



Strengthening
Families
Communities &

**An Approach to
Post-Adoption Services**
A White Paper
Executive Summary

Casey Family Services
The Casey Center
for Effective
Child Welfare Practice

Post-Adoption Services

Casey Family Services, the direct service arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, believes that children need and deserve stable families and strong communities for their healthy growth and development. When children are not able to live with their birth family, every effort should be made to ensure that they have the opportunity to grow up in a stable and permanent family.

This White Paper examines policy and practice aimed at providing family stability and permanency for children through adoption. To set the context, the paper examines issues and trends in adoption today, identifies the needs of children waiting for adoption, describes the growing importance of post-adoption services for children and families, highlights elements of responsive post-adoption services programs and presents a set of post-adoption principles as a foundation for policy and practice. Recommendations are made for both policy and practice that we believe will expand the pool of adoptive families and will strengthen and preserve adoptive placements.

Recent policy initiatives have resulted in significant increases in the numbers of children being adopted. In 1996, President Clinton's "Adoption 2002" initiative promoted a doubling of the number of children being adopted from foster care by 2002. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) mandated changes in child welfare practice designed to ensure more timely movement of children through the foster care system and into permanent adoptive homes, when reunification with birth family was not possible within set time frames. The number of children being adopted in recent years has increased dramatically as these policies have been implemented. For example, in fiscal year 1999 there was a 28 percent increase in the number of children being adopted from foster care from fiscal year 1998. At the same time, as more children are being adopted, more children are entering the pool of those "waiting to be adopted." In March 2000, a total of 134,000 children were in this category – an 11 percent increase from the 118,000 in September of 1999.

The focus of these policy initiatives has been on moving children more rapidly out of the foster care system so that they do not spend critical years of their childhood without a permanent family. While this is an important and positive goal, it is equally important to ensure that the many adoptions that are taking place will be permanent and will not result in a revolving door back into foster care. The children who are waiting to be adopted from the foster care system often experience physical, emotional and behavioral problems resulting from their histories of abuse, neglect, abandonment, chaotic and unstable living environments, and the witnessing of domestic and community violence. Adoptive parents often face significant and ongoing challenges in the day-to-day parenting of these children and in coping with the impact on all family members. Research has found that the children at greatest risk for their adoptions to unravel are those who are older, have histories of serious abuse or neglect, and have had multiple foster home placements. The risk of adoption disruption is also higher for those children who have behavioral difficulties and/or emotional problems.

Only limited attention has been paid to the need for ongoing services and supports for adoptive families as part of these policy initiatives. A broad array of services and supports for the family prior to, during, and after the adoption can help to stabilize and preserve adoptive placements and can help in recruitment efforts. Assurance of the availability of services and support after adoption has been found to play a critical role in many prospective adoptive parents' decisions to go forward with the adoption of children in foster care. Unfortunately, these services and supports are not readily or consistently available or easily accessible in communities across the country.

Casey Family Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have long recognized the importance of stability and permanence for the healthy growth and development of children. Since 1991, Casey Family Services has been providing post-adoption services to families

in many of the states in which it operates. In 1995, Casey Family Services held a regional conference on post-adoption services, bringing together the leading practitioners across the country to share information about their work. Many participants suggested a follow-up conference. Interest in a national conference grew after the passage of ASFA because of the increasing numbers of children being adopted and the concern of professionals about the long-term success of these placements.

Thus, in December 2000, Casey hosted a national conference on post-adoption services, *Strengthening Families and Communities: An Approach to Post-Adoption Services*. Over 500 participants, including state child welfare officials, adoption program managers, judges, state legislators and representatives from court improvement projects, child advocacy organizations, private agency associations, and adoptive parent organizations were in attendance at this important national event. Two policy roundtables were held with attendance averaging 60 people at each session. Roundtable participants discussed the following three principles and gave their views on policy priorities to ensure successful adoptions:

1. Adoption-competent services and supports should be available to all adoptive families who need them, regardless of the circumstances of the adoption.
2. A broad network of adoption-competent services and supports should be available in communities, ranging from prevention and early intervention services to intensive in-home or residential treatment services.
3. Adoption-competent services and supports should be available as they are needed by adoptive families at various times throughout a child's development, when adoption-related issues surface and impact the child and family.

Our policy framework is based on the belief that the federal government has a continuing responsibility to support families who come forward to adopt children from our public child welfare system. Since these are children who often have special needs, we believe that the services provided while they are in foster care should be continued if they transition to adoption. This extension of services will eliminate certain disincentives that would occur if transition to adoption meant losing critical forms of assistance and support.

Our past 10 years of experience in providing post-adoption services, combined with the knowledge of current trends and issues in adoption and discussion with professionals and adoptive parents from across the country, leads to the following key policy and practice recommendations:

Policy Recommendations to Promote Systems Change

1. *Recommendation:* Adoption subsidies should be provided based on the special needs of children, not on the eligibility criteria of their adoptive parents.
2. *Recommendation:* All states should comply with the Interstate Compact on Adoption Medical Assistance to assure continuity of adoption subsidy assistance and health care coverage for children when their adoptive families move across state lines.
3. *Recommendation:* Flexible federal funds should be accessible to states to continue and/or develop a seamless, comprehensive array of adoption-competent, community-based services and supports to meet the ongoing needs of children and their adoptive families.
4. *Recommendation:* An array of federally and state funded adoption-competent comprehensive mental health services should be easily accessible to adoptive families. The length and intensity of services should be determined on a case-by-case basis depending on the needs of the child and family, not arbitrary time limits established by Medicaid or private insurance companies.

5. *Recommendation:* The federal government should develop policy that ensures adoptive families access to residential treatment services, as appropriate, without having to first relinquish custody of their children. States should be encouraged to use a mix of existing community-based mental health services funding to maintain adoptive families' legal responsibility for and involvement in their children's treatment.
6. *Recommendation:* The federal government should require that states track the entry and re-entry to foster care of children adopted through the public child welfare system and other means.
7. *Recommendation:* Public and private child welfare agencies should collaborate to engage in a public education initiative to increase the understanding of adoption-related issues and the benefits of post-adoption services.

Practice Recommendations to Enhance the Design and Delivery of Post-Adoption Services

1. *Recommendation:* States should provide training and information to service professionals to strengthen their understanding of adoption and the issues confronting adopted children and their families, and to enhance their skills to effectively assist them.
2. *Recommendation:* States should provide complete and accurate information about adoption subsidies prior to adoption and clear processes for review and approval of subsidy changes after adoption finalization.
3. *Recommendation:* Public and private organizations should strengthen their collaborative efforts with adoptive families and other community resources to focus on enhancing post-adoption services.

4. *Recommendation:* Public and private agencies should expand the knowledge base about post-adoption services through greater financial and programmatic support for research and evaluation activities.
5. *Recommendation:* Child welfare agencies should seek feedback from adoptive parents to strengthen prospective adoptive parent training programs that enhance their understanding of the needs of children who are adopted and better prepare them for the opportunities and challenges ahead.
6. *Recommendation:* Child welfare agencies should engage adoptive parents and adopted youth and young adults in the design and delivery of post-adoption services.
7. *Recommendation:* States should make greater use of technology to create centralized information systems on existing services and supports for adoptive families at the local level.

It is clear from research, practice and, most importantly, from adoptive parents themselves that post-adoption services and supports are critical to promoting successful adoptions. Casey Family Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation stand ready to provide ongoing assistance to help states develop and expand their services and supports to adoptive families.

For a copy of the entire White Paper and for more information about Casey Family Services' Post-Adoption Services Program and technical assistance, please contact Sarah Greenblatt, director of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice.

Casey Family Services
127 Church Street
New Haven, CT 06510
Telephone: 203.401.6900
888.799.KIDS
Fax: 203.401.6901
www.caseyfamilyservices.org

The Annie E. Casey Foundation
701 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
Telephone: 410.547.6600
Fax: 410.547.6624
www.aecf.org



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