



## Providing Postadoption Services

The importance of quality postadoption services has long been recognized by adoption professionals and adoptive families. More recently, their benefits have been acknowledged by a small, yet growing, body of research. Postadoption services reflect an array of programs and supports—including education and information services, counseling, and peer support networks—provided to adopted children and youth, adoptive families, and sometimes birth families<sup>1</sup> after an adoption is finalized. These services often respond to the effects that separation, loss, and trauma can have on children and youth who have been adopted. They can facilitate adjustment processes; promote child, youth, and family well-being; and support family preservation.

<sup>1</sup> While birth families can benefit from postadoption services, this bulletin focuses primarily on services for adopted people and adoptive parents. For more information and resources for birth parents, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/birth/for/>

### What's Inside:

- The need for postadoption services
- Types of postadoption services
- Common barriers to use of services
- Delivery and funding of services
- Characteristics critical to the success of postadoption services
- Key steps in program development and implementation



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This bulletin draws from available literature and practice knowledge to summarize key issues related to providing effective postadoption services. It is intended to support adoption professionals in addressing the needs for postadoption services and meeting common challenges in their delivery.

## The Need for Postadoption Services

Notable increases in the number of adoptions over the past two decades, particularly adoption of children and youth from foster care, have brought increased attention to the service needs of adopted children and youth and their families (Freundlich, 2006). By addressing important issues common in the adoption experience, postadoption services can benefit adopted people and their families who have participated in all types of adoption—child welfare, private domestic, and international. While most adoptions are successful and a great number of adoptive families resolve difficulties without agency services, many could use help in meeting challenges at various points in their life. Several factors, described below, contribute to the need for effective postadoption services.

### Separation and Loss

All children and youth who have been adopted experience some level of separation and loss, which can create significant

challenges throughout childhood and into adult years. Even children and youth adopted as infants may experience a range of emotions related to separation and loss, such as grief, identity confusion, fear of rejection, and low self-esteem. Separation and loss issues, and associated emotional turmoil, often appear or reappear during special events (such as holidays, birthdays, adoption anniversaries) and at different developmental stages, particularly adolescence. Crisis events—such as divorce, a death in the family, or military deployment of a family member—can also bring about powerful feelings and fears of separation and abandonment.

- **How Postadoption Services Help.**

Postadoption services can help children and youth to deal with their emotions, mourn previous losses, and come to terms with their experiences and present circumstances. Services also can support adoptive parents in understanding and addressing issues related to their child's loss, separation, trauma, attachment, and identity.

### Early Childhood Trauma

Many children and youth who are adopted have experienced early trauma as a result of abuse, neglect, early deprivation, or institutionalization. Children and youth who have been removed from their families and placed in foster care, particularly those with multiple placements, often have experienced chronic or complex trauma.

An expanding research base indicates that early traumatic experiences can disrupt a child's brain development, which can have negative consequences for the child's later learning, behavior, social and emotional functioning, and

physical well-being (Anda et al., 2006; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007; Perry, 2000). In particular, early trauma may affect a child's regulation of emotions and behaviors, ability to form relationships, tendencies toward dissociation, and negative self-image (Cook et al., 2007). Children and youth who have experienced early trauma may develop coping strategies for dealing with stress and perceived threats that continue even when they are placed in safe environments. For example, they may try to exert control over others or disconnect from situations—"fight or flight" responses—which may no longer be appropriate in their new families. The effects of early trauma on development vary from child to child and may not always be evident until later years.

- **How Postadoption Services Help.** Trauma-informed postadoption services can help children learn new ways of thinking and responding when facing stress and perceived threats. Services also can help adoptive parents understand their children's behavior in the context of trauma, build their capacity to cope with challenges, and identify appropriate strategies to meet their children's needs and allow healing to occur.

## TRAUMA RESOURCES

For more information on early childhood trauma, visit the following websites:

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network at <http://www.nctsnet.org/>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/trauma.cfm>

## Emotional, Developmental, Physical, and Behavioral Problems

Adopted children and youth have elevated risks for emotional, developmental, physical, and behavioral problems, which research links to early deprivation, maltreatment and trauma, prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, and emotional conflicts related to loss and identity issues (Bramlett, Radel, & Blumbert, 2007; Simmel, Barth, & Brooks, 2007; Smith, 2010). While the majority of adopted children function in normal ranges, those with externalizing problems (e.g., defiance, physical or verbal aggression, lying, withdrawal) and needs requiring continuous care can pose challenges for their adoptive families. In one study that explored why families seek postadoption services, an overwhelming majority (96 percent) noted problematic child behavior (Lenerz, Gibbs, & Barth, 2006).

- **How Postadoption Services Help.** Adopted children and youth and their families may benefit from therapeutic postadoption services, including individual or family therapy/counseling. Parents often need information and guidance on how best to respond to their children's needs and behaviors, and they may benefit from services that strengthen coping skills and/or respite care to take a needed break from ongoing parenting demands. Several programs that examined the outcomes of postadoption services reported improvements in child behavior, parents' understanding of the effects of adoption on a child's behavior, parental confidence in managing child behavior, and family functioning (James Bell Associates, 2011; Lenerz, Gibbs, & Barth, 2006; Smith, 2006; Zosky, Howard, Smith, Howard, & Shelvin, 2005).

## Family Dynamics and Adoption Adjustment

Adoption introduces a range of issues that affects individuals and families in different ways. For example, adoptive parents may experience their own feelings of loss and grief, sometimes stemming from infertility issues. Some family members struggle with unrealistic expectations of the adoptive experience. Families in which adopted children or youth are of a different race, culture, or ethnicity than that of an adoptive parent, as well as nontraditional families, may face additional challenges from public scrutiny and their child's search for identity. Adopted children and youth at times struggle with coming to terms with the circumstances of their adoption and feeling different from other children and youth, and their parents may have difficulty knowing how best to help them. In some instances, the adoption and postadoption experience can create stresses in a family and may also prompt strains in marriages or partnerships. Some adoptive families, particularly those in which children and youth have complex needs, report feeling isolated in dealing with challenges (Hudson et al., 2006).

- **How Postadoption Services Help.** Postadoption services, particularly peer-support groups and community-building activities, can provide opportunities for adopted children and youth and their family members to explore and address adoption-related issues with others in similar situations and lessen isolation among adoptive families. One research study (Reilly & Platz, 2004) demonstrated significant relationships between the use of postadoption services and positive family outcomes. In particular, parents with

children with special needs<sup>2</sup> who received informal support services (e.g., support groups) and financial support reported higher satisfaction with parenting. Unmet service needs were associated with lower quality parent-child relationships and a more negative perceived impact on the family and on the marriage.

## Openness, Search, and Connection

Many adoptions today are planned to involve openness to maintain some level of contact between birth and adoptive families. In closed adoptions, at some point, many adopted people seek information about their birth family and/or to reconnect with birth relatives. Recent technological advances are having a considerable impact on the search process. The Internet can provide easier and faster access to relevant information, and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) are connecting people in new ways. While social media can be a powerful tool to those involved in a birth relative search, they also introduce new complexities related to the faster pace of contact and privacy concerns.

- **How Postadoption Services Help.** Postadoption services can benefit birth and adoptive families who are maintaining open adoption relationships as well as those who are looking for information or searching for their relatives. In addition to needing guidance on search processes, those that choose to reunite with birth relatives may need support in preparing emotionally, pacing a reunion appropriately, and

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on special needs adoption, see "Special Needs" Adoption: What Does it Mean? at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/specialneeds/>

building relationships. Adoptive parents also may require assistance in responding to their child's questions about their birth parents and dealing with their own emotions about openness.

## Permanency

Postadoption services can benefit adopted people and adoptive families in many ways, particularly by helping them to deal with emotional, behavioral, and developmental issues and achieve healthy family relationships. The positive outcomes for children and families, in turn, can promote permanency outcomes.

- **How Postadoption Services Help.**

Postadoption services may provide support in the following ways:

- **Prevention of disruption and dissolution<sup>3</sup> of existing adoptions.** While the vast majority of adoptions do not disrupt or dissolve (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012), those that do create the possibility that a child will enter or reenter foster care. Leaving trauma symptoms and behavioral problems unaddressed, for example, may overwhelm a family's coping abilities and may jeopardize permanence. In some extreme cases, when issues intensify and services are not otherwise

available, adoptive parents may find that they have few alternatives other than relinquishing custody to obtain needed services, such as residential treatment for their children. Adoption dissolutions result in high financial costs for agencies as well as high emotional costs for all involved—the child, adoptive family members, and adoption workers. Research provides some, albeit limited, support for the connection between adoption stability and postadoption services (Avery, 2004; Prew, Sutter, & Carrington, 1990; Smith, 2006). In a study of barriers and success factors for adoption from foster care, a lack of services was cited by both parents and adoption professionals as a key reason that adoptions were not successful. Conversely, parents noted that agencies helped contribute to adoption success by providing ongoing emotional support, postadoption resources/services, and training and information (Children's Bureau, 2007).

- **Recruitment of adoptive families.** There is some evidence that the availability of services, subsidies, and supports following adoption plays a role in the decision to adopt from foster care among prospective adoptive parents (Freundlich & Wright, 2003; Hansen, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The term *disruption* is used to describe an adoptive process that ends after the child is placed in an adoptive home and before the adoption is legally finalized, resulting in the child's return to (or entry into) foster care or placement with new adoptive parents. The term *dissolution* is used to describe an adoption process that ends after the adoption is legally finalized, resulting in the child's return to (or entry into) foster care or placement with new adoptive parents. For more information on disruption and dissolution, see *Adoption Disruption and Dissolution* at [http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s\\_disrup.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s_disrup.cfm).



## Types of Postadoption Services

In multiple studies, adoptive parents report needs for postadoption services (e.g., Children's Bureau, 2007; Festinger, 2006; Freundlich, Avery, Gerstenzang, & Munson, 2006; Reilly & Platz, 2004). This research suggests that needs range from occasional support to intensive intervention and that parents seek a combination of concrete and clinical services as well as informal supports as needs arise. Specific needs vary from study to study and from family to family.

Postadoption service needs commonly requested by families can be grouped in the following categories (Barth, Gibbs, & Siebenaler, 2001):

- Educational and informational services
- Clinical services
- Material assistance
- Support networks

Drawing from the available research and current state of postadoption programs, the table that follows summarizes information related to the need for and delivery of key services within each service category. The table also provides resources for additional information.

### Core Postadoption Services

Service Type	Needs	Delivery Aspects	Resources for More Information
<b>Educational and Information Services</b>			
<b>Information and referral (I&amp;R)</b>	Adoptive families need information about services and resources available to them, including community-based resources.	I&R services can be provided through one-on-one meetings or in workshops, and via websites, resource directories, telephone hotlines, or warmlines.*	Adoption Assistance by State Database (Question 7) <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/</a>
<b>Parenting education</b>	Families need education on what to expect following adoption; how to address their child's grief and other emotions; and how to deal with attachment, behavior, and development issues. Some parents seek educational resources specific to their family type (e.g., single parents, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families) or the type of adoption (e.g., open, special needs, transracial).	Parenting information can be made available through in-person training (lectures, workshops, seminars), publications (pamphlets, books, newsletters), or online services (websites, blogs, and webinars).	Child Welfare Information Gateway <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/training.cfm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/training.cfm</a>  Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, Adoptive Parent Preparation Project <a href="http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/2008_02_parent_prep.php">http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/2008_02_parent_prep.php</a>
<b>Marriage and relationship education</b>	Families may benefit from services that build relationship and communication skills, address strains that may arise during the adoption experience, and promote healthy family life. A cluster of Children's Bureau demonstration projects reported positive outcomes from marriage education services, including gains in family functioning (James Bell Associates, 2011).	Programs may use varied instructional formats that range from weekly workshops to day-long programs or weekend retreats. Formal instruction may be supplemented with support groups and other support services.	National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, <i>Marriage and Relationship Education: Tips for Practitioners Working With Adoptive Couples</i> <a href="http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/resource-detail/index.aspx?rid=2860">http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/resource-detail/index.aspx?rid=2860</a>  ACF, Healthy Marriage Initiative <a href="http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage">http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage</a>
<b>Background information</b>	Adoptive families need information about their children's medical, genetic, and social histories, as well as help in understanding the potential implications of those histories for needs and services.	Most States have laws and agency policies that guide disclosure of background information.	Child Welfare Information Gateway, <i>Providing Background Information to Adoptive Parents</i> <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_backgroundbulletin.cfm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_backgroundbulletin.cfm</a>
<b>Openness, search, and reunion support</b>	Adopted persons, as well as their birth and adoptive parents, may need support in accessing information and adoption records, arranging reunions with birth families, and dealing with resulting emotions.	In accordance with State laws, agencies enable access to adoption information and registries. Some will provide additional services to facilitate and prepare triad members for reunions.	Child Welfare Information Gateway <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/birth/for/connections.cfm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/birth/for/connections.cfm</a>  <i>Searching for Birth Relatives</i> <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.pdf">http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.pdf</a>  National Foster Care and Adoption Directory <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/index.cfm?event=viewSearchForm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/index.cfm?event=viewSearchForm</a>

\*While hotlines generally provide 24-hour assistance for urgent issues, warmlines offer nonurgent support, frequently from peers, during business hours (Monday–Friday, 9–5).

Service Type	Needs	Delivery Aspects	Resources for More Information
<b>Clinical Services</b>			
<b>Therapeutic interventions for children and families</b>	Therapeutic interventions are increasingly recognized as vital to help adopted children and their families (Freundlich, 2007). Therapy and counseling can help adopted children address issues that result from early trauma, separation, loss, identity confusion, and crisis events. Services help adoptive parents address problems in adoption adjustment, respond to their children’s issues, and deal with the impact of adoption on their families. Research shows adoptive families use mental health services more frequently than other families (Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009), which seems to reflect both greater needs and a greater willingness to use services (Smith, 2010).	Therapeutic interventions include individual and family counseling and adoption preservation services. A continuum of options—from home- and community-based services to intensive residential treatment programs—serve varying needs. Some programs have specialized services for crisis intervention.	<p>Child Welfare Information Gateway  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/stability/treatment.cfm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/stability/treatment.cfm</a></p> <p><i>Selecting and Working with a Therapist Skilled in Adoption</i>  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.pdf">http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.pdf</a></p> <p>Adoption Assistance by State Database (Question 8)  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/</a></p> <p>North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), <i>Post-Adoption Services: Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Children Adopted from Foster Care</i>  <a href="http://www.nacac.org/policy/postadoptpaper.pdf">http://www.nacac.org/policy/postadoptpaper.pdf</a></p>
<b>Adoption-competent community services</b>	Adoptive families often express concerns that community professionals are not sensitive to the unique issues that arise in adoptive families (Smith, 2006). These professionals may include therapists, school personnel, doctors, and attorneys.	Some agencies are partnering with schools of social work and private agencies to develop adoption-competent education and certificate programs for service providers. These initiatives range from brief training sessions to comprehensive certificate programs.	<p>National Resource Center for Adoption, <i>Adoption Competence: A Guide to Developing an Adoption Certificate Program for Mental Health Practitioners</i>  <a href="http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/practice-tools/">http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/practice-tools/</a></p> <p>Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE), <i>Adoption-Competent Training</i>  <a href="http://www.adoptionssupport.org/train/index.php">http://www.adoptionssupport.org/train/index.php</a></p>
<b>Material Support</b>			
<b>Financial assistance</b>	Families use Federal or State financial assistance (adoption assistance or adoption subsidies) to purchase community services (e.g., tutoring, counseling) that help meet the child’s educational, physical, or emotional needs. For families adopting from the child welfare system, financial assistance is the most commonly received service and often rated the most essential (Barth, Gibbs, & Siebenaler, 2001; Howard & Smith, 2003).	Dollar amounts, eligibility requirements, and what can be covered under financial assistance varies widely across States and within States for children with different special needs. Financial assistance policies can change over time in response to State budgets and other factors. Regardless of policy changes, existing adoption assistance agreements remain legally binding at the agreed-upon subsidy and service levels.	<p>Child Welfare Information Gateway  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/finassistance.cfm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/finassistance.cfm</a></p> <p><i>Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted from Foster Care</i>  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_subsid.pdf">http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_subsid.pdf</a></p> <p>Adoption Assistance by State Database (Questions 1–6)  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/</a></p>



Service Type	Needs	Delivery Aspects	Resources for More Information
<b>Medical assistance</b>	Families may seek postadoption assistance with health care coverage, treatment services, and specialized medical equipment to meet their children’s medical needs.	Eligibility requirements and what can be covered vary across State programs.	Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance <a href="http://aaicama.org/cms/index.php/medical-assistance/title-iv-e">http://aaicama.org/cms/index.php/medical-assistance/title-iv-e</a>  Adoption Assistance by State Database (Question 9) <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance</a>
<b>Support Networks</b>			
<b>Peer support services for adoptive parents</b>	Being with other adoptive families reinforces that the adoptive family experience is normal, even if it is different from that of nonadoptive families. Peer support offers opportunities to freely express one’s frustrations without being judged (Chamberlain & Horne, 2003). Research indicates that families value group services for emotional support as well as a source for needed information (Bryan, Flaherty, & Saunders, 2010). Peer support services have been linked to reduced isolation and improvements in parenting knowledge, confidence, and commitment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2005).	Support networks may be professionally facilitated or self-help oriented. In addition to support group meetings, some agencies offer group outings, special events, and informal gatherings. Mentor or buddy programs pair adoptive parents with more experienced adoptive parents or others in similar circumstances. Web-based chat groups can provide ongoing opportunities to link families.	National Foster Care and Adoption Directory <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/index.cfm?event=viewSearchForm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/index.cfm?event=viewSearchForm</a>  Child Welfare Information Gateway <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/services/postadoption.cfm">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/services/postadoption.cfm</a>  NACAC, <i>Developing a Parent-to-Parent Support Network</i> <a href="http://www.nacac.org/adopttalk/parent2parentnetwork.pdf">http://www.nacac.org/adopttalk/parent2parentnetwork.pdf</a>
<b>Peer support services for children</b>	For many adopted children and youth, a peer support group is a valuable opportunity to interact with other adopted persons and to see that their experiences and feelings about being adopted are normal. Peer groups provide a safe environment where children and youth can talk about their birth and adoptive families and share their fears and concerns.	In addition to support group meetings, some agencies offer camps or other specialized activities specifically for children and youth who have been adopted and sometimes for specific family types (LGBT, single parent, or transracial). Websites and online forums can provide ongoing support that supplement in-person activities.	

Service Type	Needs	Delivery Aspects	Resources for More Information
<b>Support for transracial/transcultural adoptions</b>	Adoptive parents whose children are of a different race or culture may seek resources specific to supporting their children, promoting their child's heritage, and coping with racism.	Services may include seminars, educational resources, support groups, cultural events, special outings, heritage camps, and heritage tours to home countries. Some programs tailor services for specific groups, such as repatriation and healing programs for tribal adopted persons and their families.	<p>Child Welfare Information Gateway  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/transsupport/">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/transsupport/</a></p> <p>New York State Citizen's Coalition for Children  <a href="http://nysccc.org/family-supports/transracial-transcultural/">http://nysccc.org/family-supports/transracial-transcultural/</a></p> <p>PACT  <a href="http://www.pactadopt.org/app/servlet/HomePage">http://www.pactadopt.org/app/servlet/HomePage</a></p>
<b>Respite care</b>	All parents need periodic breaks from their children. This may be especially true for parents of children who require high levels of attention due to specific medical and emotional needs. Respite care can be helpful in diffusing stress to avert crisis situations. While surveys of adoptive parents report the need for respite care, those needs are often unmet (Barth, Gibbs, & Siebenaler, 2001; Festinger, 2006; Hudson et al., 2006).	Respite care may be offered to parents in their home on an individual basis or in group settings through weekend outings or summer camp. Sometimes, support group members provide informal respite to each other's children.	<p>ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center, <i>Respite as a Support Service for Adoptive Families</i>  <a href="http://archrespite.org/images/docs/Factsheets/fs_33-adoptive_families.pdf">http://archrespite.org/images/docs/Factsheets/fs_33-adoptive_families.pdf</a></p> <p>AdoptUSKids, <i>Taking a Break: Creating Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Respite Care in your Community</i>  <a href="http://www.adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/taking-a-break-respite-guide.pdf">http://www.adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/taking-a-break-respite-guide.pdf</a></p>
<b>Cross-Cutting</b>			
<b>Advocacy</b>	Many adoptive parents report needing support in dealing with schools and community service providers to raise awareness of adoption-related issues and to address their child's specific needs as they evolve over their lifespan.	Professionals may need to intervene directly on a family's behalf to effectively navigate bureaucratic requirements. Service providers or experienced parents also may model advocacy skills to parents, enabling them eventually to advocate for their children on their own.	<p>NACAC, <i>Advocating for Post-Adoption Support</i>  <a href="http://www.nacac.org/postadopt/PostAdoptToolkit.pdf">http://www.nacac.org/postadopt/PostAdoptToolkit.pdf</a></p>
<b>Case management</b>	Families need support in accessing and coordinating needed services and resources.	Where provided, a single coordinator can help access services across agencies and systems or organize and facilitate a team meeting to assist a family.	<p>Child Welfare Information Gateway  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement</a></p> <p>Adoption Assistance by State Database  <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance">http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance</a></p>

## Common Barriers to Use of Services

As the table above illustrates, many opportunities exist for postadoption services. While the recognition of the importance of such services continues to grow, a number of challenges stand in the way of use. Research on postadoption needs and services (Children's Bureau, 2007; Festinger, 2006; Ryan, Nelson, & Siebert, 2009; Smith, 2010) have examined the perspectives of adoptive families and professionals and highlight the following barriers to accessing postadoption services:

- Insufficient availability of postadoption services
- Scarcity of adoption-competent providers
- Families' limited knowledge of service availability
- Reluctance among parents that sometimes stems from unrealistic expectations and/or not wanting to appear as "inadequate"
- Affordability
- Limited accessibility due to location or hours

In addition to these cross-cutting barriers, particular concerns have been identified related to specific services. For example, in regard to respite care, issues arise not only in finding appropriate and affordable respite providers, but also around parental concerns with leaving a child who has attachment or separation anxiety issues (Hudson et al., 2006).

## Delivery and Funding of Services

Adoption agencies vary greatly in terms of the postadoption services they provide (Barth, Gibbs, & Siebenaler, 2001; Mack, 2006; Smith, 2010). Ideally, a postadoption program would reflect a continuum of services from the education and preparation of parents through crisis intervention. Several State agencies offer or provide referrals to multiple services, including two or more services listed on the table presented above. Few, however, are able to provide a full range of services to all families who need them (Smith, 2010). In addition, services offered change over time, reflecting shifts in budgets, policies, and priorities.

While some program evaluations have been conducted, our knowledge is still limited with regard to service effectiveness and the appropriate mix and delivery of services to best meet families' needs. Currently, there is no single evidence-based postadoption service model (Smith, 2010). Rather, agencies draw from diverse service and support approaches.<sup>4</sup> Agencies tend to tailor postadoption programs to reflect family needs, existing service delivery systems, and available resources.

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed information and examples of current models of postadoption services, see the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute's *Keeping the Promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed*, available at [http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/2010\\_10\\_20\\_KeepingThePromise.pdf](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/2010_10_20_KeepingThePromise.pdf)

## Providers and Service Models

Postadoption services are delivered through several different service models, including the following:

- **Adoption agencies.** Public and private adoption agencies may deliver postadoption services directly. Services may be provided by an adoption worker, who may already have worked with the family during the adoption process, or through a specialized postadoption service unit that focuses specifically on postadoption needs.
- **Contracts with private organizations.** Many public agencies contract with private organizations to provide postadoption services. These services may be offered to a State, a local area or county, or a specific region.
- **Multiagency collaboration.** It is not necessary, or even practical, for all postadoption services to be provided by State or county programs. A collaborative approach uses existing public and private service providers to deliver postadoption services and to train personnel to improve the level of community response to adoptive families and their children. Services may be made available through existing health, mental health, and social services systems, as well as through nonprofit or faith-based organizations. Systems of care initiatives are one example of a collaborative approach that brings multidisciplinary public agencies and community organizations together to provide comprehensive, community-based services to children and families.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For more information on systems of care for child and family mental health services, see <http://www.tapartnership.org/systemsOfCare.php>; for resources related to building systems of care in child welfare, visit <http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm>

## Funding

Funding for postadoption services comes from a variety of sources, and each State funds these services somewhat differently. As there are few Federal funds specifically dedicated for postadoption services, many States blend an array of existing Federal and State revenue sources to help pay for postadoption programs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Casey Family Services, 2003; Smith, 2010). Federal funding streams for child welfare services that potentially can be used for postadoption services include:

- Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program (Title IV-B, part 2)
- Child Welfare Services (Title IV-B, part 1)
- Adoption Assistance, Administration, and Training (Title IV-E)
- Adoption Incentive Program
- Adoption Opportunities, Discretionary Grants, and Field Initiated Demonstration Grants
- Medicaid (Title XIX)
- Social Services Block Grant (Title XX)
- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families/ Emergency Assistance (TANF/EA)

Each of these funding options has different eligibility, match, and program requirements. Some funding streams may support specific postadoption services but not others.<sup>6</sup> In addition, each funding stream supports

<sup>6</sup> For additional information on financing options for postadoption services, see Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Funding Permanency Services: A Guide to Leveraging Federal, State, and Local Dollars*, available at <http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/AECFFundingPermanencyServicesFinal.pdf>, and Casey Family Services' *Strengthening Families and Communities: Creative Strategies for Financing Post-Adoption Services*, available at <http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/userfiles/pdf/pub-2003-creative-strategies-report.pdf>

a range of child welfare services beyond postadoption programs. As a result, States must make decisions regarding the appropriate allocation of limited available funding to meet varied programmatic needs.

In addition to the child welfare funding sources listed above, child welfare agencies may be able to collaborate with other State agencies or private service providers to access other Federal funding sources. For example, they may be able to support certain services through funding from the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Community Mental Health Services Block Grant Program, Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program, and others. Several States also tap into a range of State and local funding sources to support postadoption programs.

## Characteristics Critical to the Success of Postadoption Services

Lessons learned across research and practice underscore the following characteristics as essential to postadoption programs:

- **A preventive approach.** Several adoption experts suggest that programs adopt a prevention perspective as one model for services (Smith, 2010; Freundlich, Avery, Gerstenzang, & Munson, 2006.) Too often, services are not available until a crisis occurs and conditions and stresses have become unmanageable (Casey, 2003). Postadoption services can play a key role

in strengthening families before a crisis—by establishing an early foundation for services, helping parents understand what to expect over the course of their child’s development, building their knowledge and skills for dealing with challenges, promoting protective factors (see box), and reversing negative patterns before they become entrenched.

- **Services that are specific to the histories and needs of adoptive children and their families.** While all families face challenges, adoptive families face complex issues that are different from those of families formed biologically. Postadoption services must address the effects of early trauma, separation, and loss, as well as identity issues (Smith, 2010; Freundlich, 2006). Child welfare agencies can work together with service providers to build adoption competence and trauma-informed practices. (For more information, visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at <http://www.nctsnet.org>) Agencies also can work with adoptive parents to advocate for adoption-competent services in schools and the community.
- **Flexible programming with a continuum of services.** Adopted children and youth and their families are not all the same and have diverse needs and concerns that frequently require a multidisciplinary approach and a mix of formal and informal supports (Freundlich, 2006; Zosky et al., 2005; Atkinson & Gonet, 2007).
- **A family systems perspective.** Postadoption services should not focus on “fixing” the problems of the adopted child, but rather must support the family system as a whole (Freundlich, 2006;



National Consortium for Post Legal Adoption Services, 2011). While families may identify a child's behavior or emotions as the primary reason for seeking services, there are often more complex dynamics within the family and environment that need to be addressed (Freundlich, 2006; Smith, 2006). Research and demonstration findings underscore the importance of engaging families through extensive outreach and nonthreatening, empathetic approaches (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2005; Zosky et al., 2005).

- **Culturally competent practices.** Postadoption service providers need to be sensitive to the role of culture, ethnicity, and race in adoptive family dynamics (National Consortium for Post Legal Adoption Services, 2011). Cultural competence is an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures while being aware of one's own cultural worldview. Culturally competent practice involves respect for people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and other diversity factors.
- **Ongoing services.** Adoption is a lifelong process, and its challenges can be unpredictable. Some needs are evident in the immediate postadoption and adjustment phase. Other needs may emerge as an adopted child grows, enters school, reaches adolescence, or transitions to adulthood. Postadoption services can be most relevant to families when they continue to be available beyond the initial postadoption period (Freundlich, 2006; Freundlich, Avery, Gerstenzang, & Munson, 2006; Lenerz, Gibbs, & Barth, 2006).

## THE ROLE OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors are conditions that can help increase the well-being of children and families and mediate or buffer the negative impact of stressful and traumatic experiences. Research has identified a number of protective factors that contribute to resilience (see literature reviews in Benzie & Mychasiuk, 2009; Smith, 2010). These factors can help promote positive outcomes in adoptive families and include the following:

- Warm, nurturing parenting styles and a secure attachment between the child and the adoptive parents
- Parental knowledge of child and youth development and realistic expectations for children who have experienced adoption
- Open family communication patterns
- Parental capacity to cope with stress and effectively deal with challenges
- Concrete supports and access to needed mental health and health services
- Social support and networks that reduce social isolation and provide emotional support and assistance

Over the past decade, these factors have served as a focus for strengthening at-risk families within child maltreatment prevention efforts.<sup>7</sup> Recently, their relevance to adoptive families also has been recognized. For example, Florida has incorporated protective factors in plans to support adoptive families (Florida Office of Adoption and Child Protection, 2010) and Minnesota's Permanency Project assessed changes in protective factors in their evaluation (Elleraas & Turnbull, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For more information on protective factors and child abuse and neglect prevention, see <http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/preventionmonth/factors.cfm>

## Key Steps in Program Development and Implementation

Developing and implementing a postadoption program requires consideration of a variety of factors, including the needs of adoptive families, available staff and resources, relevant policies, and existing program infrastructure. Eight key steps (which may overlap in timing) can help strengthen the development process while also helping to overcome barriers to service use.

- 1. Assess needs.** Developing or expanding postadoption programs should start with a tailored and comprehensive assessment of family needs, existing resources, gaps in services, and collaborative opportunities.
- 2. Engage adoptive parents and adopted persons in the planning and development process.** Getting input from consumers of service—through advisory boards, surveys, and focus groups—will help develop client-driven services that better meet needs and also will promote engagement of families in services when delivered.
- 3. Learn from others.** While there is a scarcity of established evidence-based practice models for postadoption services, there is an informal base of existing programs and experiences to learn from. Visit Child Welfare Information Gateway for information on how other States and localities are addressing postadoption services: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/>

### ADOPTION ASSISTANCE DIRECTORY

To learn more about adoption assistance and postadoption services available in each State, search the Adoption Assistance Directory on Child Welfare Information Gateway's website:

[http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt\\_assistance/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/)

- 4. Secure funding.** While there is no single funding source dedicated to postadoption services, there are a variety of Federal, State, and private sources available. Agencies must decide which mix of funding streams works best for them and the families they serve. It is helpful to establish a well-considered postadoption service plan before funding becomes available. While individual agencies or adoption professionals are not able to access Federal funding streams themselves, they may work with their State Adoption Program Managers<sup>8</sup> to develop a comprehensive postadoption services plan for their State.
- 5. Collaborate.** No single agency can address the wide range of issues and needs of adopted children and youth and their families. The multifaceted nature of family needs requires collaboration across multiple systems (e.g., child welfare, family support, mental health, education). Collaboration can help create a continuum of appropriate services for adoptive families while also leveraging available resources.

<sup>8</sup> To find the State Adoption Program Manager in your State, access the National Foster Care and Adoption Directory at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>

**6. Cultivate qualified personnel.** To assist families after adoption, postadoption programs must recruit and retain staff with expertise in adoption issues. Specialized training (within and across agencies) may be necessary to build a solid understanding of relevant adoption issues as well as cultural competence to address the needs of diverse families. To access information on postadoption training, including postgraduate adoption certificate programs developed by States and universities, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postplacement/training/examples.cfm>

#### ADOPTION COMPETENCY CURRICULUM

The National Resource Center for Adoption offers a training curriculum on common issues and challenges in adoption practice (<http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/acc/home/>). One training module focuses on postadoption services: <http://www.nrcadoption.org/wp-content/uploads/TG-Post-Adoption-Services-4-11.pdf>

**7. Implement and promote services.** After taking time to plan and develop programs that fit family needs, attention will shift to implementation and getting the word out to families. Some agencies send postadoption service announcements to recipients of adoption subsidies while others rely on word of mouth, particularly through support groups. Programs need to remain flexible to adapt over time to shifting needs and resources.

**8. Evaluate services.** Evaluating the outcomes of postadoption services is critical to inform program quality and identify areas for improvement. Evaluation can help build the field's knowledge on which postadoption services work best and for which families. Moreover, evaluations can be a valuable asset in building the case for future funding.

#### LOGIC MODEL BUILDER FOR POSTADOPTION SERVICES PROGRAMS

The Logic Model Builder can be a valuable tool for planning and evaluating a postadoption services program as well as securing funding. The Logic Model Builder can help with the following:

- Developing a logic model—a picture of how a program is expected to work
- Identifying anticipated program outcomes
- Considering evaluation instruments that may be appropriate to measure success
- Visually illustrating how services are expected to lead to short- and long-term outcomes
- Serving as a roadmap for program development, implementation, and evaluation

Visit the Logic Model Builder for Postadoption Services Programs at [http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/logic\\_builder.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/logic_builder.cfm)

## Conclusion

Whatever the circumstances of their adoptions, adopted children and youth need nurturing relationships to help them manage feelings of loss and grief and help them heal. Adopted children and youth and their families need an ongoing mix of services and supports that are family centered, trauma-informed, and responsive to their specific needs. As discussed throughout, postadoption services can benefit adopted people and adoptive families in many ways—helping them to deal with emotional, behavioral, and developmental issues, address the impact of trauma, and achieve healthy family relationships. The long-term outcomes of these services lie not only in strengthening adoption stability and permanency but, moreover, in enhancing family functioning and family and child well-being.

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