

## **Post-Adoption Services**

Post-Adoption Services at Casey Family Services take many forms: counseling sessions with families and children; support groups for parents and kids; workshops on adoption for parents, teachers and mental health and child welfare professionals; advocacy on behalf of adoptive families; support to families in times of crisis; collaboration with community resources. All of these activities are based on basic principles that drive our practice and reflect our beliefs about adoption and what adoptive families need in order to succeed.

We believe:

- Adoption is one way to build a family;
- Adoption is the best plan for most children who cannot be raised by their birth families.
- Adoptive families need and deserve the support of their communities in the form of acceptance, understanding and services.

### **The Casey Family Services Approach**

Casey Family Services Post-Adoption Services (PAS) program grew out of the agency's experience providing assistance to foster families who adopted the children in their care.

Recognizing that the emotional and psychiatric difficulties of foster children did not end when they were adopted, the agency concluded that adoptive families needed continued contact with social workers and access to services to be able to stay together. Because very few public or private agencies offered services to families after their adoptions were finalized, Casey's PAS program began offering post-adoption services in 1992 to any adoptive family in the community.

A needs assessment was conducted as a first step in designing a program model. Interviews were conducted with adoptive parent groups and professionals in the field and research studies related to needs of adoptive families were reviewed.

As a result, a program model was developed that included the following five core components:

- Information and referral
- Counseling
- Support groups
- Education and training
- Advocacy

The program was conceived as a center where adoptive families could come together and connect with other adoptive families and professionals. The intent of the program was to build communities of support for adoptive families among each other, within the professional fields and within their communities.

The post-adoption services program operates in six Casey Family Services divisions, including Bridgeport and Hartford, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. As with all of its child welfare activities, the ultimate goal of Casey's Post-Adoption Services Program is a safe, stable home where children can have the opportunity to grow up into healthy, productive adults who are supportive parents.

Because adoption is a life-long process that affects children and families at different stages of their development, the requests from families and the intensity of the post-adoption services provided vary. A family with very young adopted children may seek advice on how and when to talk to them about adoption. It may be a number of months or years before they contact the program again, when their child has a deeper understanding of adoption and may need some professional counseling to sort through their emerging feelings of grief and loss around their birth family. At the same time, the parents might attend a support group where they meet and share parenting strategies with other adoptive parents in similar situations. And families experiencing serious difficulties--children with a diagnosed mental health need or parents having marital difficulties because of the challenges of parenting a child with special needs--may require a more intensive combination of post-adoption services, including participation in family and individual counseling, advocacy services, and parent and child support groups.

The PAS program is designed to respond to the range of issues that adoptive families seek help with, including ensuring a smooth transition from foster care to adoption for children and families; building family relationships between adopted children and adoptive parents and adopted children and birth siblings; helping adopted children and adoptive parents to cope with the feelings of grief and loss associated with being given up by birth parents or with infertility; searching for self-identity when there may be information gaps in a child's birth history; working with transracial and transcultural adoptive families to ensure that the child's cultural identity is respected and understood; managing challenging and disruptive child behavior at home and school; and dealing with the emotional and physical trauma, like abuse and neglect, experienced by children prior to adoption.

### **Information and Referral**

Some families first contact the PAS program to get information about adoption or to get referrals to other adoption resources in their area. For example, a family who has adopted transracially or transculturally may seek a referral to an African-American church or other cultural institution in their community to develop connections with their child's ethnic or cultural identity. In many cases, a first, exploratory call may be the key to helping a family learn that the issues they are

facing are not unusual. Too often, adoptive families feel at fault—lacking in some way—when their children do not thrive in their care. Uninformed and ill-prepared to either understand or cope with the fall-out from their adopted child’s early trauma, they welcome the knowledge that they are not alone, and that their children’s behavior may be a phase in his or her healing process. Reading lists, information about national associations, or state and local services, public services and ways to access them, community supports and services, all are important to families, and sometimes difficult to find.

### **Assessment and Service Planning**

Other families require more than information. When a family requests services, they are assigned to one of the PAS social workers to begin an assessment. During this process, the social worker and family meet to gather information about the family, the concerns that brought them to the program, and the child’s developmental, educational, medical, psychiatric, and foster care placement history.

Following the assessment, the PAS social workers determine whether the program will be able to meet the family's needs. For example, a family whose child has serious mental health needs not related specifically to adoption that require long-term counseling would be referred to a therapist in the community. In this case, although the family is not receiving counseling from Casey, they can participate in the other post-adoption services, including support groups, parent workshops, and advocacy services.

If the counseling needs are adoption specific and can be addressed with short-term therapy, the PAS social worker and the family develop a service plan that sets specific goals. For example, a goal might be to improve the relationship between the adoptive parents and child. The service plan would include specific steps to reach that goal, including weekly family and individual counseling and participation in support groups and training opportunities.

### **Counseling**

Individual and family counseling constitutes a significant portion of the services offered by Casey's PAS program. Members of the PAS staff are clinical social workers with master’s degrees and expertise in child placement and adoption. Sessions may include individual counseling for the child, family counseling, and/or counseling for the parents.

Counseling is based on a family systems approach and at different points in the process it may involve the adoptive parents, adopted children, other children in the family, the family as a whole, extended family, or the adopted child’s birth family. The counseling service is a specialized service of therapeutic intervention that recognizes individual and family values and goals, is sensitive to cultural differences, accommodates variations in lifestyles, and emphasizes personal growth, development and situational change.

Counseling is goal-oriented and generally ranges from 1 to 20 sessions. Long-term and more intensive mental health needs are referred to other community resources.

The needs of adopted children change as they reach different developmental stages in their lives. At a young age, children begin to understand what adoption means and their parents need to know how to talk with them about it. Generally, between the ages of 7 to 9, children understand that they were adopted because their birth families were unable to care for them. During their adolescent years, they begin to develop their own identity and it is important for them to understand the reasons for their adoption. Older adolescents begin to develop a strong urge to search for their birth families and can sometimes develop fantasies about their birth families that need to be addressed. Casey's PAS program responds to the changing needs of adopted children and their families so they can return for additional counseling services throughout these different stages.

Depending on the ages of the children and concerns of the adoptive family, PAS social workers use different types of counseling. For younger children play therapy, using toys and drawing, helps to get them to act or draw out the issues that they are struggling with. Older children are better able to talk about what they are feeling, but it is important for the PAS social workers to use language that actually relates to their feelings.

Sometimes the counseling involves the parent and child in specific activities—creating life books, for example—that help them communicate about adoption and the child's experience. Through the process, the child develops their identity and the adoptive parents get a better understanding of their child's prior history and feelings about their adoption.

An important component of the counseling services, and Casey's post-adoption services in general, is building strong relationships between the PAS social workers and adoptive families. Many teachers, therapists, and others tend to blame adoptive parents for their children's behavior or difficulties, when these problems are often a result of the trauma children experienced prior to being adopted. The PAS social workers understand that adoptive parents are not to blame. They work to ensure that parents and children know that Casey is there to help them before a problem becomes a crisis.

In Rhode Island, for example, an adoptive family, who first became involved with Casey's PAS program by participating in a support group decided to adopt another child. They took advantage of the PAS program to prepare their family for what might have been a very difficult transition.

### **Support Groups**

Both adoptive families and PAS social workers agree that support groups—for parents or children—are a key component of post-adoption services. The types of groups offered are often determined by a survey of adoptive families in the

community to assess what would be useful to them. Different types of groups include parent-run support groups to talk about the impact adoption has on parenting children; therapist-facilitated support groups on specific topics like parenting a child with an attachment disorder; or a group for parents and preschoolers together to help them talk about adoption by reading stories and drawing.

Many of the Casey divisions offer support groups on parenting challenging children. The participants in these groups may have placed their kids in residential placements, on psychotropic medications, or in day treatment. These groups help parents who are struggling with very difficult behaviors.

In Hartford, a support group was formed after a few adoptive families came in for counseling services to work through their feelings about adoptions that had dissolved because of serious behaviors by teenagers, including violence against their parents and criminal activities. Many of these parents have feelings and experiences that they couldn't share with anyone else, either because people would not believe them or would be horrified by what they have to say. Their experiences create intense feelings of resentment, loneliness and rage that are difficult to express or address. These groups, facilitated by a therapist, provide a safe place where families can work through these issues.

The kids' support groups serve many purposes, including introducing adopted children to other adopted children, providing a safe place where kids can explore adoption-related issues and ask questions, and increasing social skills and self-esteem.

In Bridgeport, Teen Talk is a support group for adopted adolescents that has been meeting on a regular basis for nearly three years. Originally, the group was set up to meet during a school-year semester. But when the initial 14 weeks ended, the group wanted to continue meeting because they were really helping each other. The Teen Talk group gave a presentation, entitled "Teens Talk About Adoption," at the 1999 annual conference of the African American Administrators of the Child Welfare League of America in Washington, D.C. The teens urged administrators to make sure that an adopted child's birth history is obtained from the very beginning and then passed on as a child moves through the child welfare system. They discussed the struggles that adopted children face, such as search issues, birth histories, race, culture, relationships, fears and concerns, and hopes and dreams. They also talked about the importance of their support group, and how it provides a safe place to talk about adoption and an opportunity to be around other teens who share the same questions, feelings, and thoughts.

### **Workshops for Parents**

Workshops for adoptive parents are designed to give them tools to help with specific issues, whether it is talking to their children about their adoptions-- answering questions like "Why do I look different from you?" or "How come I was

given up?" "What was wrong with me?"--or providing parenting strategies to manage specific behaviors, such as fighting, stealing, or lying.

Some of the workshops have a specific focus on training parents how to advocate within the school system for their child's special education needs. The educational advocacy training helps parents understand their rights under federal and state education laws, and how to advocate for an evaluation of their child to determine if they are eligible for special education services. These services may include an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the child.

Funded by federal education money, an IEP is a legal document developed by a multidisciplinary team of teachers, special needs teachers, psychologists, speech and language specialists, and parents that meets once a year to determine what services are necessary for a child's education. The plan might recommend that a child attend a resource room, speech and language therapy, or it might specify that the child needs to sit in a certain place in the classroom. The entire multidisciplinary team has to sign off on the plan. If the parent doesn't sign off, the team continues negotiating until the parent agrees that the plan will meet their child's educational needs.

A recent training session in Rhode Island for adoptive parents on the identification, assessment, and treatment of learning disorders provided an overview of federal and state special education laws, and how to access services and write IEPs. The session was designed to empower parents so they are informed about their rights and their children's rights when they are working with the school system.

Bridgeport PAS staff recently conducted a family training session called "Beyond the Movie Screen and Into the Hearts and Lives of Adopted Children." The session discussed how to use everyday movies, books, and music to help children talk about their adoption experiences. The movies discussed in the workshop were *Losing Isaiah*, *The Lion King*, *Mask and Powder*. Participants split into smaller groups based on which movie they had seen, and each group developed a list of adoption-related themes from that movie. These themes included issues of loss of birth family, of being from a different culture or ethnicity from adoptive parents, and of self-identity and not knowing details of your birth family history.

### **Advocacy**

Casey's post-adoption services work includes three levels of advocacy: case, interagency, and systems. Case advocacy helps adoptive families obtain specific services and resources for their adopted children. Interagency advocacy is when PAS social workers coordinate multiple agencies and services for an adoptive family. Systems advocacy seeks to promote practices and policies that support adoptive families.

Case advocacy involves helping adoptive parents advocate for the needs of their child. Workers help adoptive parents obtain educational, financial, mental health, or

recreational services for their children. This might include helping them apply for Medicaid or other government sources to subsidize the costs of therapy or specialized treatment for their children. In some cases, advocacy involves helping parents whose children need temporary out-of-home placement in residential treatment facilities to evaluate the services provided. In addition to helping parents advocate for appropriate placements, the PAS social workers assist families to prepare for their child's return home.

Much of the case advocacy work is done in schools. Parents are sometimes intimidated by school systems, which have their own language, hierarchies, and perceptions. PAS social workers often attend school meetings with parents to help by asking questions and raising issues about the child's educational plan.

Interagency advocacy often involves coordinating the multiple mental health and social services adoptive families may be receiving. Social workers assist families to bring all treatment providers together to form a treatment team. The team—consisting of the parents, therapists, teachers, former foster parents, adoption workers, and other agency case managers—works with the family to identify goals of the services and meet regularly to determine how to work together to reach those goals.

Casey's systems advocacy seeks to encourage public policies that support adoptive families. In Rhode Island, Casey is a member of the statewide Special Needs Adoption Coalition (SNAC), which is comprised of professionals from public and private adoption agencies, state adoption and foster care workers, and representatives from Rhode Island colleges and universities. By improving collaboration and communication among adoption professionals, the coalition seeks to raise awareness and the level of understanding of impact adoption has on children and families. SNAC activities include working with local colleges and universities to include training in adoption issues in their curriculum, working with the Chief Judge of Family Court around adoption policies and practices in the court system, and creating a central registry of mental health providers who are trained in adoption issues.

Another example of systems advocacy is in Vermont, where, through an adoption opportunities grant, Casey and the Vermont Department of Human Services hired a trainer to provide advocacy training sessions to a group of adoptive parents. The group learned how to advocate to their legislators about the need for services and supports for adoptive families and children, including financial assistance for therapy, respite care, and special educational activities.

### **Professional Training and Community Education**

Casey's PAS professional training and community awareness activities educate the public and mental health and other social service professionals about adoption and the impact it has on children and families. The program aims to help therapists and other clinicians be more skilled in working with adoptive families. As more children

with special needs are adopted from foster care, it is especially important that therapists know about adoption, attachment, and supporting attachment.

The Maine Adoption Guides program--a collaborative post-adoption services program of Casey, the Maine Department of Human Services, and the University of Southern Maine--concentrated its training efforts on raising awareness about adoption among child and family service providers throughout the state. More than 200 mental health clinicians, social workers, and other professionals were trained by teams of an adoption caseworker, an adoptive parent, and a therapist. The focus of the training was on the dynamics of a child's birth history and adoption, and the impact those issues have on both children and families.

Many times parents, teachers, and others are not aware of the many ways that the trauma--physical or sexual abuse, multiple foster placements, or fetal alcohol syndrome--a child suffers prior to adoption can affect their behavior. Some of the professional training sessions offered by Casey are facilitated by adoption experts like Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao, author of *The Family of Adoption*, and Dr. Dan Hughes, author of *Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Troubled Children*. In Vermont, for example, Dr. Hughes provides monthly training sessions for therapists and mental health professionals on working with children who have attachment issues and, consequently, have a very difficult time trusting adults and forming loving relationships with their adoptive families. The goal is to increase the number of clinicians throughout the state who are able to treat adoptive children with attachment issues.

In Bridgeport, the post-adoption program is providing a series of training sessions funded through a federal Adoption Opportunities grant, which is a partnership of Casey Family Services Bridgeport Division, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, and the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents. One daylong session was led by Dr. Pavao, who discussed clinical issues in adoption with local clinicians and therapists. She also gave a presentation to adoption workers in the Connecticut Department of Children and Families on the importance of their role as keepers of children's history as they move through the child welfare system and on helping families and children prepare for the "lifelong journey of adoption." There is also a series of workshops for adoptive and pre-adoptive families on how to manage the process of transitioning from foster care to adoption.

### **Families and Fun**

Casey's structured post-adoption services are complemented by informal activities, like picnics, parties, and other family outings. Just getting adopted kids together with each other can be therapeutic. They bond with the common thread of being adopted and it is good for them. Adoptive parents are especially appreciative of the informal as well as formal services.