

# Improving Family Preservation Services for Adoptive and Guardianship Families

Many adoptive and guardianship families need support services at some point to encourage child and family well-being. Some families will need more intensive support services—family preservation services—to keep them intact.

Adoptive/guardianship family preservation services are specific support services designed for families whose children are at risk of disruption, dissolution, or out-of-home placement. They are usually short term, high intensity, and family focused, addressing both the current crisis and the ongoing needs of the family as a whole.

## Adoptive family preservation as prevention

By investing in family preservation for adoptive and guardianship families, child welfare systems are fulfilling the promise of permanency and preventing young people from reentering foster care. For this reason, it's important that we consider the work of adoptive/guardianship family preservation as prevention services.

Family preservation services can require a larger resource investment than less intensive services. But as administrators seek to build on their family preservation services, it's important to consider the costs—both human and financial—of having children reenter foster care. There are two main

strategies administrators can consider to help preserve adoptive/guardianship families:

1. Expand post-permanency services to include more intensive supports.
2. Make existing family preservation services more adoption- and guardianship-competent.

The Family First Prevention Services Act allows federal Title IV-E funding to be used on evidenced-based services provided to families whose children are at risk of entering the child welfare system. The law includes all families who are at risk of out-of-home placement, including adoptive and guardianship families.<sup>1</sup> By building an evidence base of effective family preservation services designed for adoptive and guardianship families, systems are more likely to ensure the sustainability of these services because they will be able to access the funding made available through Family First.

<sup>1</sup> Section 475(13) of the Social Security Act [42 USC 675] defines a child who is a candidate for foster care to include “a child whose adoption or guardianship arrangement is at risk of a disruption or dissolution that would result in a foster care placement.”

## Strategies to provide targeted family preservation services for adoptive and guardianship families

The nature of the challenges facing adoptive and guardianship families is often different from those facing other families and stem from the long-term impact of trauma and loss and challenges in building attachment between parents and children. As a result, many systems have sought to create specialized family preservation services for adoptive and guardianship families as part of their support-service array. Such programs often include the following strategies:

### Invest in intensive in-home services

Access to intensive in-home services can reduce the need for out-of-home placement, as all family members are wrapped in support services that address their needs. Because they meet frequently with the family in their home, professionals engaged in these services gain a better understanding of their circumstances, strengths, challenges, and functioning.

Intensive in-home services improve family functioning by providing high levels of development and support to all family members during and immediately following a crisis. Sometimes these services can be modified to take place in the school or another community setting, if this best meets the needs of the family.

### Provide easy access to crisis intervention

Effective crisis intervention requires more than a voice on the end of a hotline. It entails addressing the immediate crisis in the short term, as well as service navigation in the longer term to resolve the circumstances that led to the crisis. It's one small

component of a comprehensive adoptive/guardianship family preservation plan.

It's important that families know how to access crisis intervention services before they find themselves in a crisis with their child. Not knowing where to turn can result in unnecessary out-of-home placements, legal consequences, and danger to parents and children.

Build crisis intervention into your general post-permanency support services and ensure that all families understand how to access these interventions should the need arise. In your communication and outreach to families, help them understand that it is normal to face crises and normal to seek help.

### Offer post-crisis respite

A crisis can present a significant trauma for all family members. This is especially true if someone was harmed or in physical or psychological danger. After the immediate crisis has been addressed, it's likely that the family and the youth will need a break.

Brief, well-planned time apart will help all family members to recover from the acute crisis and ready themselves for the work ahead. Offering post-crisis respite allows caregivers and youth to focus on what they each need to do to be successful in their post-crisis maintenance plan. Structured, time-limited respite—especially when delivered as a routine part of crisis intervention—can prevent the need for longer out-of-home placement after a crisis.

### Encourage appropriate use of residential services

While preventing out-of-home placement is a goal of family preservation services, sometimes temporary residential services are necessary for the overall stability of the family.

As you talk with families about out-of-home placement options, remember that there can be a stigma associated with them. In keeping themselves and their children safe, parents may be met with judgment from those both inside and outside the child welfare system. Feelings of shame and failure may prevent them from seeking out appropriate placement options earlier in a crisis. That delay can ultimately increase the amount of time youth spend in out-of-home care and make family preservation more challenging.

If a youth must be placed in residential care, it's important that this placement happens with a clear plan of care where services are provided to the entire family—not just the youth. There should be clear family involvement in decision making, frequent visitation and family engagement to maintain family bonds, and a family education plan to take place while the youth is in out-of-home care.

As with any out-of-home placement, a family-centered plan for transitioning the child back home should be made as soon as possible. Residential services for this population should also be adoption- and permanency-competent, as well as trauma-informed. Wrapping all family members in support services will help to ensure that the youth spends the least amount of time in out-of-home care as possible.

## **Strategies to make your general family preservation services more effective for adoptive and guardianship families**

All systems have existing family preservation services for families at risk of foster care entry, but

sometimes these programs are not well-designed to meet the unique needs of adoptive and guardianship families. The following strategies might help ensure your traditional services better serve this special population.

### **Ensure providers are adoption- and permanency-competent**

Preserving adoptive and guardianship families will require that service providers are well versed in the core issues of adoption and permanency, and understand the significant impact of trauma and loss. You can ensure existing family preservation services are a better fit for adoptive and guardianship families if providers have received the proper training to become adoption- and permanency-competent.

The National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI) has developed two free web-based trainings to help child welfare and mental health professionals meet the needs of children, youth, and families who have experienced foster care, adoption, and guardianship.

### **Evaluate outcomes specifically for adoptive and guardianship families**

To assess whether you are effectively meeting the needs of this special population in a traditional family preservation program, it's important to track and evaluate outcomes for adoptive and guardianship families. If adoptive and guardianship families are faring worse or are less satisfied, it may mean you need to create a specialized program or dedicated adoption/guardianship staff to better serve these families' needs.

## The importance of data collection and continuous quality improvement

Overall, child welfare systems collect inconsistent data on whether adoptive and guardianship placements truly remain permanent and what works to keep families together. It is challenging to understand how effective our interventions are without this information.

To understand how well our services work, we must follow families engaged in family preservation over time. Thorough program evaluation must be included in any service implementation or expansion plan. This could include pre- and post-service surveys on stress and well-being indicators, tracking the stability of families at specific times after intervention, or tracking the length of time youth need to be placed in out-of-home care.

Consider partnering with a university to help you gather and interpret your data, and share it with other states, tribes, and private partners engaged in similar work. And listen to families! Seek their input as you design new services or implement changes. Ask them about their greatest areas of need. Listening to the families we serve will improve our services and allow us to develop a stronger evidence base for adoptive family preservation services in the future.

## Examples from the field

### Seneca Family of Agencies, California

Seneca Family of Agencies offers specialized, intensive wraparound services to children and youth who are at risk of out-of-home placement and their families. The adoption/permanency wraparound services are specifically designed for families who

have adopted children from the foster care system, as well as relative caregivers and guardianship families. The goal of these services is to prevent residential placement.

Through the use of family-based teams—which include family members, people in the family’s community, parent partners, youth partners, and care coordinators—all members of the family receive services that are based on the unique needs of the family. These services can often take place in the family’s home and include skill-building for parents and youth; therapeutic behavioral and mental health assessments and services; peer support; and individual and family counseling. Each service plan is family-driven, and other community services can be added to the plan based on the family’s needs.

Since it began operating in 2001, the adoption/permanency wraparound program has been able to preserve 95 percent of the highest risk participating adoptive families.<sup>2</sup>

### Illinois Adoption and Guardianship Preservation

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services contracts with multiple private agencies to provide post-permanency preservation services. Most services are available in the family’s home, and include crisis intervention, clinical assessments, therapeutic services for all family members, intensive in-home services, respite, support groups, case management, and advocacy. Trained professionals respond to a 24-hour crisis hotline and program staff make a home visit within three days of the family’s crisis call. Services are available for 360 days and can be extended to 24 months. In some circum-

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2 Learn more about Seneca Family of Agencies’ wraparound services at <http://kinshipcenter.org/services/wraparound.html>

stances, the department is able to pay for residential treatment if the treating clinicians believe the best treatment option to be residential care.

The Center for Adoption Studies at Illinois State University has conducted research and evaluation on this program. Key findings have included that the rate of children and youth in adoption and guardianship reentering foster care has been less than 1 percent for all adoptive and subsidized guardianship families served by the program.<sup>3</sup>

## FosterAdopt Connect, Missouri and Kansas

FosterAdopt Connect’s Behavioral Interventionist™ program provides intensive services in the home for children experiencing behavioral or emotional challenges that put their placement at risk. The interventionist provides respite to the parents while working one-on-one with the child on neuro-developmental activities to improve self-regulation. As part of the program, direct care staff also provide services to parents and caregivers, such as role-modeling, coaching, de-escalation training, and attachment education.<sup>4</sup>

## Georgia Division of Family and Children’s Services, Crisis Intervention Teams

Families receiving adoption or guardianship assistance in Georgia who are at risk of disruption or dissolution are eligible for services through Georgia’s Crisis Intervention Teams. The teams wrap families in short-term services designed to assess the

3 Learn more about Illinois Adoption and Guardianship Preservation at <https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/in-home-services-to-keep-adoptive-and-guardianship-families-together/>

4 Learn more about FosterAdopt Connect’s Behavioral Interventionist™ program at <https://www.fosteradopt.org/family-permanency/behavioral-interventionist/>

families’ needs, address the crisis, and preserve the placement. Services can include intensive behavioral therapy, in-home crisis response and recovery, crisis respite, service navigation, and assistance with residential placement, if appropriate. The state also has a 24-hour crisis line staffed by professionals trained in crisis intervention. This line is advertised to all families receiving adoption or guardianship assistance.<sup>5</sup>

## Resources on adoptuskids.org

### *AdoptUSKids Support Services Assessment Tool and companion guide*

Before you can implement new services or enhance existing ones, you need to first understand how your current support services work together in the lives of adoptive and guardianship families. This tool and its companion guide lead you through a process of gathering information from caregivers, staff, and others about your system’s entire support-service array and how effective and accessible your services are.

Using this tool will help you to identify gaps in services and focus limited resources on the areas of highest need in your system.

### *AdoptUSKids Support Matters guide*

This comprehensive guide is intended to equip state, tribal, and territorial child welfare managers and administrators—as well as family support organizations—with current information about effective strategies for developing data-driven family support services and research findings to help them make the case for implementing and sustaining these services.

5 Learn more about Georgia DFACS Crisis Intervention Teams at <https://qic-ag.org/logs/ga-crisis-intervention-team/>

## Other resources

### Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) Intervention and Program Catalog

Search for other preservation programs in use throughout the country at <https://qic-ag.org/introduction-qic-ag-intervention-and-program-catalog/>.

### National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Institute (NTI)

Access free adoption competency training for child welfare and mental health professionals at <https://adoptionssupport.org/nti/>.



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