

# Accessing Adoption Support and Preservation Services

Provided both before and after adoption, adoption support and preservation services can help you and your family with a wide range of issues. These services are available for everything from learning how to explain adoption to your preschooler, to helping address the needs of a child who has experienced early childhood abuse and trauma, to supporting your adopted teen's search for identity. All family members can benefit from some type of support. This factsheet outlines the types of services available, their benefits, and ways to find services in your area.

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## Various Terms for Support Services

Across the country, a variety of terms are used to refer to services and forms of support for people who have been adopted and their families. You may hear agencies use terms such as “postadoption services,” “adoption support and preservation services,” “postplacement services,” and “family support.”

For this publication, we primarily use the term “adoption support and preservation services” as a way to align with common terminology and to emphasize the purpose of the services. We also include some references to “postadoption services,” given its continued use by some agencies. Depending on where you live and the specific agencies you work with, you may hear services referred to by other terms.

## ISSUES ADOPTIVE FAMILIES OFTEN ENCOUNTER

For many years, postadoption services were commonly viewed as services that were provided after the legal finalization of the adoption—and in some cases only for short periods of time. However, adoptive families and adoption professionals recognize that a full range of support is necessary to ensure well-being, long-term stability, and true permanency for children who have been adopted and their families.

Adoption affects people who have been adopted and their families in many ways over the course of their lifetime. Several issues—such as loss and identity development—affect all adoptive families, while other experiences may depend on the child's and family's background and the type of adoption. Common challenges for which adoptive families typically seek support and services follow.

**Loss and grief.** All children who have been adopted, even those adopted as infants, experience some level of separation and loss from their family of origin. They may grieve as they come to realize the role that adoption has played in their lives. They may also struggle with feelings of abandonment as they try to understand why they were placed for adoption and how that affects who they are and the person they hope to become. These feelings may appear and reappear at different stages of life, even when their adoption and family life is a positive experience. Children who have been adopted may need support working through conflicting feelings, mourning their losses, and understanding their experiences in developmentally appropriate ways. Adoptive parents may encounter their own feelings of loss and grief, which may stem from infertility or differences between expectations and the realities of adoption and parenting. For some adoptive parents, these issues may cause strains in their marriages or partnerships. For others, it may lead to depression.

**Trust and attachment.** Any child separated from their family of origin has experienced a break in attachment. Adoption requires the development of new attachments and bonds. Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, foster care, or institutionalization may have difficulty trusting and connecting with their new family. These children may need help building healthy relationships. They may also need help understanding that they can build new relationships without having to end their existing relationships and attachments. Developing new relationships doesn't mean they are replacing other important people and relationships in their lives.

**Identity formation.** The process of identity development can be more complex for children who have been adopted, regardless of when they were adopted. This process may be further complicated if the child's race or birth culture differs from that of the adoptive family. Teens, in particular, may experience identity confusion as they confront the primary questions of adolescence and consider how they are similar to or different from their adoptive parents and birth parents. Teens may struggle with questions such as, "Who am I?", "How am I different from my parents?", or "Which of their values will I take as my own?"

**Connections with family of origin.** At some point in their lives, many people who have been adopted want information about or to reconnect with their birth family. Social networking sites and apps (e.g., Facebook, Snapchat) connect people in new, more immediate ways. While these tools can help accelerate a search for members of one's family of origin, this faster pace of contact can sometimes be emotionally overwhelming to participants if they are not prepared. Think about how to set safe and appropriate boundaries for social media use—for you, your child, and other family members—to minimize the potential privacy and safety risks. For more information, view the Information Gateway factsheet [Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers](#), which provides tips for parents who want to help their children use social media safely.

**Challenges due to early experiences.** Children who have been abused, neglected, placed in foster care, institutionalized, or exposed prenatally to drugs and alcohol may have ongoing emotional, developmental, physical, or behavioral difficulties. You may see some of these difficulties reflected in the following ways:

- **Effects of early childhood trauma.** Research shows that early traumatic experiences, such as abuse or neglect, can affect a child's early brain development, which can have consequences for how a child behaves, expresses emotions, forms relationships, and copes with stress. The effects of trauma on development vary from child to child and may not appear until years later or may increase a child's mental health needs. To learn more, explore Information Gateway's [Child Maltreatment and Brain Development: A Primer for Caregivers](#).
- **Health issues and developmental delays.** Children who have been neglected or have spent more than a few months in an institutional setting may have missed out on important developmental activities due to a lack of stimulation and proper nutrition. They may have difficulties with eating, sleeping, speech, and forming healthy attachments. Additionally, children may also have developmental delays, disabilities, and other medical needs due to other health conditions (e.g.,

Down syndrome, spina bifida, etc.). As a parent, you may also face challenges meeting your child's needs related to a specific health-care issue or incomplete medical records/information. You may find it helpful to seek an assessment by an adoption-knowledgeable physician and may need ongoing health services to support children with developmental delays and/or health-related needs.

**School issues.** Some children who have been adopted experience learning delays or behavioral problems that affect how they do in school. If you see your child struggling in school, you can work with your child's teacher or other school personnel to provide specific support to your child. You have the right to [request that your child be evaluated for a disability and their eligibility for special education services](#). If your child has a learning disability and is eligible for special education, school staff must work with parents to develop an [Individualized Education Program](#) (IEP), which identifies services that will be provided to help the child meet educational goals. The National Council for Adoption created a [comprehensive handout for adoptive parents seeking school-based support](#) that includes links to guides, factsheets, and sample documents to help families understand special education evaluations, IEPs, and more.

**Other issues.** Different types of adoptions may raise additional issues and service needs. For example:

- **Open adoption.** Many families are participating in a range of openness in adoption in which a birth parent or other birth relative(s) continues to have some contact with the adoptive family after the adoption. Adoptive families, families of origin, and children or youth who have been adopted may need agency support in building relationships among family members, navigating appropriate roles, and setting boundaries.
- **Adoption from foster care.** All children adopted from foster care have experienced some level of trauma. Families adopting children from foster care need information on parenting a child who has been abused or neglected and helping them heal from these past traumatic experiences; the needs of children at different developmental stages; or, if they were foster parents, on making the transition from foster to adoptive families. (See Information Gateway's [Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption](#).) In many cases, adopting a child from foster care means that your child remembers his or her family of origin, so there may be additional dynamics for adoptive parents to navigate, including talking with your child about his or her memories of life before adoption and helping them understand that it's okay to love and feel connected to both his or her adoptive family and family of origin. In addition, relatives and kin who adopt their relative children may need support around their changing relationships and family roles. (Find out more by visiting the Information Gateway [Kinship Care web section](#).)
- **Transracial/transcultural adoption.** Many families adopt children from racial or cultural backgrounds that differ from their own. Given the importance of promoting their child's heritage and supporting and embracing their child's racial or cultural identity, parents may seek related educational resources or learning opportunities. This may include speaking with neighbors or coworkers or visiting houses of worship that share your child's racial or cultural background.

- **Intercountry adoption.** For families that adopt children from another country, there are potential implications from changes in U.S. policy and practices related to citizenship and documentation of their children's legal status. For example, families may need assistance ensuring that they have their children's U.S. citizenship status established with all necessary supporting documentation. Learn more about intercountry adoption on the [U.S. Department of State website](#).

## CHANGING NEEDS FOR SUPPORT AT DIFFERENT AGES AND DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Most of the time, children who have been adopted are not thinking about adoption and its complexities. Like other children, they are busy with schoolwork, sports, and social events. But there are developmental stages as well as milestones and events that can trigger emotional or behavioral responses or prompt new questions and thoughts related to being adopted. As you think about your child's development, it's important to keep in mind that experiences of trauma, abuse, and neglect can affect how and when children reach various developmental stages.

**Developmental stages.** Children understand and feel differently about their adoption at different points in their life. For example, children adopted as infants may first learn about their adoption story as toddlers or young children. When entering school, a child may become aware that most children were not adopted and may be challenged to respond to questions and comments from peers. During adolescence, as youth go through the normal process of exploring identity issues and independence, they may have new questions about their families of origin and their relationships, and they may begin searching for relatives. Additionally, as people who are adopted become parents or become old enough to consider parenting, they may experience desires to reconnect with birth relatives or know more about their genetic history. Consequently, people who are adopted have questions, concerns, and needs that often change over time.

**Milestones and events.** In addition to developmental stages, multiple milestones and events, such as the ones below, can trigger adoption issues and tap into powerful emotions:

- Birthdays of the child who was adopted and his or her siblings, parents, or other relatives
- Anniversaries of placement into foster care, an orphanage, or the adoptive family; or the date of adoption finalization
- Holidays and ceremonies (especially Mother's Day and Father's Day, but any holiday or event that involves family gatherings and sentiment)
- School projects in which a child is asked to talk about his or her family, such as "family tree" assignments, the history behind his or her name, or identifying inherited family traits
- A doctor's visit in which a person who is adopted is asked to supply medical history information
- Adoptive mother's pregnancy, birth of a child, or adoption of a sibling
- Divorce
- Accessing your child's original birth certificate or your child hearing news about changes in laws regarding being able to access original birth certificates (e.g., when there is media coverage of policy debates about whether to allow people who are adopted access to their birth certificates)

- Contact with a birth relative, whether unexpected or planned
- Deployment of a military family member
- Death of a family member or pet

During these times, you should watch for signs indicating that your child—or you—needs special support. Signs might include changes in mood, eating habits, or sleeping habits. Parents can prepare children by discussing the possibility that these triggers may cause a reaction. Let your children know that you understand what is happening and will be there to help, including getting additional support if needed (see the section below on therapy and counseling services). For more information about how to meet your child's needs at various ages and developmental stages, see our tip sheets [Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler](#), [Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child](#), and [Parenting Your Adopted Teenager](#).

### **Adoption and Customary Adoption of American Indian/Alaska Native Children**

For American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children being adopted—whether through adoption involving a termination of parental rights or through customary adoption—it is important to help children maintain connections to their culture, especially for children adopted by parents who are not members of the Tribal community. In many cases, adoptions involving AI/AN children will have the Federal Indian Child Welfare Act apply, which includes multiple requirements for Tribal approval of the adoption. For more information, visit the Information Gateway [Tribal Child Welfare webpage](#).

## **IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A RANGE OF SERVICES TO SUPPORT ADOPTIONS**

Children in adoptive families do better when their families are fully prepared and supported to address needs or issues as they arise, rather than waiting for challenges to reach a crisis level. Preadoption services and support, such as family and child preparation both on adoption in general and on child- and family-specific information, can help promote the long-term stability of an adoption. The following two key concepts for families are important to keep in mind: 1) Preadoption services are important for supporting the stability of an adoption, and 2) postadoption services can include both preventative services (e.g., preventing instability, disruption, or dissolution<sup>1</sup>) as well as intensive services that help with maintaining the stability of an adoption. Families who are preparing to adopt or who have adopted may find it helpful to find out about what supports and services are available at various points in the process to help promote your family's long-term stability and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adoption disruption is when an adoption ends before finalization. Adoption dissolution is when the legal relationship between the adoptive parent(s) and the child who was adopted is severed after finalization.

<sup>2</sup> For more indepth information about a framework on a full range of adoption support services, see the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and [Preservation's Permanency Continuum Framework](#).

## TYPES OF SERVICES

The wide range of issues that can be addressed with adoption support and preservation services means the services themselves must be diverse. The following are the most common types of adoption support and preservation services, including those that families often identify as most helpful.

### PREPARATION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

It's crucial for you and your family to understand, to the best of your ability, your child's history and background, including accessing educational and medical records and information about his or her experiences before being adopted. Obtaining this important knowledge will help you be better prepared to understand and meet your child's specific needs. To learn more, see Information Gateway's publication [Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adopted Child](#).

For families who adopt through intercountry adoption, accessing detailed background information may be particularly challenging. You can still learn about trends and patterns often seen in children adopted from the same country or similar situations. Parents can also connect with services that provide information about their child's needs and earlier life experiences even in the absence of detailed medical and social histories. For example, there are several clinics around the country that have expertise in medical and developmental issues in children adopted from other countries and can conduct assessments to help adoptive families be more aware of their children's developmental progress. You can search online to find international adoption clinics in your area.

**Support groups.** Support groups can offer both adoptive parents and youth valuable opportunities to interact and share with others who have had similar experiences. Groups provide members with support systems, social interaction, and information resources. Groups may restrict their focus to families or children who share certain characteristics (such as children adopted from a specific country), or they may include all adoptive families in their programming.

- **Adoptive parent support groups.** Often organized by adoptive parent volunteers, support groups bring together experienced and new adoptive parents to share experiences in a nonjudgmental atmosphere. Parent groups offer a variety of services—discussion groups, social activities, family events, workshops, newsletters, websites, community referrals, and more. Groups exist throughout the country and vary extensively, from small community playgroups for parents of toddlers to large regional groups.
- **Children and youth support groups.** For many children who are adopted, a peer support group is their first chance to interact with others who were also adopted and see that their experiences and feelings related to adoption are normal. Groups provide a safe environment where children can talk about their birth and adoptive families and share their fears and concerns. Some groups pair older adopted youth as mentors for younger children.

- **Online support groups.** Available 24 hours a day and bridging geographical distances, internet support groups, blogs, and social media pages or private groups have become a popular way for adoptive families to access support and information from people who understand their journey and experiences. Other forms of technology (e.g., text messaging, video conferencing) are increasingly being used to help connect adoptive parents or youth who have been adopted. As with any internet activity, you should take precautions to protect safety and privacy for you and your family members. Many of these groups are private or closed and have an administrator who manages the membership and moderates discussion to help ensure the group remains safe and that information shared within the group is appropriate and kept confidential (when needed). For additional information about using Facebook groups to provide support to adoptive families, see the [Families Rising website](#).

### **Resources to Find Services and Additional Information**

[National Foster Care & Adoption Directory](#) (Information Gateway)

[Database of Parent Support Groups](#) (Families Rising)

[FosterClub](#)

[Foster Care Alumni of America](#)

[Support for Parents Who Adopt From Foster Care](#) (AdoptUSKids)

[Developing a Parent-to-Parent Support Network](#) (North American Council on Adoptable Children [now Families Rising])

**Camps, social events, and heritage activities.** Overnight camps or retreats are a way for members of adoptive families to connect not only with others like themselves but also with their own family members. Such events, which may take place over a weekend or a full week, often combine adoption and ethnic heritage support with traditional camping activities. Attendees frequently form powerful friendships with other children who were adopted, and they provide each other with support all year long. Other adoptive family activities may include picnics, group outings, recreational activities, and celebrations of cultural events, as well as heritage tours of home countries.

**Therapy/counseling.** As mentioned above, members of adoptive families may need professional assistance as concerns or problems arise. Needs will differ from family to family and may include the following:

- Guidance on children's attachment, trust, emotional, or behavioral issues
- Assistance in working through the impact of adoption on the family and strains in marriages or partnerships and other relationships
- Support in working through feelings when the reality of adoption does not match expectations

- Healing from traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect
- Permanency support that addresses parent-child conflicts

Counseling and therapeutic services can help children learn to address multiple challenges. They can also help you understand your child's behavior, especially as it relates to early trauma, and identify strategies to meet your child's needs and allow healing to occur. Timely intervention by a skilled professional can often prevent concerns from becoming more serious problems. The type and duration of therapy will vary. Some families need a therapist's help only for a short period; others build a relationship over years, accessing help as needed. There are many different types of treatment approaches and professionals offering therapy. It is particularly important to work with therapists who are familiar with the unique issues and dynamics of adoption (often referred to as "adoption-competent" professionals) and involve parents in the process.

### **Resources to Find Services and Additional Information**

[National Directory of Adoption-Competent Professionals](#) (Center for Adoption Support and Education)

[National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services](#)

[Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists](#) (Information Gateway)

[Psychologist Locator](#) (American Psychological Association)

**Respite care.** All parents need some time for themselves. This may be especially true for parents of children who require high levels of attention. Children who have experienced trauma or have attachment challenges may also find it helpful to get brief time away from their parents. Respite care is planned or emergency care provided to a child with special needs in order to provide temporary relief to family caregivers. It is meant for families with children who require more skilled care than babysitters can provide, foster parents whose program requires a licensed provider, or families going through a crisis of their own. Respite care may be provided in your home or another selected site. To find out more about respite services available in your area, search online or ask your caseworker or other adoptive families nearby. Learn more about respite care and access the National Respite Locator on the [ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center website](#).

**Information resources.** Service providers may offer, or provide referrals to, useful information and resources that respond to adoptive family members' questions and help them understand their child's needs and the ways that adoption may affect the family over many years. Adoptive parents need to be equipped with relevant ongoing training, information, and development of knowledge and skills so they continue to have the capacity to meet their children's needs across their children's developmental stages. It's normal for adoptive parents to encounter new situations or topics you want to learn about as you and your children face new experiences. You may find it helpful to

explore a variety of resources, including books, magazine, websites, workshops, conferences, and other sources of information. Accessing this information can help you both get reference information when you need it (e.g., using a reliable website) and learn from others who have experience with adoption (e.g., connecting with other adoptive parents at trainings and conferences).

### **Resources to Find Services and Additional Information**

[National Foster Care & Adoption Directory](#) (Information Gateway)

[Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler](#) (Information Gateway)

[Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child](#) (Information Gateway)

[Parenting Your Adopted Teenager](#) (Information Gateway)

[Center for Adoption Support and Education](#)

**Openness, search, and reunion.** State agencies and other organizations may help adoptive parents, families of origin, and people who have been adopted negotiate postadoption contact agreements or access information and adoption records, in accordance with State laws. Some will provide additional services to arrange and prepare for reunions and mediate the relationships that may form. They can also answer questions and help children who have been adopted, adoptive family members, and birth family members process the powerful emotions that may surface during search and reunion.

### **Resources to Find Services and Additional Information**

[Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families](#) (Information Gateway)

[Access to Adoption Records](#) (Information Gateway)

[Adoption Search and Reunion](#) (Information Gateway)

[Searching for Birth Relatives](#) (Information Gateway)

**Financial assistance and waivers for youth.** For some youth adopted from foster care, there may be financial assistance, waived fees, or other cost savings available for higher-education opportunities. Youth who were in foster care on or after their 13th birthday can file as independent and don't have to include their adoptive parents' income on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For additional information, visit the [Federal Student Aid website](#). Additionally, some States offer college tuition reductions or waivers for youth with foster care experience. To learn more, view the [How to Cover College Expenses for Your Child Adopted From Foster Care webpage](#) on the Families Rising website.

## ADDITIONAL SERVICES

Many other kinds of adoption support and preservation services are available to your family. The table below provides information on where to find more information about accessing those services.

### Resources to Find Services and Additional Information

[Post-Adoption Support for Adoptees & Adoptive Families](#) (National Council for Adoption)

[Post-Adoption and Guardianship Support Services in Your State](#) (AdoptUSKids)

[Adoption & Guardianship Assistance by State](#) (Information Gateway)

[Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted From Foster Care](#) (Information Gateway)

## FINDING SERVICES

Details about support services in a particular area are available from local, State, Tribal, and national information resources. In general, to find information about adoption support and preservation services, you can do the following:

- Contact your State's adoption assistance specialist or post permanency services and support contact. These individuals are typically employed by the State human services or child welfare agency and experts on postadoption services and programs in each State or Territory. This information is available in Information Gateway's [National Foster Care & Adoption Directory](#). To find the appropriate contact within a Tribe, search online for the Tribe's social services or human services department.
- Call the adoption service provider that arranged your child's adoption and ask for referrals. You can also call other public and private adoption agencies in your area and ask to receive information on adoption support and preservation events and services. While some services may be restricted to families who adopted through the agency, many will be open to all adoptive families.
- Contact parent support groups for information about their events and local organizations that provide services.
- Find out if your employer offers workplace support groups, online networks, or referral services for adoptive parents.
- Search online for national and regional adoption support and preservation services databases and provider listings.
- Ask family doctors, other adoptive families, or parent support groups for recommendations. Other adoptive families can be a great source of information both on service providers and how to access and make good use of those services, based on their own experiences.

## PAYING FOR SERVICES

Some adoption support and preservation services are free of charge, while others require some payment. However, depending on the type of adoption and the needs of your child, there may be assistance available for some adoptive families to help cover the costs (e.g., reimbursement or costs being covered by your adoption assistance payments).

**Federal and State adoption assistance for children adopted from a public agency.** Many children adopted from public agencies qualify for adoption assistance (subsidies), which can often be used to pay for adoption support and preservation services. An adoption assistance agreement should clearly describe the types of adoption support and preservation services (e.g., respite care, counseling) that will be reimbursed. State assistance may cover expenses not covered by Federal programs, particularly medical assistance (Medicaid); direct payments to meet a child's special physical, mental, or emotional needs; and emergency assistance. Eligibility requirements vary by State. For more information, visit the [Adoption Assistance webpage](#) on the Families Rising website.

### Adoption Tax Credits

Adoptive families may be able to claim an adoption tax credit for their Federal—and possibly State—taxes. The Federal adoption tax credit allows families to claim up to \$13,460 (as of 2017), with adjustments based on income. For more details on the adoption tax credit, visit the [Internal Revenue Service website](#) and view the Families Rising's guidance on [how to claim the adoption tax credit](#).

**Health-care and mental health-care benefits.** Families with an adoption assistance agreement may be able to access Medicaid to cover certain health and mental health needs. Summaries of State policies on available adoption assistance programs and services, including medical assistance, are available on the [Information Gateway website](#). A listing of [State medical assistance specialists](#) is also accessible. In addition, some health insurance companies and health maintenance organizations may offer benefits that can be used for health or mental health services. Adoptive parents can check on the specific coverage with their insurance provider.

**Employer-supported benefits.** Some companies may provide employer benefits, such as information resources or referrals and financial reimbursement for adoption-related activities. To find out if your company offers adoption assistance, review its human resources benefits handbook or contact your company's benefits department. Additionally, although designed for employers, an [adoption-friendly workplace guide](#), developed by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, can also help prospective or new adoptive parents understand common workplace adoption benefits and better navigate conversations with their employer about available supports.

**Conference, seminar, and educational event fees.** Scholarships are sometimes available to help with the cost of attending adoption conferences and seminars, particularly for families who adopted through public agencies. Contact each event's organizer(s) to inquire about available support opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Adoption is a lifelong experience for a child and family. It is normal to face challenges; some challenges may even appear long after the adoption has been finalized. Adoption support and preservation services offer guidance, support, and opportunities to connect with other families who understand your experiences. These services contribute to positive outcomes by helping address the common issues encountered by adoptive families and promoting healthy family relationships.

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