



FOSTER PARENT ADOPTION: WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW

Introduction

The practice of foster parent adoption is growing. More and more public social service agencies are finding that a child's foster family often is the placement of choice when that child becomes free for adoption. This is especially true when the child or children in question have special needs or are children of color and when a strong feeling of attachment has grown between foster parent and child during the course of the foster care placement.

This factsheet is written for foster parents who are considering adopting one or more of their foster children. The information will also be helpful to a foster parent who already has adopted or to a new foster parent who may be faced with the possibility of adoption sometime in the future. Another factsheet entitled "Foster Parent Adoption: What Professionals Should Know" also is available from the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC).

This factsheet will discuss some of the issues to think about as you consider adopting your foster child or children. It includes a worksheet to use in conjunction with your agency social worker to guide you through the decisionmaking process. At the end of this factsheet are a list of references for further information and a list of organizations with an interest in foster parent adoption.

Issues to Consider

In many ways, when a child lives in your home with you, life is not terribly different if he or she is officially a foster child or an adopted child. The day-to-day tasks involved in child rearing remain the same. There are meals to cook, clothes to wash, outings to plan, lessons to supervise, hugs to savor, conversations to share, discipline to administer, a mind to stimulate, talents to develop, values to instill, and ambitions to encourage. During the course of living, growing, learning, and playing together, you are very likely to become attached to the child placed with you. So what is the big deal if you decide to adopt? It is just more of the same, right? Well, yes, but also, no.

Of course, there are many differences between foster care and adoption, ranging from the trivial to the significant. After a child is adopted and postplacement visits have taken place, a social worker will no longer come by your home to visit. The child will have your last name. You will not have to share authority with an agency—decisions about school, medical treatment, religious practice, and a myriad of other parenting matters can be made without

someone looking over your shoulder. The child will inherit from you and is entitled to a share of your estate equal to that of any of your other children. You will be financially responsible for the child's welfare until he or she reaches the age of majority, and you will be liable for his or her actions should he or she be involved in a legal dispute.

Over and above these practical matters, you will have to deal with emotional issues as well. Because the child has experienced loss, he or she will go through the grieving process, perhaps over and over again at certain critical times in his or her development. This is called *developmental grieving*. You will become acquainted with the stages of grief and the behavior that goes along with each stage. The denial, anger, and depression stages all have predictable patterns of behavior that you soon will be able to recognize, if you do not already.

You also will be learning about the concept of *entitlement*—the awareness that this child is now your child and that you have the right to discipline, love, and care for this child, totally and permanently. You will have a stake in this child's future, and this child will have a stake in yours.

When you adopt your foster child, especially if the child has been with you for an extended period of time, both you and the child's social worker should help the child to understand the significance of the change in status. The child's lifebook, a personalized account of his or her birth and placement history, may be an important tool in facilitating this understanding. It is very important that you mark or celebrate the change from foster care to adoption in some symbolic fashion, so that the child really perceives the difference. Children who have been moved around a lot may not really understand what all the fuss is about, but it should be made clear that adoption is a major life event. A special party, a family ceremony, even the sending of formal announcements are all possible ways of marking the adoption. Ask your child and other family members what they would like to do to commemorate this milestone.

When you adopt your foster child, you will have to incorporate the child's birth family experiences and background—and possibly former foster care experiences—into your family life. You must honor the child's birth heritage and positive memories and build upon them. If past experiences involved abuse or neglect, especially sexual abuse, you should receive special training to understand how those experiences can affect a child in later stages of development. If the child will have contact with birth or former foster family members, you should consider how visiting or corresponding will work within the context of your family.

Availability of Resources

If you adopt a child who has special needs—either as a result of genetics, his or her placement experiences, or a combination of these two factors—you will be dealing with these issues for an extended period of time. Adoption subsidies can help with the financial aspects of raising children with special needs, but you also need to know what other resources will be accessible to you. Some of the resources you should investigate include the following:

- *Postadoption services.*—Are postadoption services available from your agency? Ask your social worker.
- *Support groups.*—Are there groups in your area for adoptive parents or organized around the particular special need that your child has? Research your community.
- *Counselors or therapists.*—Are there counselors in your area who have expertise in older child or special needs adoption? Do they accept medicaid?
- *Other foster parent adopters.*—How do other foster parents who have adopted through your agency feel about the support they have received? Talk to them.
- *Family and friends.*—Consult your immediate and extended family members, and other important people in your life. Do they support your decision to adopt? Will they stand behind you unflinchingly if there are problems in this adoption that are not solvable overnight? If they do not, can you still handle it?

Ultimately you alone or you and your spouse are going to be responsible for this child, but knowing that there are some identifiable supports may make that responsibility a little easier to bear.

Mutual Assessment

The central issue in changing from the role of foster parent to that of an adoptive parent is that of redefining your *attachment* to the child that came about through daily living as a full lifetime *commitment*. Are you ready, willing, and able to see this child through to adulthood and to afford him or her all of the opportunities—and burdens—that being a member of your family entails? Can you see this child being a part of your life long into the future? To do this, you and your agency social worker should examine the strengths and needs of your family, agency, and community and evaluate the impact of adding this particular child, with his or her particular strengths and needs, to your family on a permanent basis. This is what making an informed adoption decision is all about.

Hopefully, your agency will walk you through the process of evaluating the strengths and needs of the child and your family to see whether permanent placement with you is in all of your best interests. The attached worksheet will help you consider your personal adoption readiness.

Conclusion

If you do adopt, be aware that there is a large adoptive parent and professional support network in this country. You definitely will not be alone. As we noted earlier, foster parent adoptions are happening more and more frequently. There are adoptive family support groups all over the country that provide a forum for discussion, friendship, and mutual assistance. Adoption conferences on the local, regional, and national levels offer additional learning opportunities. Literature on many relevant topics is available to you, including other publications from NAIC. More and more professionals and agencies are developing expertise in the area of postadoption services. All of this means that if you have an occasional rough period along the way, knowledgeable and empathetic people can help you through it.

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**FROM FOSTER PARENT TO ADOPTIVE PARENT
A STRENGTHS AND NEEDS WORKSHEET***

This worksheet is designed to be completed by foster parents who are considering adopting a child who has been living with them through a foster care program. If there are two parents, it is helpful for both to complete the worksheet separately and then compare the strengths and needs. Designed as a self-assessment tool, the worksheet should provide some ideas to be discussed with the agency social worker for next steps in the decisionmaking process toward a foster parent adoption. Needs will indicate tasks to be accomplished. Please note that this worksheet touches only a few of the critical issues important to foster parents who are considering adoption. For further exploration of critical tasks, see *Resource Guidebook: From Foster Parent to Adoptive Parent*. This guidebook is published by the Child Welfare Institute. See the list of organizations for its address and telephone number.

Foster Parent Adoption Task	Strengths: (What I have done to accomplish this task.)	Needs: (What I still need to do.)
I have discussed the entire placement history of my child with at least one social worker and believe I have all information that is available.		
I have identified several strengths and several potential problems with this adoption.		
I have discussed ways to solve the potential difficulties with those I consider to be family.		
I have all information that is available about this child's birth family and have determined ways to help this child maintain positive connections with his or her roots.		

*This worksheet is adapted with permission from material published in *From Foster Parent to Adoptive Parent*, developed by Heather L. Craig-Oldsen, M.S.W., and published by the Child Welfare Institute, 1365 Peachtree Street, N.E., Suite 700, Atlanta, GA 30309, 1988.

Foster Parent Adoption Task	Strengths: (What I have done to accomplish this task.)	Needs: (What I still need to do.)
I have considered levels of "openness" in adoption and have planned for a level of openness that will meet the needs of this child and work for our family.		
I have discussed the difference between attachment and commitment with those I consider to be family. Those close to me understand that I am making a lifetime commitment to a child who may later in life have challenges and difficulties as a result of early experiences.		
This child has a lifebook which I plan to use to help him or her understand the differences between foster care and adoption as well as to help with developmental grieving.		
I have considered the ways this child expressed loss earlier in life and have anticipated and planned for ways this child may grieve at the time of adoption and at other important milestones during life (developmental grieving).		
I have planned ways to help this child maintain a tie to his or her cultural, racial, or ethnic roots.		
I have planned ways to talk with other children in the family about this adoption, including ways to help the family understand the differences between foster care and adoption.		
I have planned for the future financial and medical needs of this child and have thoroughly discussed subsidy with at least two social workers.		
I have identified people who will support me if I become discouraged.		

Foster Parent Adoption Task	Strengths: (What I have done to accomplish this task.)	Needs: (What I still need to do.)
I am pursuing adoption willingly and at this time do not feel coerced by a loved one or the agency.		
I have talked with at least one family who has adopted through the foster care program.		
I have considered this decision for several months and believe that adoption of this child is important for the well being of this child, my family, and myself.		

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Organizations With an Interest in Foster Parent Adoption

Child Welfare Institute
1365 Peachtree Street, N.E., Suite 700
Atlanta, GA 30309
(404) 876-1934

Child Welfare League of America
440 First Street, N.W., Suite 310
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 638-2952

Institute for the Study of Children and Families
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, MI 48197
(313) 487-0372

Lutheran Social Services of Washington-Idaho
6920 220th Street, S.W.
Mountain Lake Terrace, WA 98043
(206) 672-6009

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse
11426 Rockville Pike, Suite 410
Rockville, MD 20852
(301) 231-6512

National Foster Parent Association
Information and Services Office
c/o Gordon Evans
226 Kilts Drive
Houston, TX 77024
(713) 467-1850

National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption
16250 Northland Drive, Suite 120
Southfield, MI 48075
(313) 443-7080

North American Council on Adoptable Children
970 Raymond Ave., Ste. 106
St. Paul, MN 55114-1149
(612) 644-3036