

# How Child Welfare Systems Are Providing Family Support: Support for Youth

A key part of providing support services that meet the needs of foster, adoptive, and kinship families is having an array of services specifically for children and youth. By helping children connect with peers who have had similar experiences, get needed therapeutic services, build healthy relationships with caring adults, learn more about their culture, and experience other beneficial forms of support, child welfare systems can help meet children's needs while also helping promote improved outcomes for children and their family.

The information below describes multiple forms and categories of support for children and youth. Although this information presents distinct descriptions, some of these services and forms of support may be delivered in ways that overlap or fully combine the services. As with all services for youth, it's important to provide services and support in developmentally appropriate ways, not just based on the age of each child or teen.

## Categories of support and services

- **Child or youth assessment** — To ensure children and youth have the best chance to succeed, a thorough, trauma-informed assessment helps identify their strengths, their needs, and services their family may need to help them heal and grow. Whenever possible, the professionals conducting the assessment should meet with caregivers to explain the results and help connect the family to needed services. The Children's Trauma Assessment Center at Western Michigan University provides a comprehensive neurodevelopmental assessment of the impact of trauma on children and informs families and caseworkers about the assessment results. Following the assessment, staff use an interdisciplinary team approach to develop findings and recommendations. They give caregivers a written report containing the assessment results and explaining the child's behavior from a trauma perspective.
- **Child preparation** — Services to prepare youth for permanency, whether reunification, adoption, or guardianship, can help promote stability and smoother transitions. Adoption Network Cleveland prepares children for adoption by helping them develop coping skills, build strengths, and address divided loyalties. The organization offers a "Get Real" peer support group for teens waiting to be adopted and works with youth on the production of "Digital Me" videos that can be used to recruit an adoptive family.
- **Mentoring** — Connecting children with mentors can help them experience the benefits of having additional caring adults in their lives, including helping them get more experience developing healthy relationships with adults.

Mentors can also help children build their self-esteem, interpersonal skills, and vision for their future. Children are most often mentored by adults—sometimes including people who have personal experience with foster care or adoption—who serve as safe and healthy role models. As part of a broader set of services, Fostering Healthy Futures in Colorado connects children with graduate student interns in behavioral health fields, such as social work or psychology, from a nearby university as mentors.

- **Peer support and connections to other youth** — Peer support helps normalize the experiences of children, youth, and families as they make connections with others living in similar circumstances or with similar experiences. In Bethany Christian Services' ADOPTS program, children and youth attend six weeks of support groups where they learn to build social skills, enhance self-concept, and develop healthy relationships. Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis, MO, offers skill-building support groups for older youth (ages 13 to 18) who have been or are preparing to be adopted.
- **Support connecting with siblings and other birth family members** — Special services to help children remain connected to birth family members, including siblings, support reunification and ensure children maintain connections that are critically important. The Native American Youth and Family Center in Oregon offers a monthly gathering with meals and activities that enables children and youth who are in foster or kinship care to visit, have fun, and spend time with their siblings, caregivers, and birth family members in a safe environment.
- **Therapeutic services** — Helping youth address their experiences with trauma and develop ways to cope and heal can help them be more emotionally healthy in the short term and achieve better outcomes in the long term. Therapeutic services can take many forms, including individual therapy for a child or youth and group-based interventions to help children participate in support groups focused on developing healthy relationships and social skills. As part of a combined approach to helping children heal from grief and loss while doing intensive family finding as a permanency strategy, Anu Family Services helps children deal with their trauma history by having a permanence specialist use the 3-5-7 Model to help children and youth work through their grief and loss and improve their emotional well-being. Bethany Christian Services' ADOPTS program provides individualized therapy involving 12 to 18 therapy sessions for children or youth and their parents over a period of 16 weeks, emphasizing how they can heal from past trauma. Children learn skills for managing emotions, enhancing relationships, handling social situations, and improving self-identity.
- **Cultural activities** — Events and activities that help children stay connected—or develop new connections—to their culture can help them with their identity and ties to their community and birth family. For example, some tribes offer specific activities for children, including

cultural crafts, dance, and naming ceremonies. In the Choctaw Nation’s foster care and adoption program, members of the tribe’s youth advisory board—teenagers who are future tribal leaders—work with the children, often doing cultural crafts and activities.

- **Camps and other recreational experiences** — Helping children access fun childhood experiences such as camps, sports and games, and other activities contributes to normalcy for a child while also providing benefits such as developing connections with other children, learning new skills, and—in some instances—providing respite for the child and parents. Specific camps and activities, such as Camp to Belong, can also provide opportunities for children who have been separated from their siblings to connect with their siblings in a fun, safe environment.
- **Leadership and advocacy development** — Support services can help empower youth to become stronger leaders and advocates, both for themselves and for other children and families involved in the child welfare system, through experiences such as leadership training and opportunities to share their stories (e.g., as part of youth panels or speak-out teams or participating in advisory groups). The Yakama Nation Kinship Program connects children in kinship care with the tribe’s LISTEN program, which helps youth develop leadership skills and build awareness of their heritage. Youth also serve as ambassadors and volunteer in the community when there is a need.
- **Life skills development** — Children who are or who have been in foster care may need

help building skills that they missed out on learning earlier in life, as well as support building life skills that help them both be part of a family and prepare for adulthood. Services include areas such as cooking, budgeting, cleaning, and learning how to drive. Adoption Network Cleveland partners with the Junior League of Greater Cleveland on “Cooking with Cuyahoga’s Kids” to provide food preparation and nutrition instruction to youth in foster care.

- **Job training and employment support** — Similar to other life skills development services, some child welfare systems provide training and opportunities to help youth get ready to enter the workforce and to be able to maintain employment. New York’s Bridges to Health provides services to prepare youth age 14 or older with severe disabilities to engage in paid work as well as support to help those youth be successful in a job, such as providing youth a job coach to help them adjust to a new job, and work to ensure supervisors understand the youth’s disability.
- **Funding and vouchers for additional services** — Some child welfare systems provide financial support to help meet children’s varied needs and interests. The Yakama Nation Kinship Program offers vouchers for youth in kinship care to take part in recreational and leadership activities in the tribal community. Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis, MO, provides funding of up to \$200 for things such as summer camp, lessons, sports team participation, room makeovers, graduation expenses, and fun days with siblings.

## Ready to learn more?

Our guide, *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families (2 MB PDF)*, provides detailed descriptions of these and other programs, along with guidance on using support services to help with both recruitment and support of families, suggestions and tools for assessing the support needs of families, tips on using data to demonstrate the value of support services, and information about ways to implement support services successfully.

You can learn more about any of the program ideas listed above in the *Support Matters* guide:

- The Children's Trauma Assessment Center at Western Michigan University: page 114
- Adoption Network Cleveland: page 71
- Fostering Healthy Futures: page 135
- Bethany Christian Services' ADOPTS program: page 92
- Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis: page 130
- Native American Youth and Family Center: page 166
- Anu Family Services: page 88
- 3-5-7 Model: page 207
- Choctaw Nation's foster care and adoption program: page 118
- Camp to Belong: page 101
- Yakama Nation Kinship Program: page 203
- Bridges to Health: page 96

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at [consultation@adoptuskids.org](mailto:consultation@adoptuskids.org).



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