



**NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
FOR FOSTER CARE
& PERMANENCY PLANNING**

at the Hunter College
School of Social Work

INFORMATION PACKET: *Adoption of Adolescents*

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SUMMARY OF THE ISSUE

Adoption of adolescents is fraught with barriers and oftentimes undesirability on behalf of adoptive parents and adolescents as well. Yet, it is an important step in the psychological, emotional, and behavioral well-being of these children, ages 11-18. The developmental period of adolescence naturally places strain on all parent-child relationships. Adolescence is often spent searching out one's identity, gaining independence, conforming with peers while rejecting parental values, and involvement in negative behavior as a means of testing and experimentation. Adoption compounds this issue for the adolescent as the child must struggle to answer the question, "Who am I?", without always knowing, "Where did I come from?"

By and large, the majority of adolescents waiting to be adopted reside in the foster care system. Due to the chaotic histories of abuse, neglect, abandonment, and overall instability ingrained into their lives, adolescents available for adoption typically suffer from severe attachment disorders. This difficulty in forming healthy relationships not only intensifies typical adolescent behavior, but challenges adoptive parents as they strive to offer continuous love and support to a newly adopted child.

The importance of permanency created by adoption is backed by research. Studies (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Courtney et al., 1998; Sharma et al., 1996) indicate, when compared to the general population of youth, foster youth who age out of the system: are less likely to complete high school; have difficulty maintaining employment, economic security, and health care; and exhibit higher rates of incarceration. However, barriers to adopting adolescents are numerous, ranging from the lack of termination of parental rights to tightened time frames on ensuring a child's permanency—not necessarily through adoption—created by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997). Despite these multi-faceted barriers, adoption of adolescents is a meaningful and important endeavor.

FACT SHEET

- Adolescents waiting to be adopted are considered “special needs” children on the basis of their age.
- Based on 2000 estimates, approximately 520,000 children reside in the foster care system, while only 117,000 children in the system are eligible for adoption.
- Based on 2000 estimates, 134,000 total children were eligible for adoption, with the number of adolescents waiting to be adopted equaling 29%.
- In 1999, only 17% of all adopted children were adolescents.
- Approximately 71% of all children waiting to be adopted were removed from their parent(s)/caregiver at 5 years of age or younger.
- Although age varies by state, adolescent adoptees must consent to adoption typically when they reach between the ages 12-14, in addition to a combination of other people involved in the adolescent’s life.
- Alternative permanency plans to adoption include: legal guardianship, reunification with the family, kinship care, and long-term foster care.
- Due to turbulent histories typically suffered by adopted adolescents, they may experience heightened identity formation difficulties, extreme fears of abandonment, intense issues of control, and undeniable feelings of not belonging to the new family. These compounded effects of their unstable lives create attachment disorders, ranging in severity, making it difficult for the adoptive parents to forge bonds with their adopted child.
- The biggest legal barrier to adopting adolescents remains the lack of termination of parental rights. Some states offer exemptions to children who do not want their parents to relinquish their rights for reasons including: parents are complying with case plan and the family is expected to reunite; the child does not give consent for adoption and reserves alternate permanency planning; the child is labeled delinquent, or suffers from severe psychological/emotional problems, and requires treatment in a residential facility.
- Children left to age out of the foster care system exhibit negative outcomes and closely resemble those individuals at or below the poverty line in many regards (employment, economics, education, incarceration, young pregnancies).

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REVIEW OF MAJOR POLICIES & LEGISLATION

Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments (2001): These amendments, signed into law in January 2002, make changes to the original Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act (1997). The first bill focused on providing grants to states and Indian tribes for family support, family preservation, family reunification, and adoption promotion and support services. It incorporated a Court Improvement Program (CIP) to introduce more money into the state courts to handle foster care/adoption proceedings. Changes made by the new amendments effecting adolescents include time-limited reunification for families, strengthening of CIP to expedite court actions, and availability of education and training vouchers for youth adopted from foster care after age 16.

Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997): This act imposes a State plan for all foster care and adoption assistance with the paramount concern being that of the health and safety of the child, while mindful of those parents who pose a serious risk to this goal. The act outlines conditions of termination of parental rights and initiates selection of an adoptive family for children under State responsibility for 15 of the last 22 months. It also provides incentives to assist States in reaching their targets for increased numbers of permanent placements of children in foster care. It further revokes federal assistance to those states who surpass the time limit established.

Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (1994): This act prohibits the delay or denial of any adoption or placement in foster care due to the race, color, or national origin of the child or of the foster or adoptive parents. It was followed by the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Act (1996) which further reiterates this impetus. Without supporting or denying the importance of race, this act seeks to expedite placement of children.

PRACTICE TIPS

Model Program: Illinois' adoption preservation services contain the hallmarks of a good intervention. It strives to improve the overall functioning of the family through working with them in their own environment, personalizing treatment plans, and offering a supportive, non-blaming approach. Specific distinctive characteristics include workers who:

- Are highly available, come to the family's home, and respond on a 24-hour on-call basis.
- Gather information from multiple sources to formulate a thorough assessment of the child and family situation.
- Incorporate multiple types and levels of interventions such as support groups, Individualized Education Plans with teachers at school, participation in team meetings with a collaborative group of people involved in the adopted adolescent's life, and advocate on behalf of the families to receive necessary resources.
- Address adoption issues (i.e., the effects of adoption, involvement of birth family members, the stages of family integration) throughout the entire process.
- Provide emotional support for adoptive parents in order to assist them in depersonalizing the adopted child's behavior, thus lowering feelings of self-blame and failure during difficult times.

Other practice tips from those experienced in adopting older children include:

- Prepare your support system ahead of time;
- Slow down, be alert to signs of emotional exhaustion;
- Be realistic about the post-honeymoon period, admit when times are difficult;
- Trust yourself and remember to listen to all family members;
- Be assertive with the system;
- And remember that family life is probably a new experience for your adopted child.

WEBSITES & RESOURCES

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

120 Wall Street, 20th Floor
New York, NY 10005

www.adoptioninstitute.org

Phone: (212) 269-5080

E-mail: getinfo@adoptioninstitute.org

Provides an abundance of up-to-date information on adoption issues related to current research; available programs and services; legislation and policy; conferences; and more.

National Adoption Center

1500 Walnut Street - Suite 701
Philadelphia, PA 19102

www.adopt.org

Phone: 1-800-TO-ADOPT

Adoption agency providing extensive information on-line. Additionally, this site acts as a thorough resource for special needs populations through the link "Adoption Quest".

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse www.calib.com/naic

330 C Street, SW
Washington, DC 20447

Phone: (703) 352-3488

(888) 251-0075

E-mail: naic@calib.com

Fax: (703) 385-3206

A comprehensive guide produced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, within the Administration for Children and Families. Site presents updated statistics, legislation, and publications and offers a wide-spread base of information on all issues affecting adoption.

National American Council on Adoptable Children

970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106
St. Paul, MN 55114

www.nacac.org

Phone: (651) 644-3036

E-mail: info@nacac.org

Fax: (651) 644-9848

Committed to serving children labeled unadoptable. This resource provides information on numerous categories of special needs children, and offers a summary of the markers for an outstanding adoption preservation service.

National Resource Center for Foster Care & Permanency Planning

www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

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Dedicated to ensuring the permanency of children in the child welfare system through implementation of current legislation with a focus on quality practice. Program offers training and technical assistance, as well as extensive information of its focus.

National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption

Spaulding for Children

www.spaulding.org

16250 Northland Drive, Suite 120

Phone: (248) 443-7080

Southfield, MI 48075

Fax: (248) 443-7099

Focuses on all aspects of special needs adoption populations by offering technical assistance and consultation, training, curriculum, and an extensive bookstore