive parents and start a parent support group or organize special events. (For more information and tips, visit the website of the North American Council on Adoptable Children at <http://www.nacac.org/postadopt/postadopt.html>)
- Talk to local school personnel, mental health providers, and health care professionals about how they can build their skills for meeting the specific needs of adopted children, youth, and their families. Some materials and trainings have been developed for community professionals, such as the following:
 - National Resource Center for Adoption's *Adoption Competence: A Guide to Developing an Adoption Certificate Program for Mental Health Practitioners*
<http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/practice-tools/>
 - C.A.S.E. Adoption-Competence Training resources
<http://www.adoptionsupport.org/train/index.php>
 - Child Welfare Information Gateway's Training to Provide Postplacement Adoption Services
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/training/>

Conclusion

Adoption is a lifelong experience for a child and a family. It is normal to face challenges; some challenges may even appear long after the adoption has been finalized. Postadoption services are a valuable way for adoptive families to get guidance and needed support and also to find others who understand, and perhaps share, their experiences. These services bring positive results by helping address issues common to adoptive families and by promoting healthy family relationships.

Additional Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway
Parenting After Adoption website section
http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/

Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption
Strengthening Your Forever Family: A Step-by-Step Guide for Post-Adoption
<http://davethomasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/DTFA-Post-Adoption-Guide.pdf>

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute
Keeping the Promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed

http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2010_10_promises.php

The National Resource Center for Adoption
Adoption Support and Preservation Services:
A Continuing Public Interest

<http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/practice-tools/>

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