

SIX REASONS

to Offer Support Services to Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families

Providing support services to foster, adoptive, and kinship families helps child welfare systems meet the needs of children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and trauma. Below we identify some of the specific benefits of such services, with the goal of helping child welfare administrators and others make the case for offering supports to adoptive, foster, and kinship care families.*

1. Support services help address the varied needs of children in—or who have been in—foster care

- **Effects of trauma**—A national study of children and youth in the child welfare system found more than 70 percent had experienced chronic or repeated trauma.¹ Research suggests childhood trauma and abuse affect brain development and have consequences throughout an individual’s life. Among other things, complex trauma can affect children’s ability to express and control emotions, concentrate, handle conflict, form healthy relationships, interpret social cues, and distinguish safe from threatening situations.²
- **Health and emotional needs**—In a review of the health needs of children in care, Lewis et al. report, “The health and emotional needs of children in foster care are complex. The prevalence of chronic conditions among foster children has been estimated at between 30 and 80%. An estimated 25% of foster children have 3 or more chronic conditions.” They also note many children in foster care face common medical issues such as respiratory problems, skin conditions, dental problems, anemia, and vision and hearing difficulties.³
- **Mental health challenges**—Research emphasizes that children in foster care are also at a higher risk for mental health problems due to their early experiences. Lewis et al. explain, “Depression, reactive attachment disorders, acute stress responses, and post-traumatic stress disorders are some of the common mental health diagnoses of children in foster care.”⁴ Kerker and Dore note that entry into care compounds children’s existing problems.⁵
- **Challenges continue after adoption**—The challenges facing children and youth in foster care do not automatically go away after being adopted. Many children adopted from foster care have special physical, mental health, and developmental needs. Studies show these children are at heightened risk of moderate to severe health problems, learning disabilities, developmental delays, physical impairments, and mental health difficulties.⁶

* You can find more information and research in [Chapter 1 of *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field about Support Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*](http://www.nrcdr.org/develop-and-support-families/support-matters) (<http://www.nrcdr.org/develop-and-support-families/support-matters>).

2. Providing support after placement helps child welfare systems recruit families for children in foster care

The availability of successful support programs can help increase the effectiveness of recruitment, prospective parent development, and retention efforts. As child welfare systems seek ways to increase their pool of foster, adoptive, and kinship families for children in foster care, offering support services can be an important strategy.

- In interviews conducted as part of the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids evaluation, Ellis found the most common reasons prospective adopters decided not to adopt included concern about their ability to meet the child’s needs and worry about a lack of supportive services to help them meet those needs.⁷
- In a paper on the importance of post-adoption services, Casey Family Services notes: “Assurance of the availability of services and support following adoption has been found to play a critical role in many adoptive parents’ decisions to go forward with the adoption of children in foster care—whether children are adopted by their current foster families or new families recruited for them (Freundlich 1997).⁸

3. Providing support helps families meet the needs of children and youth, including placement stability and permanency

Providing post-placement services can increase agencies’ capacity to train and develop families effectively to meet the needs of the children and youth in care. Agencies and organizations that offer both pre-placement preparation and post-placement support report that the ongoing contact their staff have with adoptive, foster, or kinship care families improves the agency’s ability to prepare other parents to care for children who have experienced trauma. Organizations offering both pre- and post-placement support services have been able to increase the depth and intensity of the information and support they provide to prospective parents as a result of their in-depth knowledge about what families need. These feedback loops help child welfare systems use the insights from supporting families to continue to strengthen their recruitment and family-preparation approaches.**

4. Support helps keep families together and improves family functioning

With support, parents are able to remain committed and effective as they raise children who have complex needs. As a result, support services can help keep families together:

- Houston and Kramer note that the “amount and quality of support that adoptive families receive when parenting a child with a history of abuse or neglect is an important factor that contributes to family permanency”⁹

** This kind of connection between recruitment and support efforts is one example of the many ways that an integrated approach to recruitment and support can help child welfare systems strengthen their efforts to build and sustain a pool of families for children in foster care. Our resource [Using Integrated Recruitment and Support to Build a Strong Pool of Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families](#) provides additional ideas and information on the benefits of an integrated approach.



- Zosky et al., in their study of adoptive parents who used Illinois adoption preservation services, reported the following specific ways services helped families succeed:
 - Helped them cope with the challenges of raising a child with disabilities and other challenges
 - Helped diminish the child's negative behaviors
 - Helped them maintain the adoption¹⁰
- In his analysis of placement stability and disruption, Crum found the amount of emotional and social support a parent received had a statistically significant impact on increasing foster placement stability.¹¹ Piescher et al.'s review of foster care program studies indicated a number of ways support services helped relative and non-relative foster families:
 - Social support, such as support groups, led to greater satisfaction and improved child behaviors.
 - Respite care reduced stress and increased parent satisfaction.
 - Support from agencies and caseworkers and reduced caregiver stress.¹²

5. Support services can increase a child welfare system's ability to sustain a pool of foster families

In addition to supporting permanency efforts, support services help retain foster parents, which helps child welfare systems be able to provide placement stability for children in foster care.

- The Annie E. Casey Foundation reports that in the communities it has served, as many as 40 percent of foster parents stop providing foster care due to lack of agency support.¹³
- Based on their review of the literature on foster care placement stability, Brown and Calder note that support to foster parents is associated with improved retention and decreased placement failure.¹⁴
- The National Resource Center on Permanency and Family Connections cites recruitment, assessment, support and training of caregivers, and placement-specific services as key issues in foster placement stability.¹⁵

6. Providing support helps child welfare leaders increase their responsible stewardship of government funds

Two in-depth economic analyses found that adoptions from foster care, even those where support is provided, save significant public funds:

- One analysis found that each adoption saved between \$90,000 to \$235,000 in public costs, and even more in private costs.¹⁶
- The other analysis found that the 50,000 adoptions each year in the United States saved from \$1 billion to \$5 billion.¹⁷

Supporting foster and kinship care families can also be a way to use limited government funds effectively. Each move in foster or kinship care costs money, in addition to the human impact it has on the child being moved and the family. It means another family to recruit and train, and of course means a child has to experience the trauma of another loss and the difficulty of another transition. In a review of research on foster care placement stability, Pecora explains the impact: “Placement changes disrupt service provision, stress foster parents (thereby lowering retention rates), take up precious worker time, and create administrative-related disruptions (e.g., Brown & Bednar, 2006; Flower et al., 2005; James, 2004).”¹⁸ Providing support services can improve placement stability, which can help reduce these negative impact costs.

Contact the [National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment at AdoptUSKids](https://www.nrcdr.org) (NRCDR@adoptuskids.org or 303-755-4756) to find out how we can assist your child welfare system in applying insights from the *Support Matters* publication as part of your recruitment, development, and support of families.

ENDNOTES

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