CREATING STRENGTHS-BASED PROFILES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WAITING TO BE ADOPTED

A Guide for Administrators and Managers

March 2018

Adopt US Kids

Together we hold their future

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1 Introduction

For decades, photolistings, *Wednesday's Child* features, Heart Galleries, and other public profiles of children and teens waiting to be adopted have been an integral, valuable part of efforts to ensure that adoption professionals find permanent, loving families for children in foster care. These child-specific public recruitment activities have helped make adoption a reality for thousands of children and have considerably raised awareness among the public about the fact that every child needs a family.

The world has changed dramatically since the launch of these efforts, yet how the field features and describes children waiting to be adopted has remained much the same. Since these efforts were first employed, internet use became commonplace, the federal government passed laws highlighting the need to protect confidential medical and educational information, and cyberbullying became all too common. Many jurisdictions have changed waiting-child programs and policies, but as a whole, the adoption field has not fully reformed practice related to how it portrays children who need families.

In this guide, you will find information about how to shape your system to ensure the most effective—and protective—public profiles of children waiting to be adopted.

The guide explores policies and practices, staffing, training, and evaluation that you can implement to enhance practices in child-specific public recruitment efforts including photolisting. While the guide's focus is on child narratives and photos, it also addresses the agency's response system given that it is an integral part of any public recruitment effort.

Our information-gathering process

The AdoptUSKids national photolisting is the only service of its kind fully funded by, and operated on behalf of, the US Children's Bureau.[1] This gives us an opportunity to see how states and counties feature children who are waiting to be adopted. To identify best practices and develop strong guidance for the field, we decided to take a close look at what we and others can do better to ensure

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1   The AdoptUSKids photolisting includes narratives and photos provided by child welfare professionals around the country. As a result, we have an opportunity to see a great diversity in what photolistings include in various jurisdictions. Although we don't develop or control what is posted on our photolisting, we are committed to working with the field to improve the narratives featured on our site and others.

that children have the best possible chance of being adopted while also protecting their safety, dignity, and privacy. Over a period of many months, we:

- Convened focus groups of adoption professionals, young people who had been in foster care, and adoptive parents

- Surveyed and interviewed prospective adoptive parents, frontline caseworkers, and others in child welfare

- Reviewed thousands of narratives of children waiting to be adopted

- Researched many jurisdictions' photolisting practices and policies

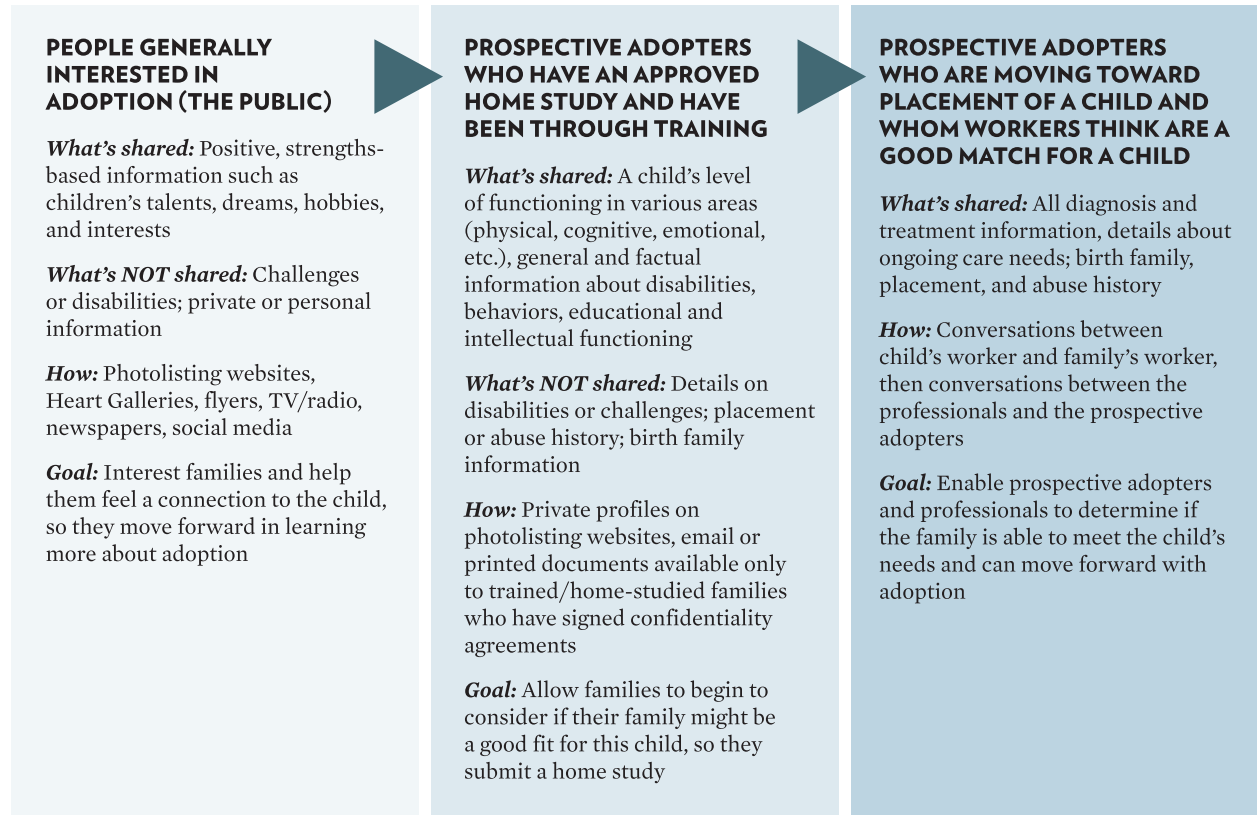- Considered laws related to privacy and data protection

Take advantage of the AdoptUSKids photolisting

You can learn more about the AdoptUSKids photolisting on our website.

A new paradigm

As a result of our intensive research, input from the field, and consideration of expertise—both within our project and the Children's Bureau and from many others—we are calling on the adoption field to embrace a new paradigm related to public portrayals of children who need families. The new paradigm:

- Puts a high priority on children's safety, dignity, and privacy

- Acknowledges that information-sharing happens on a continuum—with only positive information provided to the general public, general information about diagnoses and challenges provided to prospective parents who have a home study, and more specific information provided to those seriously considering placement (see graphic on next page)

- Frames public profiles as an introduction to children who need a family, using strengths-based narratives with positive, descriptive information and up-to-date, appealing photos

- Embraces the idea of a private narrative, shared only with home-studied families who have signed a confidentiality agreement, through which more information about challenges and disabilities is shared

PEOPLE GENERALLY INTERESTED IN ADOPTION (THE PUBLIC)	PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS WHO HAVE AN APPROVED HOME STUDY AND HAVE BEEN THROUGH TRAINING	PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS WHO ARE MOVING TOWARD PLACEMENT OF A CHILD AND WHOM WORKERS THINK ARE A GOOD MATCH FOR A CHILD
What's shared: Positive, strengths-based information such as children's talents, dreams, hobbies, and interests	*What's shared:* A child's level of functioning in various areas (physical, cognitive, emotional, etc.), general and factual information about disabilities, behaviors, educational and intellectual functioning	*What's shared:* All diagnosis and treatment information, details about ongoing care needs; birth family, placement, and abuse history
What's NOT shared: Challenges or disabilities; private or personal information	*What's NOT shared:* Details on disabilities or challenges; placement or abuse history; birth family information	*How:* Conversations between child's worker and family's worker, then conversations between the professionals and the prospective adopters
How: Photolisting websites, Heart Galleries, flyers, TV/radio, newspapers, social media	*How:* Private profiles on photolisting websites, email or printed documents available only to trained/home-studied families who have signed confidentiality agreements	*Goal:* Enable prospective adopters and professionals to determine if the family is able to meet the child's needs and can move forward with adoption
Goal: Interest families and help them feel a connection to the child, so they move forward in learning more about adoption	*Goal:* Allow families to begin to consider if their family might be a good fit for this child, so they submit a home study	

To accomplish the goal of publicly recruiting families for children while protecting their safety, dignity, and privacy, changes will be required in policy and practice related to finding adoptive families for children. Staff at all levels of the agency will need to be involved. For example:

- Administrators will need to review and perhaps make changes to policies, practices, staffing, and training related to child-specific public recruitment and photolisting. They may also need to review staffing and procedures for response systems to ensure effective responses to people who inquire about adoption. First and foremost, administrators lead by example by putting children first (for example, prioritizing children's dignity and privacy in profiles; devoting sufficient staff to enable thoughtful, individualized child profiles; and embracing a strengths-based culture in their agency).

- Managers and supervisors will need to embrace the strengths-based philosophy and communicate it to their staff members. They are also likely to be responsible for training and quality assurance related to child narratives and public recruitment. In many cases, they will be responsible for gathering and analyzing data to determine if system-change efforts are working.

- Recruiters and others developing narratives and profiles of children waiting to be adopted will have to take on the daily effort of gathering positive information and sharing it in the most compelling, safe, and respectful way to interest and engage prospective adoptive families.

- Staff who are responsible for responding to inquiries will need tools to engage and encourage families while continuing to protect children's privacy.

2 Guidelines for what to include in public profiles

It's common practice to use public profiles of children to seek adoptive families on photolisting websites, in newspapers or on TV, at Heart Gallery displays, or in flyers handed out at public events. Public narratives can be viewed by anyone who visits a website, watches TV, or picks up a printed flyer, and the potential audience includes birth family members, tech-savvy peers, the child themselves, and other community members who may know the featured child.

In general, public profiles of children and youth have two primary goals. They:

- Help prospective adopters connect with a particular child, teen, or sibling group by painting a picture of the child or children, establishing common ground, and enabling the adults to imagine these specific children in their family

- Present a strengths-based picture of the children who are waiting for families, emphasizing their personality and unique qualities

In both cases, the ultimate goal of the public profile is to reach many prospective adoptive parents and help them make an emotional connection with young people who need families. To accomplish this goal, public narratives must present a strengths-based, positive depiction of the child. They should be designed to draw prospective parents in, rather than to narrow the field of potential parents.

Full disclosure is important for adoptive parents. But it is only later in the process, through a private narrative or one-on-one conversation, that professionals should begin to explain challenges and identify future support needs related to a particular child, teen, or sibling group. It is also in a private narrative or conversation that workers can discuss the skills and characteristics of the families they are seeking for this child. Like full disclosure, determining if a family can meet a child's needs is critically important, but it should be done later in the process as part of a mutual assessment and discussion between the workers and the prospective parents.

Below we outline guidelines for what to include, what to consider carefully, and what not to include in publicly available profiles of children waiting to be adopted. You can find more detailed information in our companion guide, _Creating Effective Narratives for Children Waiting to Be Adopted_.

What to include

☐ Preferred first name

☐ Positive personality traits

☐ Strengths

☐ Hobbies, interests, and favorite pastimes

☐ What they like about school and school successes

☐ Things that are important to them

☐ Answers to questions such as: What makes them laugh? What is their dream day like? What makes them proud?

☐ Ways they are connected to the community

☐ Information about cultural connections or languages they speak or use

☐ Dreams for the future

☐ Quotes from the child

☐ Positive quotes or input from others in their life

☐ Interesting photos or videos

☐ Important family connections

☐ In profiles of siblings, how they relate to one another

☐ Birth year

☐ How a family might be a part of their life

☐ Appeals to families

☐ How to learn more

What to consider carefully

☐ A general statement about long-term needs

☐ General information about ongoing support needs

☐ Discussion of appearance

☐ Detailed discussions of chores or how the young person might be helpful to the family

☐ The young person's expressed preferences on types of families

☐ Sexual orientation, but only if the youth is out, wants the information to be included in their public narrative, has been well-informed about risks, and is engaged in the process of crafting and approving the narrative

☐ The fact that the youth is a parent, but only if the youth wants the information to be included in their public narrative and is engaged in the process of crafting the narrative and the narrative focuses on the youth rather than the baby or child

- ☐ Statements about the success of the current placement, which could lead a prospective adopter to think the current family is better for the child

- ☐ Race or ethnic background

- ☐ The applicability of the Indian Child Welfare Act

- ☐ Last initial

- ☐ Date of photo and profile (only if it is updated regularly)

- ☐ Grade level in school (only if the child is on grade level and it's updated regularly)

- ☐ An average photo, either in terms of actual photo quality or how it shows the child

What not to include

Identifying information

- ☐ Last name

- ☐ Date of birth

- ☐ Name of school, school district, neighborhood, or local geographic markers

Abuse, neglect, maltreatment

- ☐ Information related to sexual abuse, sexual acting out, or references to the child or youth as a potential perpetrator or victim, including code talk that might relate to sexual abuse (such as describing the child as overly affectionate with males, talking about the need to teach safe touch, or noting that the child should be the youngest in the family)

- ☐ Information that suggests the possibility of child as victim, such as stating that they have no boundaries or have no sense of danger

- ☐ Birth family history of abuse, neglect, physical or mental illness, domestic violence, criminal history, immigrations status, or substance abuse, including even brief references or allusions to a parent's drug use or the child's exposure to drugs or alcohol in utero

- ☐ Reasons for the child's entry into care

- ☐ The child's trauma history

Placement information

- ☐ Current placement type (such as residential treatment, group home, or juvenile justice setting)

- ☐ Placement history, including number of placements in foster care or re-entry into care or other information taken directly from the case file regarding their placement history

- ☐ How long they have been in foster care or how long they have been waiting for an adoptive family

☐ Information about why a foster family or relative is not interested in or able to be the permanent placement

☐ References to adoption interruption, disruption, or dissolution

Medical information

☐ Medical or mental health diagnoses, medication, and treatment, including whether the child has or is attending therapy or counseling

☐ Statements that a youth is pregnant or has recently given birth

☐ Levels of, or statements about, physical impairments

☐ Reports or statements from doctors, mental health providers, other health care professionals, or caregivers about medical information

☐ Clinical information from their case file

Behavioral challenges

☐ Aggressive behaviors, including anger, fighting, or oppositional acting out

☐ Sexual behaviors, including current, past, or potential victim or perpetrator role

☐ Information about delinquency or juvenile justice involvement

☐ Negative behaviors, such as lying, running away, or stealing

☐ References to a child acting younger than or being more mature than their same-age peers

☐ Impairment levels related to their behaviors

Potentially painful or embarrassing information

☐ Mention of bodily functions (including incontinence and bedwetting) or hygiene challenges

☐ *Any* descriptions of body type, including short, heavy, stocky, slender, or skinny

☐ The child's height or weight

☐ Negative descriptions of the youth's appearance

☐ References to fears or sources of anxiety

☐ Anything else they could be embarrassed by if their peers saw it, such as if the child has been bullied, has trouble making friends, is clumsy or awkward, is messy or sloppy, cries easily or often, or doesn't do well at sports or in school

Things that limit potential families

☐ Discussion about their reluctance about adoption or emphasis on a unique need for preparation for adoption

☐ Statements that suggest the writer may not believe adoption is an option for the child

☐ Limits on the type of family who will be considered, including marital status, race or ethnic background, number or age of other children in the family, religion, or other fixed characteristics

Intellectual ability or education challenges

☐ Intellectual or educational challenges, including allusions to challenges and being nonverbal

☐ References to special education status or an individualized education or Section 504 plan

☐ Specific IQ score or range

☐ References to specific disabilities that relate to school, education, or intellectual ability

☐ Statements about educational impairment level

☐ References about learning more slowly than or performing at a different grade level than their same-age peers

☐ References to actual grades or scores on assessments

Sexual orientation or gender identity

☐ Anything that would convey they are transgender, including mixing pronouns, a name and gender identity that don't match, or switching names

☐ A statement about or allusions to the fact that they are LGBTQ unless it is for an older youth who wants the listing to include their sexual orientation, and they have had thoughtful conversations with caring adults about the potential positive and negative consequences, and the youth has been involved in crafting and approving the narrative

Other

☐ Anything negative

☐ Information about the young person's being a parent unless the young person wants the information in the narrative, has discussed the pros and cons, and has approved the description

☐ Specific information or details the child asked to have excluded from the narrative

☐ Language that promotes stereotypes based on gender, race, ethnicity, or other characteristics

☐ Things the child isn't, doesn't do, or doesn't like

☐ Adoption assistance eligibility

☐ Status as legally free or not legally free

- ☐ Disclosure of sensitive or potentially identifying information about any birth family members or siblings not in foster care, including criminal history, mental health or medical details, geographic locations, immigration status, etc.
- ☐ Links or references to a young person's personal YouTube channel, web pages, or social media pages
- ☐ Outdated information
- ☐ Spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors and poorly composed writing

Photos

- ☐ Blurry, pixelated, distorted, or otherwise low quality photos
- ☐ Photos that are years out of date
- ☐ Photos that show the child's name, a school name, a school team, residential treatment center name, a well-known building or landmark, or other location markers (such as a street sign or building with a specific name or address visible)
- ☐ Photos showing clothing or backgrounds with pictures of weapons or words or pictures that suggest violence or crime
- ☐ Photos with sexual overtones, including photos with suggestive posture, photos of youth with no shirts or significant cleavage, or photos of young people in clothing that has sexually suggestive statements or pictures
- ☐ Photos of children who have a high profile because their story has received significant news coverage that included last names or other identifying information (If there is a serious safety risk or risk of exposure with a high profile, you may want to consider whether photolisting is the best recruitment option for this particular child.)
- ☐ Photos of young people who do not want their picture included
- ☐ Photos that include other children unless they are siblings the agency is seeking to place together

3 Creating a culture that enables strengths-based child profiles

Later, we explore specific policies and procedures that administrators and managers can implement to support their agency's pursuit of strengths-based practices related to photolisting and other child-specific public recruitment efforts. But the first and most important role for a leader is to create a culture in which these policies, procedures, and practices will be embraced.

Promote the value of child-specific public recruitment

The first step in creating this culture is for leaders to believe—and communicate to their teams—that photolisting and similar child-specific public recruitment efforts such as Heart Galleries, *Wednesday's Child* features, and flyers about particular children are an effective way of finding families for children. The leaders of Kentucky's Special Needs Adoption Program explain the power of photolisting: "We have had matches and adoptions as a result of these listings. We don't know how we would recruit nationally without a photolisting." And even when the match isn't made through photolisting, they know that the listings have value: "They let the public know about the need for adoption from foster care. Photolisting serves as a point of entry to start a dialogue and begin a relationship with prospective adopters."

As a leader, you can take several steps to promote the value of child-specific public recruitment:

- **First, talk often and publicly about how there is a family for every child** — Share success stories, especially when children who were in residential treatment centers, hospitals, or juvenile detention facilities are now in a caring adoptive family. Discuss teens and young adults who are thriving with their permanent families. Post pictures of medically fragile children surrounded by loving brothers and sisters in their new family. Believing and communicating that adoption is possible for some of the children and teens considered hardest to place is critically important for creating and reinforcing the desired organizational culture. The stories and images you share go a long way in conveying that culture.

- **Encourage public recruitment efforts such as photolisting** — As a leader, you can press for policies that encourage or require photolisting or other child-specific public recruitment efforts for children who don't have a permanent family identified. In staff discussions, ask if all possible efforts have been explored for each child and remind people how much it matters for children and teens to have a permanent, loving family. It's important to communicate both internally and externally that your agency will not shy away from recruiting publicly for a child simply because you aren't certain you will find a family for them—families cannot come forward if they don't know a child is waiting.

- **Track and share the number of adopted children for whom public recruitment played a role** — Partner with your state or regional exchanges or your staff doing photolisting to gather information on families who adopted through child-specific public recruitment efforts. Share positive results with staff, especially those who may question the effectiveness of such programs and strategies. If you regularly use a national photolisting such as AdoptUSKids, you can also track and report on adoptions across state lines that likely wouldn't have been possible without photolisting.

- **Track and share information about the number of general inquiries you receive that mention a specific child** — Every individual who calls or emails about a child they've seen featured is a potential adoptive parent, whether for that child or other children waiting to be adopted. With a customer service focus and follow through, people who inquire about a child or sibling group who has captured their attention can often be encouraged to attend orientation and training and pursue adoption from foster care, even if the specific child or children they inquired about are no longer available for adoption.

Highlight the importance of focusing on a child's strengths and protecting the child

As an administrator, you have a critical role in ensuring a strengths-based approach to your system's child welfare and adoption work. The best child welfare agencies create an overall culture that focuses on the strengths of children, families (birth, foster, adoptive, and kinship), and staff. To foster a general strengths-based culture, administrators can:

- Offer consistent, ongoing training for staff and contractors to change child welfare culture and philosophy and provide concrete skills and strategies for identifying child and family strengths and unique needs

- Ensure that managers and supervisors focus on staff members' strengths, offer career development opportunities, and reward staff for demonstrating an individualized strengths-based approach with clients

- Revise assessment tools, case file requirements, and other instruments to focus on identification of child and family strengths[2]

Focusing on a child's strengths in public narratives is just one part of this broader culture. Leaders can do several things to create and encourage a strengths-based culture specifically related to photolisting and other child-specific public recruitment:

- **Maintain a positive and optimistic outlook for the children and youth the agency serves** — Your own belief in children's futures and attitude about the children you serve will show and will encourage others to see them in the same light.

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2   Adapted from *An Individualized, Strengths-Based Approach in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care*.

- **Use people-first and other positive language** — In meetings, conversations, print materials, websites, and elsewhere, you can promote the need to describe children in foster care first as individuals with unique personalities and then, when necessary, raise the challenges they face. Through your own words and discussions about the importance of language, you can communicate to others how words demonstrate how professionals think and feel about the children in their care.

- **Require that case files and other documents include information about children's strengths, achievements, and characteristics** — You can require that workers' case notes and files and all child assessments include positive information—such as accomplishments, important milestones, skills, and abilities—in addition to the challenges the child is facing or the support they need as a result of the trauma they have experienced. This is a practice that should begin with the agency's first contact with a child and continue throughout the life of the case. Positive case information helps shape staff's feelings about the children on their caseload and also provides excellent information for child narratives.

- **Highlight and reward staff for successful efforts** — You can include information about the importance of having a strengths-based perspective in performance reviews and staff meetings or celebrations. You can regularly commend managers and supervisors for being strengths-based so everyone sees how much you value this characteristic. As part of this effort, you can also highlight and share with staff effective, compelling child narratives, and note the need for all profiles to be as positive as these examples.

- **Implement a process for reviewing photos and narratives** — You can create a formal agency process for ensuring that child profiles are strengths-based. It's important for staff to see that you are taking these principles seriously and investing time and attention to achieve the goal of a strengths-based culture.

Consider prospective parents partners in the process

In many cases, having public child narratives be completely strengths-based is a change for prospective parents—both those who have a home study and those earlier in the adoption process. When agencies decide to wait to share more information about a child's challenges and medical conditions, they need to be sure that prospective parents are informed about when and how additional information will be provided. The agency also needs a strong response system designed to help parents learn more about children and the process of adopting and how to protect child-specific information once it is shared.

As a leader, one of your roles is to ensure that all agency staff see prospective parents as partners. Agencies that value prospective parents will:

- **Share information with prospective parents about why narratives are strengths-based and when they'll receive more information** — When parents understand why information is shared on a continuum, they often feel like partners in protecting children. When home-studied families sign a confidentiality agreement before receiving additional information, they may see

themselves as already caring for the child by taking on this responsibility. You can include your information-sharing philosophy on your website and in your photolisting information, and have staff provide it in response to inquiries.

At the same time, it's also important for you to communicate throughout the agency the importance of full disclosure for adoptive parents. Understanding their child's background, experiences, and challenges is critical for families to successfully help children heal and thrive. Sharing that crucial information just needs to come later in the process than during the public recruitment effort.

- **Support prospective parents through the process** — It is vitally important to have a planned and thoughtful response system that welcomes prospective adopters from first contact and provides them with information about the needs of children, the qualities of successful adoptive parents, the adoption process, and the importance of ongoing support. You should ensure that your response system is robust and customer oriented. (Our guide, *Using Customer Service Concepts to Enhance Recruitment and Retention Practices*, provides more detailed information about how to change your agency culture to be more responsive and better engage families.)

- **Engage prospective parents in determining which children they can parent** — In some systems, workers determine which children prospective parents will be considered for and if the fit is right, while the prospective adopters play a less active role. A better option is to ensure your agency views child-placement decisions as a conversation between professionals and prospective parents, with parents being encouraged to think about their strengths and capacities and how they fit with a child's interests and needs.

- **Continue to share information about and provide support related to the effects of trauma** — Although public narratives shouldn't include information about the challenges facing a particular child, it's important for your agency to communicate clearly with prospective adopters about the fact that all children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and other trauma may have significant needs and require special parents. Your agency can share information about the needs of children in foster care—and the support you provide to address them—in all introductory material about children who are waiting to be adopted and the adoption process.

A critically important way for you to ensure a culture of viewing prospective parents as partners is to provide ongoing support after adoption. When agencies offer a full continuum of support services to adoptive families, they are embracing parents as partners in ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in their care.

Learn more about how other communities support families in our guide, *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*.

Ensuring child narratives are positive is both right for kids and also an effective way to convince reluctant child welfare professionals to conduct child-specific public recruitment. Some workers resist photolisting and other public recruitment because they rightfully want to protect children. With strengths-based narratives, these child welfare professionals can protect children and employ another tool in their effort to ensure they have loving families. We know that nothing hurts a child more than not having a family to love and care for them.

4 Implementing a system that supports strengths-based child narratives

In your role as administrator or manager, you have the opportunity to create policies and set expectations that lead your staff to see public profiles as an effective tool for recruiting families for children and teens waiting to be adopted. Below we outline many of the areas you'll need to consider as you plan and move toward implementing a system that supports the use of strengths-based photolisting and other child-specific public recruitment. Chapter 5 provides examples of how two jurisdictions have designed their systems to ensure strengths-based efforts and effective responses.

Policies and procedures

To ensure changes across your system, you'll need to implement policies, guidelines, and practice standards in a variety of areas. In the early stages, you may want to start with practice standards. Then, when you are sure the process is working, you might want to adopt formal policies to ensure future compliance.

Choosing children for photolisting or other child-specific public recruitment

It's important to develop a policy about which children will be photolisted or otherwise publicly recruited for, with information about which children should or must be featured in statewide or national recruitment. When crafting this policy, consider that all children and teens who have adoption as their plan can be recruited for, as long as they don't already have an identified adoptive family—such as foster parents or relatives. Photolisting or recruiting for children who have a family identified both wastes staff time and frustrates prospective parents who inquire about children who have already been placed.

Interjurisdictional placements

The Adoption and Safe Families Act precludes federally funded agencies from delaying or denying child placements if a family is available in another jurisdiction. As a result, all agencies should consider recruiting nationally for children who don't have a permanent family identified. When conducting regional or national recruitment efforts, agencies also need to pay close attention to how well their system handles interjurisdictional placements. We have many helpful resources on this topic, including a brief video to help staff understand the importance of interjurisdictional placements.

In addition to specifying which children you should recruit for publicly, your policy might include:

- **Clear protocols around excluding children from photolisting or other public recruitment** — The goal should be to ensure that as many children as possible benefit from these recruitment options. Your policy could cover acceptable exclusions based on safety issues or existence of a permanency resource and require written documentation of the reason for exclusion. Make sure you have a process for having managers or other leaders review any designated restrictions on a child's placement, such as being placed in-state or only with a two-parent family, and ensure the restrictions are really in the child's best interests.

- **Permissions required** — For children who are not legally free for adoption, your agency should have a policy about who can consent to the child's public recruitment. You likely will need signed permission from the child's legal guardian, birth parents, or a judge. For youth 18 and older, the policy should include obtaining signed consent from the youth before photolisting or other public recruitment.

- **How children will be prepared and supported during the process** — In addition to having policies on which children are photolisted, we also recommend implementing policies and practices that ensure children are well-prepared for and informed about, in developmentally appropriate ways, any adoption recruitment efforts. Such policies or protocols should cover how to have sensitive, positive discussions with young people about the purpose of photolisting, how the agency will protect the child's private information, and how the youth will be included in the process.

  It's also important that policies ensure a child's foster parents, caregivers, therapists, and other key connections are informed about recruitment efforts so they can support the child if concerns or questions arise. In cases where foster parents and professionals have decided that the child's foster parents will not be their permanent family, you may want to have the foster parents sign a permanency commitment form, which asks them to help with the process of finding a family for the child. When foster parents are partners in the process they can help share information for narratives, review narratives for accuracy, and take quality photos for use in profiles.

Content of public narratives

One of the first things to consider as you shift to using strengths-based narratives is to identify what your agency's rules are about what can be included in public narratives and what can't. We recommend creating agency policy or practice guidelines for both photos and narratives that ensure a child's safety, dignity, and privacy. You can adopt or adapt our guidelines, outlined in chapter 2, as your standards.

You may want your legal team to review the policies to ensure compliance with relevant laws such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the Federal Educational Rights and Protection Act, the Multiethnic Placement Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act, and any applicable state privacy laws.

Other policies or procedures that can help ensure more effective, positive narratives include:

- **Requiring developmentally appropriate engagement of youth in the creation, review, and approval of their narratives** — One of the best ways to engage prospective adopters is to have them hear the child's or teen's own words. Agencies that require careful, developmentally appropriate child engagement can help ensure accurate narratives with the most compelling details. Who knows the child better than the child?

  For younger children or those with intellectual or developmental delays, your policy might cover conducting a child interview or having a caregiver complete a child profile form. Policies might require that older children be offered the option to draft or review their own narrative. If narrative writers work with the young person and know the youth will be reviewing the narrative, it may encourage them to include more interesting details and omit anything the child might not like to have shared.

- **Requiring caseworkers to track strengths and positive developments in each child's case file** — Requirements for caseworkers to regularly document positive information make it easier to write or update a child's narrative with accurate, strengths-based information. Your policy might also cover managers' or supervisors' review of case files to determine if they are following these requirements.

- **Requiring updates of each narrative and photo at least once or twice a year** — Regular updates are one of the best ways to generate renewed interest in children waiting to be adopted. With each review, workers and recruiters can add new accomplishments, details, and milestones about the child and double-check to make sure the profiles follow agency guidelines. Recruiters or workers may also be able to engage children more effectively in contributing to the narrative as the children mature and participate in updates to their narrative.

- **Developing a protocol where managers or supervisors review each narrative, before publication, for adherence to guidance and overall feel** — Ensuring that narratives and photos are reviewed for compliance to the guidance and for whether they are truly strengths-based is critical to ensuring your effort's success. Make sure your procedures include sharing any changes found in the review with staff who wrote the narrative. With each edited narrative, staff are reminded of the agency's commitment to a strengths-based culture and can get better and better at achieving quality work. To ensure accuracy, your review protocol may also include running the draft narrative by caseworkers or recruiters as well as foster parents or others who know the child well.

- **Requiring training on the importance of strengths-based narratives and photos** — You may want to implement a policy requiring training for existing and new staff or contractors on the agency's philosophy and narrative and photo guidelines. Specific training ideas are discussed in chapter 6.

Content of private narratives or other avenues of sharing information with home-studied families

In addition to establishing policies on what is shared in a public narrative, your agency will need rules about additional information you share at future stages of the process. We recommend creating a system for sharing information with home-studied families through a private narrative, whether accessible as part of a photolisting system or shared another way. (The AdoptUSKids photolisting provides the option of creating a private narrative about each child, which is available to registered and verified home-studied families. Our photolisting system also has a confidential narrative option, available to registered child welfare professionals.)

Some agencies may choose to share more information only through conversations with the child's worker. In Kentucky, for example, workers have the inquiring family complete a form about what type of child they are considering adopting and then the workers share additional information about the child only if a good fit seems possible.

Regardless of how you do it, it's important to identify what is shared at this next stage of the process.

What to include in a private narrative

We recommend that private narratives include:

- A child's functioning or ability level

- General, factual statements of diagnoses made by qualified medical professionals

- Ongoing or long-term medical needs

- Specific disabilities that relate to school, education, or intellectual capacity

- Special education status or individual education plan

- Performance or challenges in school

- Support needs

- Information about the type of family being sought and the skills parents should have

- A child's expressed desire on family types

- That a youth is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender if the youth wants the information in the private narrative

- Adoption assistance eligibility

- Status as legally free or not

What to disclose later in the process with families who are specifically pursuing placement of the child

In policy or guidelines, you should clearly identify those items that should not be shared even in a private narrative but rather disclosed later in the process of communicating with specific prospective families. We recommend excluding from private narratives:

- Identifying information such as last name, school, address, date of birth, specific places the child goes (such as a workplace or clubs)

- The child's immigration status

- The child's abuse and neglect history

- Anything that discusses or alludes to the child's potential to be a victim

- Information about sexualized, self-harming, or similar behaviors

- Information about the child's birth family's history of physical or mental illnesses, immigration status, criminal history, or other challenges

- Reason for the child's entry into care

- Whether the child is LGBTQ unless the child has agreed to include that information

- Information about the child's criminal or delinquent behavior or juvenile justice involvement

- Current placement information, placement history, details about the number of placements, or adoption disruptions

- Negative statements or beliefs about the child

What to be cautious about

Your agency should identify, in policy or practice standards, those specific challenges that can and should be shared in the private narrative. For mental health diagnoses we recommend caution, especially related to diagnoses that may have more of a stigma. We also recommend excluding from the private narrative information about sexualized or self-harming behaviors, behavior that could be criminal, or similar behaviors.

Your policy should also clarify that workers must share full information with prospective adopters once they are moving toward placement of a particular child or sibling group. It is at this stage that we recommend sharing information about a child's abuse and placement history and other challenges that are the most sensitive.

See chapter 10 in our guide, *Creating Effective Narratives for Children Waiting to Be Adopted* for more detailed information on private narratives.

Response system

Recruiting families for children who are waiting for adoption will only be effective if your response system is able to handle inquiries from the public and from home-studied families. You can consider policies or standard practices in the following areas to help ensure an effective response:

- **Length of time before a response must be made** — Your agency may want guidelines on the maximum time before staff must respond to any adoption inquiry. For example, you might have a rule that staff respond within one or two weeks to all inquiries, but with different responses for the public and for home-studied families. For inquiries from home-studied families about a particular child, your policy might include an initial response within a few days requesting the prospective family's home study, with a specific response from the child's worker about the family's potential as a placement within two or three weeks of receiving the home study.

- **How additional information will be shared with home-studied families** — It's also important to have formal guidelines about how you'll share additional information about children with prospective adopters. If your photolisting system has a private narrative for registered, home-studied families, you'll want to have policies about who can register and how you'll verify that they have a home study before you provide access to more private information. If you don't have a specific private narrative system, your agency will need a policy on how and when you will share additional information with home-studied families in writing or in conversations with workers.

  We recommend the policy include having families sign a confidentiality agreement that requires them to protect the child's information and to discuss the contents only with their worker, immediate family members, and service providers as part of the process of determining if they are able to meet the child's needs.

Creating a family-friendly response system

For more information about assessing if your response system is designed to encourage and engage families, you can use our [easy assessment tool](#).

Staffing

The staffing issues involved in moving toward strengths-based child-specific public recruitment include both who is crafting narratives and who is responding to inquiries. Below we explore some potential staffing structures as well as relevant skills. You can also contract for the work of developing narratives and responding to prospects.

Development of child narratives

As you make a staffing plan, you'll want to consider how many children you are currently recruiting for, how many more you might add to these efforts, and how frequently you hope to update their narratives. Discuss with your managers the amount of time it takes to gather information and write narratives now, as well as how much you plan to change current practices. For example, if your narratives now have limited information and aren't as well written as you'd like, you may have more significant staffing changes to make.

Don't forget to consider your review process and the amount of time it will take to have one or more staff members review and revise narratives.

You can achieve success with a variety of staffing structures. You are likely to have the most interesting and compelling narratives if you have designated writers or editors taking a lead role while partnering with people who know the child well and can provide information about them.

- **Designate a centralized writer or writers** — If you have a staff member or contractor with exceptional writing skills, you may want to assign them to write all narratives. Or you can hire someone to enhance your communications. Although the worker closest to the youth will know the most about them, that person may not be the best qualified to write the final profile. Working together, a writer and a child's worker can collaborate to identify the strengths, interests, and qualities that best describe the youth and create a well-written profile. Consistent excellence in writing will also create a more professional look and feel to your recruitment efforts. Truly gifted writers can make each child's narrative stand out from the crowd, with their ability to engage readers, tell stories, and paint a picture of a young person who needs a family.

- **Identify a designated editor or editors** — Even if you can't have a designated writer, you likely have staff with strong communication skills. You may have caseworkers or recruiters develop each narrative, but then ask a manager, caseworker, or other staff with excellent writing skills to reshape the narratives. You might also have parent group leaders or other volunteers who are willing to take on this job. Strong editing can take a so-so piece to a much higher level. Many good writers enjoy polishing others' work and may be excited to take on the responsibility of presenting children in the best possible light. As with having a designated writer, using one or a couple of editors can ensure consistent quality in your efforts and make it more likely that your staff will follow agency's guidelines.

- **Have the child's adoption specialist or recruiter develop the narrative** — Many child-specific recruiters have more time than caseworkers to spend with children. This allows them to get to know the children, talk about what they are looking for in a family, and hear what their hopes and dreams are. These conversations help with other recruitment efforts and provide wonderful material for a strengths-based narrative. Recruiters can partner with caseworkers to ensure accuracy and with editors for writing help if needed.

- **Ask caseworkers to draft narratives** — In most cases, a child's worker has the most information about the child, including their skills, abilities, and personality. While some caseworkers are excellent writers, others may need more writing or editing assistance. If you

have caseworkers write narratives, it may help to create a series of templates they can choose from. Be sure to also offer them samples they can emulate.

No matter who is drafting child narratives, it is important to implement a robust review process to assess adherence to guidelines, ensure overall positive feel, and correct typos or grammar errors.

Response system

It is critical that each interaction prospective parents have with the agency leaves them with the feeling that they are welcomed, valued, and supported. You'll need to create a customer service-oriented plan to respond to all inquiries from prospective adopters, whether they have a home study or not.

A good first step is to assess the amount of staff time you need to respond to inquiries. Key questions include:

- How many inquiries do you handle each month? How many are from home-studied families and how many from others?

- Who is responding to which inquiries? Is that the best use of their time?

- How much time is spent, on average, responding to inquiries—both to the general public and to home-studied families inquiring about a particular child?

- Is your goal to respond more quickly or with more in-depth information?

- Do you want or need to improve your tracking of inquiries?

- Do you want to follow up after a set period of time (such as one week or one month) with people who made an inquiry?

If you're seeking to provide more information to prospective families, implement more robust tracking, or speed up your response time, it may require more staff time than you're currently using. Similarly, if you are writing more engaging narratives or doing more public recruitment, you may need more staff to respond to increased inquiries.

As with developing narratives, there are many ways to handle inquiries, including contracting with an adoption exchange or other private agency. Below we outline some options and considerations for handling calls, emails, and other communication from prospective adoptive parents responding to recruitment efforts.

- **Have different staff members respond to those who have a completed home study and those who don't** — It may be most efficient to have a receptionist or other administrative staff respond to initial inquiries from prospective parents who have not yet begun the process or who haven't completed their home study. Make sure this person is trained in customer service and is able to warmly and accurately discuss the steps in the adoption process, the effects of trauma on children and teens, and when and how people can move forward with orientation and training.

Administrative staff can also handle first inquiries from families who have a home study and inform them about next steps. Then the child's worker or recruiter can respond after they've received a home study and help the family learn more about the child or sibling group.

- **Have volunteer or paid adoptive parents respond to inquiries** — If your goal is to share more information with prospective parents and encourage them in the process, having adoptive parents respond may be the way to go. Adoptive parents can talk about the needs of the children and the adoption process, while encouraging individuals to believe that they can adopt a child who needs a family.

  As with staff, make sure you have an effective training and orientation program in place so that the parents know what information you want them to share and how they can help people connect with orientation or training. When you train parent staff or volunteers, be sure to clarify roles and boundaries given that the adoptive parents may have other relationships with the agency.

- **Create adoption "ambassador" or specialist positions** — Like adoptive parents, adoption specialists help prospective adopters who are early in the process understand what they need to know. They can also provide ongoing encouragement and support to waiting families, whether or not they have a home study completed.

Considerations for responding to families

- Remember, the first phone contact with a prospective parent has a great impact on their decision to move forward. Your role is to ensure a friendly and welcoming response with every communication.

- Provide whoever is answering inquiries with the information they need to answer factually and with a focus on maintaining engagement with the prospective parent.

- Consider how prospects want to be contacted. These days, many people would prefer to communicate through text, web chat, or email, while some continue to prefer a phone call.

- Work toward responding back within a few business days of the initial contact.

- Do you have resources in place to screen and train prospective parents within a reasonable timeframe? If a prospective adopter finds out that they have to wait for months to begin the process, you may lose them.

- Think about how you can engage those who are not yet ready to move forward with adoption but want to make a difference. Do you have a volunteer program? Are you set up to recruit, train, and license respite care providers or mentors? Many times, it takes an initial, less permanent involvement to open up the possibility of becoming more engaged and committed.

5 Case studies in ensuring positive child narratives and effective responses

Below we highlight how two states handle the photolisting process to ensure their narratives are compelling and that staff respond to inquiries promptly. In both states, the key is a strong commitment from leaders to ensure that children are protected, that engaging families is a priority, and that they have a plan to respond to inquiries quickly and with good customer service. These agencies understand the value of investing time and focused effort to make their photolisting more effective.

Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange

In Michigan, responsibility for writing child narratives resides with the state adoption exchange—the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE). In 2014, MARE hired a communications specialist and began a dedicated effort to make child profiles in their photolisting more positive and engaging. Their process is outlined below.

Developing narratives

- **Strengthen staff understanding of the importance of narratives** — MARE provides training to new adoption workers about the importance of the narrative and how to involve children in the process. At the training, they ask workers to fill out a form about themselves at age 15. Then they ask how much of that they would have wanted to put on the internet for everyone to see.

- **Gather key information** — Using specific forms, each child's worker provides information to MARE about the child. A child-specific recruitment plan and a form to be completed by the child ("What I want people to know about me") help adoption workers share important information for the narrative and capture quotes from the child. MARE staff also solicit input from foster parents and professionals who work with the child to add more positive details to the profile ("What others say").

- **Dedicate specific staff to do the writing** — MARE's communications specialist writes every narrative, reaching out to the worker for more information when necessary. They have a specific structure to each profile: the first paragraph contains fun, positive information about the child; the second paragraph includes more information about the child's needs; and the third notes what type of family would be best.

- **Review each narrative** — Before a narrative is published, MARE's program manager reviews it for quality assurance.

Responding to inquiries from prospective parents

- **Develop policies about responding to inquiries** — Michigan policy requires a response to every inquiry and designates certain timelines by which responses must be made. State policy requires the child's worker to make a decision about a home-studied family within 21 days of the inquiry and requires the worker to notify MARE of their decision within 30 days of inquiry. MARE helps solicit a response when workers haven't followed up within these timelines.

- **Create a process and timeline for different types of inquiries** — MARE is the first to receive all inquiries.

    - When a family inquires about a child, the child's worker receives an automated notice. If the inquiry is from a home-studied family in Michigan, the child's worker can either request the home study or check with the family's worker to see if the family has identified characteristics that they are not prepared for that would rule this child out of their consideration.

    - If the home-studied family is from another state, MARE requests the home study and sends it to the child's worker.

    - For children who receive many inquiries, MARE does some screening of the home studies to help the worker.

    - If the inquiry is from someone who doesn't have a completed home study, MARE assigns the family to an adoption navigator who will contact the family, connect them with an agency, and support them during the process. The child's worker will receive notice about the inquiry, but doesn't usually follow up with the family at this stage, especially if there are many people inquiring about the child.

Kentucky's Special Needs Adoption Program

In Kentucky, photolisting is handled by the state agency through its Special Needs Adoption Program (SNAP). Kentucky's process, which addresses both crafting positive narratives and responding to inquiries, is described below.

Developing narratives

- **Set policies and practices** — Kentucky's goal is to have a strengths-based profile that the child or teen would be pleased with if they or their peers saw it. Kentucky's interpretation of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) prohibits sharing of any medical information in the narratives, and Kentucky staff are careful to protect children's confidentiality. They are also careful not to use code words in place of protected information such as "very active" for children who have ADHD.

- **Help new staff understand the process and the culture of being strengths-based** — All new staff receive worksheets and sample profiles that talk about language to use and not use and

explore how to shine a positive light on each child being featured. New staff shadow other recruiters as they are gathering information about children and writing profiles. The review process also helps them learn what to do and what not to do.

- **Gather information for the narrative** — Someone who knows the child well—typically a worker or a SNAP coordinator (recruiter)—develops the child narrative based on conversations with the child or teen. If the coordinator writes the profiles, they share it with the child's worker, who reviews it for accuracy and missing information. The coordinator will make sure any new information is presented in a positive way.

  If a worker and the profile writer don't agree about what to include in the profile, the SNAP manager has the final say. The manager works closely with staff to ensure that the relationship stays positive and the worker understands why the rules are in place.

- **Review the narratives** — One of the regional adoption specialists reviews all narratives; typically the specialist makes only small changes. At first, the state had one person reviewing all profiles, but they found that made it harder to complete the profiles and keep them updated. By dividing the work regionally, they've enhanced their ability to have effective photolistings.

Responding to inquiries

Kentucky has created a process so that individual children's workers are not burdened by too many inquiries.

- **Create a central inquiry response system** — SNAP staff in the central office handle first inquiries. For prospective parents who are not yet home studied, staff share information about the process and connect them to orientation or training. They also let prospects know that they need to complete a home study before pursuing adoption of a particular child.

- **Use tools to streamline the process** — If the inquiry is from a home-studied family, SNAP staff send a standardized email that asks the person to complete a family review form, invites them to submit a narrative about their family, and lets them know that the state cannot share more information about a child until the home study has been reviewed, workers think there is a possible match, and the family has signed a confidentiality form.

  The family review form asks for the following information:

  - Age and gender of the child or children the family is interested in

  - Whether they want to adopt siblings and how many

  - Elements of a child's history (such as physical or sexual abuse) they feel able to handle

  - A child's specific conditions and levels of ability (such as medical conditions, mental health diagnoses, behaviors, and ability to care for themselves) they believe they can address

  - Plans for child care

> › Experience with children who have been abused and neglected

> › Willingness to adopt a child who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning

> › Willingness to adopt a child with self-harming behaviors

If, after receiving the form, the SNAP staff member thinks the prospective family might be a possible fit for the particular child or sibling group, they'll share the family's information with the child's worker. Before sharing any more medical or other information, staff ask them to sign a confidentiality agreement.

- **Engage prospective adopters** — Kentucky's staff have found that most prospective adopters are willing partners in protecting children. Once they explain that the young people and their peers may see a narrative and that state rules prevent sharing medical information, the prospective parents are usually understanding about why there is limited information. Staff have found it really helps to have prospective parents see through the child's eyes. Once a home-studied family has signed a confidentiality agreement, the family feels like they are getting one step closer and that they are trusted stewards of the child's information.

If a prospective family isn't a good fit based on the family review form, Kentucky staff still respond quickly. They've found that being responsive can keep these families engaged and interested until they find another child who is a better fit for their family.

Special tips

Kentucky's SNAP staff offered the following tips about developing effective child narratives:

- **Have recruiters who know the children or youth write the narratives** — Really knowing a child enables the writer to include lots of details and positive information about the child. One recruiter noted, "The work is just easier when it's a child you know and feel responsible for." A recruiter may also have more time—or more flexible time—to work with the child on the narrative than a caseworker with a large caseload and many crises.

- **Take the time to gather information** — Recruiters often gather information while playing a game, taking a walk, or just hanging out with the child.

- **Watch the child for information to add to a narrative** — For children who are less verbal or talkative, watching what they do and how they act and react can help fill in the gaps. Going to adoption recruitment events with kids can be a great way to gather information about what makes them happy or what they most like to do.

- **Partner with the young person to write the narrative** — Whenever possible, the recruiters partner with older children and teens and write the profile together.

- **Share profiles you really like with your colleagues** — One of Kentucky's recruiters noted that she takes a good narrative with her and uses it for inspiration for the next one she has to write.

- **Remember that the child will likely see the narrative** — Kentucky staff have received emails from photolisted children from their school's computer lab, asking for a change in the profile because something bothered them. Coordinators and specialists who write and review the narratives keep in mind that the young person—and their peers—can see what's written.

- **Vary the structure of each narrative** — In Kentucky, staff who write profiles want to be sure each narrative is unique, so they don't use a template. Over time, if they feel like the descriptions are too similar, they'll start editing them.

- **Hire professional photographers and videographers** — The adoption program uses mostly professional images and hires a professional videographer to work at events where children and youth waiting to be adopted are present.

- **Use videos** — In Kentucky, they've found adding a video of the child is often the best way to generate interest. (Michigan staff agree. They have a goal of creating a video for every child who has been photolisted for at least three months. A youth specialist and the communications specialist have a special video day where they create up to 10 videos at a time.)

- **Update the child's photo and narrative often** — One recruiter explained that she often sees renewed interest when a child's narrative is updated or when a new, better photo is included. Another pointed out how much and how quickly children and teens can change, and it's best to have a photo that reflects who they are today. Kentucky staff believe it's better to have an accurate, up-to-date photo even if it isn't as great an image as an earlier version.

6 Training staff and contractors to develop strengths-based narratives

A key element to ensuring that your agency consistently creates strengths-based narratives of children waiting to be adopted is informing current and new staff about your philosophy, guidelines or rules, and procedures. Below we outline some ideas for creating a training plan and offer suggestions for content.

Training structure

Develop a training plan

If you are implementing a change, you'll need a plan to share information about your new practices and policies with everyone involved. You'll want to include those who gather information for narratives and those who write them, which could include recruiters, adoption specialists, contractors with private agencies, caseworkers, managers, and supervisors.

Hosting one or more in-person or online training sessions will enable you to spread the word about your new philosophy and practices and help everyone understand the importance of using strengths-based narratives. The sessions will also provide the opportunity for staff to ask questions and air concerns, which will in turn ensure that managers and supervisors have a more complete picture of how staff are feeling about the changes.

Your training plan should include the initial rollout and ongoing training to ensure that new staff or contractors understand your standards. Sharing a recorded version of your first training or webinar is an efficient way to inform people newly involved in crafting child narratives. Discussions about the importance of strengths-based narratives can also be included in foster care or adoption staff orientation or in periodic in-service trainings. In addition, you might identify a coach—someone who is really committed to this concept and has taken the lead on developing excellent narratives—who can work with new staff to help them understand your goals and how best to accomplish them.

You may also consider hosting quarterly meetings with key staff to share ideas and suggestions with one another, assess how your agency is doing at implementing the new standards, and identify any areas barriers you need to address.

Conduct the training

Below are some considerations that may help make your trainings more successful.

- **Connect this training with your existing efforts** — It may be most effective to integrate training on strengths-based recruitment with other staff training. This topic could fit well with training on child-specific recruitment, strengths-based child welfare practices, or interjurisdictional placements. If the topic becomes part of the agency's established training program, it's more likely to be continued over time and reach all staff who need the information.

- **Have two trainers** — You might choose an administrator or manager who has embraced the philosophy of strengths-based narratives and a staff member who is actively engaged in crafting narratives or supervising those who do so. Together they can communicate the agency's commitment to the overall philosophy along with the details about how these changes are being integrated into the day-to-day work.

- **Be aware that staff may be concerned about handling too many inquiries or about being perceived as keeping information from prospective adopters** — Anticipate and address possible staff concerns and points of resistance, such as a fear of increased work demands. Explain what other changes you're implementing along with moving to strengths-based public child narratives, including how you handle inquiries and how and when you'll share more information with prospective parents who are further along in the process.

- **Include plenty of time for discussion, questions, and examples** — Staff who are used to including information about challenges in narratives or those for whom this is new information may have lots of questions. Others may be concerned about receiving too many inquiries, especially if they have viewed narratives as a way to screen out some prospective families. With discussion time, you'll be able to emphasize your philosophy, respond to concerns, go over gray areas, and really keep the focus on the child.

- **Have handouts on your rules and procedures as well as excellent sample narratives that fit your guidelines** — It's great for people to be able to take away tools they can refer to later.

Training content

Philosophy and the information-sharing continuum

The most important part of the training is to ensure staff or contracted agencies understand the philosophy behind strengths-based narratives. These three principles sum up the strengths-based philosophy:

1. **The first obligation is to protect the child or youth** — Think about preserving the safety, dignity, and privacy of the child. The public should not be able to find the child in person or online from the narrative. Protection also extends to omitting anything the child would be embarrassed to have seen by their peers or that could be used to bully the child. Remember that if it's posted online, the information could live on in perpetuity even if the profile is later removed or edited.

2. **The goal of a child's public profile is to encourage prospective parents** — Consider whether what you're including will make someone want to learn more about this child or this group of brothers and sisters. Is it easy to read, engaging, and compelling? Will it help prospective adopters understand that the child has a distinct personality, hopes, and dreams?

3. **The narrative should be positive, descriptive, and strengths-based** — Ask if what you've included in the narrative contributes to prospective parents' understanding of the child's strengths. The time for disclosure of challenges comes later in the process. For any item you're wondering about, consider how you would feel if someone wrote this about you or a child you love and shared it with the public. Would the child be proud to read the narrative and feel like it describes them?

Emphasize during training that the goal is always to fully disclose information to prospective parents, but to do so on a continuum. You can also share the graphic in this guide's introduction.

Discussing the concepts below can also help staff understand your agency's philosophy and principles:

- Walking in the youth's shoes: think about how they would feel if they or a classmate saw the information in the narrative

- Talking about how we share information about our lives differently for different audiences

Sample exercise

In your own life, are there times where you share information differently based on the audience? If so, make some notes about the topic and what you share at each level.

Topic where you share some information differently depending on audience:

List some information you share publicly:

List types of information you share with a smaller group of people:

List the type of information you share with only your closest friends, colleagues, family members:

....

After staff have completed the exercise, you can discuss their notes or the following examples:

- **Challenges at work** — Publicly you might share nothing at all. With your supervisor or close colleagues, you may share the frustrations you think they can help with. With your closest friends and family, you might share your thoughts about personality clashes or details about a difficult meeting or conversation with your boss.

- **Information about your child** — Publicly you may share your child's happy photos and successes at school. With a smaller group of other parents, you might express concerns about trouble your child has gotten into. With your closest friends and family, though, you might share information about a learning disability or doubts about how you're responding to any challenges you face as a parent.

Your training might also include having participants write a narrative for their preteen or teenage self. What would you have wanted others to know about you? What would you have wanted to keep private? How would you have presented your best self as well as your hopes and dreams? Like the exercise above, this effort can help participants to think about the narrative from the youth's point of view and focus on positives.

What to include, what to leave out, and what to consider carefully for a public narrative

After you've spent time covering overall goals and philosophy, you can discuss the specifics about what you think should be included in a public narrative, what should never be included, and what needs to be considered carefully.

The trainers can go through your agency's rules or guidelines or use our guidelines (in chapter 2) to frame this conversation. We encourage you to use our publication, *Creating Effective Narratives for Children Waiting to Be Adopted*, to discuss examples of what—and why—to include, as well as what not to include and what to think about carefully.

Gathering information for the narratives

The training should include how staff can effectively and respectfully gather the information to make a positive, compelling narrative. The best narratives include details that make a child's personality come to life for readers.

A great way to get information is by having the child's caseworker, mentor, recruiter, or foster parent use specific questions. In the training, discuss how this might work in your system and the need to make sure the children are comfortable with the interviewer and well-prepared for photolisting before conducting the interview. You can find additional suggestions and sample questions on our website.

What you'll cover in training will depend on your system, including whether the people drafting narratives know the children well or if narrative writers will need information from others in the child's lives. If caseworkers aren't engaged in the training or in crafting strengths-based narratives, you'd want the training to cover how recruiters and adoption specialists can partner with caseworkers to gather positive information. For example, you could ask that workers' case notes from every visit include positive information about the child and their interests, achievements, and successes. This information can then be shared with those writing the narratives.

Other training topics to consider include:

- Ways to ensure children are comfortable before an interview such as:
    - › Spending time with them before launching into questions
    - › Asking older children to take the lead and note items to include or draft the narrative
    - › Doing a role play of an interview with the youth, allowing them to interview you first
    - › Watching what they like to do and asking follow up questions

- Strategies to involve foster parents, who could:

  › Conduct interviews with the children in their care

  › Take notes about what children like and respond to such as favorite toys, clothes, activities, or people (especially for children who can't participate in an interview)

  › Review narratives to make additions, note things that have changed, or flag items that aren't strengths-based

Information to include in private narratives

After you've covered public narratives, your training can address how you'll share more information with home-studied families and what type of information to include in these private narratives or discussions. Key topics for discussion may include:

- How your agency will share private narratives with prospective adopters, such as:

  › Using a photolisting with a registration process for home-studied families and a private narrative option

  › Providing information through conversations with a caseworker or recruiter

  › Providing additional information by email or mail to home-studied families

- How to help prospective adopters understand that, when they receive more private information, they are becoming a partner with the agency in protecting the child

- That the private narrative is still not the place for full disclosure (see discussion of content in chapter 4)

Once you have covered content for both public and private narratives, you may want to do a group exercise to talk through gray areas and help make the rules real.

Sample exercise

You can share a handout with information like that below and have participants note which items they would include in a public or private narrative and which they would save for discussion. Ask participants which ones they have questions about and discuss those that need careful consideration and how they might be changed to fit in either a public or private narrative.

Note: To help guide your discussion, we've added our suggested answers in the right column, based on the AdoptUSKids guidance. These answers wouldn't be shared in the trainees' handout but would be covered in discussion.

What goes in a public narrative, a private narrative, or is saved for a later conversation?

Nicholas

Potential item for the narrative	Where the item might go or how it might change
Age 13.	OK in public narrative if you update them regularly; birth year can be better.
Has been in care for 10 years; was neglected due to his mother's addiction.	Save for conversation with families moving toward placement.
Experienced multiple placements, including reunification attempts.	Save for conversation with families moving toward placement.
Wants to be with his grandparents or aunt.	If you want to use in public narrative, reframe to be about maintaining important connections with grandparents or aunt. During conversations with prospective adopters, you could discuss the need for a careful, supported transition due to the child's relationship with his relatives.
Loves math and science.	OK for public narrative.
Is in sixth grade in a regular classroom.	Grade level is OK for public narrative if the child is performing at grade level and narratives are updated regularly. Omit the reference to a regular classroom.
Can envision being a teacher or zoologist one day.	OK for public narrative.
Would love to have dog and family who loves to camp and fish and be outdoors.	OK for public narrative; might be better to reframe references to a family to be more inclusive (such as a family who will support his love of camping, fishing, and spending times outdoors).

Has bouts of depression and receives therapy and medication.	Save for private narrative.
When he's sad has cut himself a few times but not recently.	Save for conversation with families moving toward placement.
Needs extra help at school with reading class; had an IEP and had a reading tutor for several years.	Save for private narrative.
Has 3.0 GPA; does well in almost all of his classes.	Omit the specific GPA reference; reframe to say he's doing well in his classes.
Is a bit overweight but is becoming more active and making progress in this area; likes to play volleyball and soccer.	For public narrative include mention of being active and playing volleyball and soccer; the rest isn't necessary in any narrative.
Has beautiful blue eyes and long lashes that girls would be jealous of.	Don't include; feels too focused on being attractive.
Reads every night and loves to be read to; favorite books include *Harry Potter*.	OK for public narrative.
Likes to cook and bake and helps his foster mother plan menus every week.	OK for public narrative.
Has asthma and uses an inhaler from time to time.	Save for private narrative.
Favorite foods include popcorn, hamburgers, falafel, and spanakopita.	OK for public narrative.
Doesn't like vegetables much but is willing to try them.	No need to focus on what the child doesn't like; could reframe to say he's willing to try all foods.
Needs parents who are patient and can help him learn to love himself.	Save for private narrative because it suggests he doesn't love himself now.
Is proud that he just learned to ride a bike.	OK for public narrative.
Is allergic to peanuts and other tree nuts.	Save for private narrative.
Is very near-sighted.	Save for private narrative.
Wants to have a family with brothers and sisters.	Save for private narrative; discuss it as a preference.
Doesn't get in fights or argue with his foster family.	Reframe positively for public narrative: He gets along well with his foster parents and siblings.
Is legally free for adoption.	Save for private narrative.

Writing tips to improve narratives

Although much of the training will be about guidelines and policies, it's good to have time to discuss ways to make each narrative as interesting and well-written as it can be. Your trainers might cover:

- **Using details and adjectives** — Give examples like the one below to show what a difference details make:

    › Isaiah loves to read.

    › An avid reader—especially of mysteries—Isaiah is making his way through the *Harry Potter* books right now. He can imagine going to Hogwarts, and recently bought his own magician's kit.

- **Thinking about the narrative as telling a story** — Some of the best narratives take readers on a journey with the child and the others in their life. For example:

    › Sammie is a budding designer whose grandmother taught her to sew. She treasures her sewing machine and takes perfect care of it. Sammie has made several outfits for herself, including a beautiful blue dress she wears to church. All of her foster family members have gotten a handmade item or two, and her three-year-old foster brother loves the fleece blanket Sammie made for him.

- **Varying the structure of narratives** — While some agencies like to have a set template for narratives, variety can be really helpful at keeping readers engaged when they are looking at multiple children. If you want to have fairly consistent information in your narratives, consider having either a list of items to include, but in varying order, or creating several templates so that the children's narratives don't seem too much alike.

- **Varying sentence structure, length, and complexity** — During the training, provide examples of how the same information can be presented in different ways. Changing up how you write something is a great way to keep narratives interesting. It's particularly important to remind writers not to start every sentence with the child's name. For example:

    › Andrew is a math whiz and can see himself as a math teacher one day.

    › Math is Andrew's favorite subject, and he'd love to be a math teacher.

    › This math whiz would love to help other kids learn math and can envision being a teacher one day.

- **The need for proofreading and review** — Make sure staff know your process for reviewing narratives for content and compliance with your guidelines as well as the importance of having a reader look for typos or spelling and grammar errors.

You can find more writing tips and suggestions on our website.

7 Making sure photos have the most impact

There's a reason we typically think of public profiles of children waiting to be adopted as photolistings—the photos have the most immediate impact and really help prospective parents connect with the children and teens who are waiting for a family. Recruiters say the best way to increase interest in a particular child is to update the photo or add video. For many prospective adopters, the photo is what makes them stop and decide to learn more.

Photo tips

AdoptUSKids has developed tips to help amateurs take better photos of children waiting to be adopted. We encourage you to share it with your staff.

Strategies for getting updated photos

Children's photos should be updated at least once a year. Kids change so much over time, and it can confuse prospective parents if a photo shows a 10-year-old and the description talks about high school. Even if it hasn't been a year, if a photo is blurry, unflattering, or just not that great, or the child's appearance has changed a lot, it's good to get an updated photo.

Below are some ideas for getting up-to-date photos:

- Ask the foster parents to have a photo session with the child or siblings when the kids are in a good mood or having fun. Be sure to provide the foster parents with photo tips and guidelines about what not to include.

- Make sure that caseworkers and recruiters think about getting photos on their visits. When possible, they should discuss it with the children and foster parents to ensure the children are ready and willing. If it doesn't work on one visit, plan it for the next one.

- Check to see if your agency is involved in any efforts with a professional photographer, such as a Heart Gallery. If so, see if the child can be included in a photo shoot.

- Have teens do a photo shoot with their foster siblings or friends as photographer. Provide some sample photos and easy guidelines to get the best possible results.

- Include high-quality, annual photos in every child's case file, which can then be used for public recruitment and photolisting.

Working with professional photographers

In many communities, agencies are partnering with professional photographers to get the best photos of children who need families. These partnerships are a great way to ensure that you have photos that will make prospective adoptive parents pay attention. Below we provide a case study of how one state partners with professional photographers. Whether you are doing a larger program like this one or working with one or two professional photographers here and there, the lessons for working with professional photographers can be of use.

The Adoption Exchange has a contract with the Colorado Department of Human Services to operate the state's Heart Gallery. As part of this work, the organization works with many professional photographers at multiple sessions each year to photograph about 150 children waiting to be adopted. They've found that the children almost all have a great time and love the final photos, and the photos enhance the state's recruitment efforts.

A core element in the project's success is that the state is very supportive and engaged. State staff encourage caseworkers to participate and mention the photo shoots at adoption supervisor meetings. The state has a goal to have every child photographed and to have an updated photo taken every year and works to achieve this goal.

Engaging professional photographers

The Adoption Exchange has one professional photographer who takes a lead role in helping to choose others. Here's how the organization engages new photographers:

- Some photographers step forward and ask to volunteer. In other cases, staff search the web for local photographers whose work they like. In either case, staff send links of each photographer's work to their lead volunteer photographer who weighs in about the quality of their work and whether it's a good option to pursue.

- If they like the images and the photographer lives near where they hope to have a photo shoot, the project coordinator reaches out to let the photographer know about the project and how children need permanent families. With the outreach, they include a project flyer and talk about how important professional photographers are to the effort.

- If the photographers are interested, The Adoption Exchange conducts a background check before proceeding.

- If the background check is clear, staff will typically talk with the photographer before any photo shoot to answer questions and explain the project, the effects of trauma, and potential behaviors they may see. They also share a tip sheet with specific image requirements and some other dos and don'ts when working with the children.

Plan photo shoots

The Adoption Exchange does about 11 photo shoots in a year, with each having from 3 to 25 children and often multiple photographers. The following are some successful strategies.

Before

- Create a planning committee that includes caseworkers so professionals are engaged from the beginning and can help overcome any logistical hurdles. The Adoption Exchange's committee meets quarterly.

- Ensure that caseworkers, foster parents, mentors, recruiters, or other agency staff are available to transport and supervise the children. The photographers need to be free to take photos, and the project coordinator needs to concentrate on keeping everything running smoothly.

- Send invitations to caseworkers of children waiting to be adopted, with a list of all of the children who need a new or updated photo. Send reminders if they don't respond. Mention the state's goal of photographing all children waiting to be adopted. The Adoption Exchange sends invitations at least a month before the photo shoot and a reminder two weeks before.

- Make a plan to bring siblings to be photographed together. It's worth it even though it may take extra time and effort. The Adoption Exchange lists siblings together in the invitation so the workers know they want them photographed as a group.

- Be prepared to make a plan for children who can't come to an event. The Adoption Exchange has found photographers who are willing to go to hospitals or homes to photograph children who can't make a public event for medical or behavioral reasons.

- Schedule shoots on weekdays rather than on weekends. This tends to help ensure caseworkers can participate and acknowledges that photographers often have competing demands on the weekends.

- Choose venues that have indoor and outdoor options, including small local museums, botanical gardens, stadiums, parks, or an indoor greenhouse garden center. Keep in mind it can take time to get permission from the venue.

- Look at the cases of the children who will be participating and add extra staff if it seems necessary to handle challenging behaviors.

- Show photographers images you like in advance.

- Make sure photographers know how many children they will be photographing and how the schedule will work.

- Take time to make the photographer comfortable before the shoot by explaining more about foster care and adoption and where children might live and that siblings may be living apart.

- Ask that children not wear clothes that have writing or identifiable information, such as a local team or school name.

- Solicit donations of stuffed animals or toys the children can play with—and take home with them.

- Plan 60 to 90 minutes for each child and make sure it's clear in the invitation. At The Adoption Exchange, they typically take about 15 minutes or so for photographs and another 15 or 20 minutes for videos, but having extra time is really important.

During

- At check-in, remind the adult who brought the child that they are responsible for supervising the child.

- Make sure there is always a staff member or volunteer to help out. Don't leave the children alone with the photographer or videographer.

- Have snacks and water on hand for children. Ask caregivers at check-in if the children can have a snack and if they have any allergies.

- Don't use a backdrop. It's better to get something that is more real life and less like a studio shot.

- Have new combs, lotions, and other hair accessories for children to use before the shoot. Ask the children or caregiver if they want to brush their hair before they get started.

- Have an assortment of new or almost new clothes on hand in case children come with clothing that has their school name or other identifying information, is too revealing, or otherwise wouldn't be the best in a profile picture. Let the children keep the clothing they wear. At the Adoption Exchange, staff gently suggest that children change when it seems necessary. They've found they can get lots of items during clearance sales and that sweaters and jackets are a great option as a cover-up.

- Expect that you'll get behind schedule and that you'll have to entertain the children and calm caregivers. People may come early or late and some children may take more time than planned. Extra volunteers, snacks, and toys help everyone get through these struggles.

After

- Ask caseworkers to share the photographs with the children. At the shoot, tell the children to remind their caseworkers if they don't receive one.

- Remind the photographers that they cannot use these photos in their online or print portfolios.

Making videos

At the events, The Adoption Exchange also shoots videos. Because videos really add to recruitment efforts, they try to make about 30-second to two-minute videos (most are around one minute) of each child they photograph for the Heart Gallery. Although they are able to find photographers willing to donate their time at no charge, they typically have to pay videographers given the added time needed to edit and prepare videos after the shoot.

Below are some tips for a successful video shoot:

- Schedule the videos the same day as the photos so you only have to get kids prepared and transported once.

- Have a list of questions that a volunteer or staff member will ask the children about their hobbies, their successes, what they are proud of, etc. (You can use the sample interview questions on our website to get some ideas.)

- Choose a highly skilled interviewer who has a comfortable, low-key manner with children and who has therapeutic experience in case the child begins to struggle.

- If children are reluctant, show them the potential questions and let them choose those they are willing to answer. If you see there's a hesitant child at check-in, you can share the questions then so they have time to pick the ones they want to cover.

- Have small items for the children to hold and play with while they talk—this can help settle them during the interview. Larger items can be distracting.

- Shoot video of children answering the question but also film them playing and walking around. You want this b-roll footage to liven things up and help with editing.

- Don't push if children don't want to make a video. If the children aren't ready and willing, the video won't be successful.

- Shoot video even for children who are non-verbal. You can use it as b-roll footage with narration about who the children are and what makes them happy.

- Be careful with children in skirts, dresses, tank tops, or other clothing that may become revealing if the children move around a lot during the video. These situations may require careful filming and editing to avoid showing too much.

Be careful about geotags

Geotagging is the addition of geographical location information to images or videos. The information is usually in the form of latitude and longitude coordinates, but it can also be place names or zip codes.

To protect children, be sure that if you are using photos online—in photolistings, in social media, or on websites—the photographer or your staff remove geotags from all images.

8 Ensuring strengths-based narratives through contracting

Many public agencies work with nonprofits such as adoption exchanges, private adoption agencies, foster/adoptive parent associations, and other organizations to operate their photolistings or otherwise recruit families for children in foster care. Contractors can also play a key role in supporting your agency in responding to prospective adoptive parents. These public/private partnerships can be a wonderful way to help your agency accomplish your goals of ensuring children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

If you have or plan to have a partnership, you can use the contracting process to help ensure that your partner is on board with your philosophy and practices. In this chapter, we explore some of the key elements to consider when working with contractors.

Child profiles

Shared values and clear working relationship

Developing your partnership with a private agency isn't just about issuing a request for proposals or signing a contract. When the public and private agency form a solid collaboration, you can ensure the best possible outcomes. Consider the following with your private partner:

- **Talk about values** — Achieving strengths-based narratives is first and foremost about embracing the philosophy of protecting children's safety, privacy, and dignity. It's about more than following rules and deleting references to medical information or behavior challenges. When child welfare staff are truly focused on how to most effectively convey a child's best self and encourage prospective adopters, you can see—and feel—the results in the photos and narratives used in recruitment efforts. As the public and private agencies collaborate, it's critical that leaders and staff talk about why these principles matter and how what we share about children demonstrates our belief that they have value and deserve a permanent, loving family.

- **Develop a plan for how public agency staff and contractors work together** — In many systems, public agency caseworkers will remain key players in the development of children's recruitment plans, even if contractors are writing narratives, handling photolisting, or conducting other recruitment activities. Having a group of caseworkers and private agency staff jointly identify a process for how the teams will work together is a great way to achieve buy-in, build relationships, and establish a stronger, more successful partnership.

- **Conduct joint training of agency staff and contracted staff** — Bringing public agency caseworkers, supervisors, and others together with contract staff who will be working with children or developing narratives is an effective way to make sure the whole team is on board with the strengths-based philosophy. These co-trainings enable you to foster a child-focused culture and create connections among the people who will be working to find families for children who are waiting.

Contract requirements

Building relationships is a foundational step, but the contract itself also matters. Just as you will establish internal policies and procedures for ensuring quality work, you'll want to have ways to ensure your private partner understands your goals and guidelines. The following contract elements can help you ensure more effective, strengths-based recruitment for children waiting to be adopted:

- **Information about what can be included in narratives and what cannot** — As noted above, your agency should clearly define its guidelines or policies for narrative content, and this should be communicated in any contract with a private provider.

- **The need to engage children and teens in a developmentally appropriate way** — Each public/ private partnership will be structured differently, but if your private provider, rather than your caseworkers or recruiters, is gathering information for narratives, the contract should address when and how the contractor can and should work with the children. It should also define any required communication with the child's worker. For example, if you're using specialized recruiters, you may require a set number of meetings with the children on their caseload, all in coordination with the caseworker.

- **The need to update photos and narratives every 6 to 12 months** — Make sure your contract is clear about how often each child's profile should be updated. In addition to requiring updates based on a set timeframe, your contract could require updates due to significant changes in a child's life that would affect their narrative or photo. Such changes might include a child whose gender identity or status with siblings has changed.

- **Requirements for photographs** — Your contract might require the private agency to develop a program to partner with professional photographers. Provisions could also cover minimum photo quality, the need for siblings to be photographed together, and removal of geotags or location information. You may also ask contractors to monitor the outside use of any child's photos to be sure the images aren't being used inappropriately or without permission.

- **Clarifying roles and expectations, including your agency's review and quality assurance process** — Be sure your contract includes information about your agency's role in reviewing narratives and photos for adherence to guidelines and for overall quality.

You may need to consider the resources you allocate to the contracted work if you are making significant changes in the time spent engaging youth and frequency of updates or enhancing the review or revision of narratives.

Response systems

Private partnerships can and do play a significant role in helping public agencies respond to inquiries from the public or from home-studied families. Adoption exchanges, parent support groups or organizations, and other agencies—typically with funding from the public agency and others—provide general information about adoption, connect individuals with public and private adoption agencies, and share information about the characteristics and needs of children who need families.

In your contract with a private agency, you may want to consider provisions that guide the timing and content of responses to families. Contract provisions might cover:

- **How quickly staff will respond to all initial inquiries** — Creating a contract requirement for timely response demonstrates the importance your agency places on customer service and how you respect prospective adoptive parents. It helps communicate your values and philosophy to your private partner.

- **How to handle responses from families who have a home study** — Your contract might also address how quickly staff must respond to specific inquiries on a child from a home-studied family or how they connect the family with the child's worker. Contracted staff might have designated protocols to check if the child's worker has responded and to help make any necessary connection between the prospective family and the responsible worker.

- **Types of information to be shared at different stages** — As outlined in chapter 4, you want to spell out when staff can share information that wasn't included in the public narrative with prospective adopters and which information is shared with whom.

- **Requirements for prospective adopters to sign confidentiality agreements** — Before a home-studied family receives protected medical or educational information or other more confidential information, you may require your contractor to have the prospective family sign a statement agreeing to keep information about the child confidential.

Contracts should also cover any data collection or evaluation required to assess the services provided and outcomes of efforts. The next chapter covers key data elements to consider.

9 Evaluation and quality assurance

As with any program or change effort, you need to consider how you'll evaluate outcomes and assess if your efforts are making a difference. Your evaluation plan should address what you're doing, identify outcomes achieved, and monitor if changes are happening as planned. If you gather data early in your system-change efforts, you can establish a baseline and track trends over time to see how well you're doing.

Whatever your evaluation plan is, it's important that staff understand the data they need to collect and how they and leaders will analyze the data to make thoughtful, intentional modifications as necessary over time. Data can also be useful for celebrating successes and continuing to build support for your efforts to implement changes. You can connect these evaluation efforts to the existing evaluation or continuous quality improvement efforts within your child welfare system.

Track what you're doing and if it changes over time

Below we outline the types of data you want to collect in various areas.

Child-specific public recruitment efforts such as photolisting

- How many children are you currently photolisting or otherwise conducting child-specific public recruitment activities for? What are the characteristics of these children, including, age, sibling status, and disabilities?

- Which children—how many and with what characteristics—aren't receiving this type of recruitment but have a plan of adoption and no family identified?

- What are the reasons some children and teens aren't being recruited for or photolisted?

Child narratives and photos

- What percentage of public narratives contain information that your agency has determined should not be included (private data, information about medical or educational issues, negative comments, challenging behaviors, abuse history, placement information, etc.)?

- How often are narratives updated?

- How often are photos updated?

- How many children have videos?

Response to inquiries

- How many general inquiries do you get each month or year?

- How many inquiries are made about each child? Are these inquiries from home-studied families or the general public?

- How quickly do you respond to inquiries? Does it differ for home-studied families versus other members of the public?

- How long, on average, do staff spend with people during an initial inquiry?

- Do staff follow up after the first response with some or all families who inquire? When does this response happen?

Evaluate outcomes

In addition to tracking what you're doing, it's important to assess the outcomes of your services. Below are some data elements and evaluation questions that can help determine how children and families are affected by what you do. Much of this data can be gathered automatically if you're using a photolisting system, but it can also be tracked by staff using customized databases or spreadsheets.

Child narratives and photos

- Does the number of inquiries vary greatly for children of similar characteristics but with more creative or positive narratives? Do adoption rates vary?

- Does updating or improving a narrative result in new or more inquiries, including from home-studied families?

- Does updating a photo result in new or more inquiries, including from home-studied families?

- Do you receive more inquiries for children who have a video than for those who do not?

- Is there a relationship between the number of inquiries and adoption rates for children in your system (that is, do more inquiries seem to correlate with increased likelihood of adoption)?

- At the time of placement, what do adoptive families report about how they first learned about their child or sibling group and their impetus for beginning the adoption process?

Children being photolisting or recruited for

- How many children have been placed as a result of your public recruitment efforts?

- Do your agency's placement rates differ for children of similar age and characteristics when one has had public recruitment efforts and another hasn't?

- How many children and teens are being adopted? What are the ages and other characteristics of these children?

Response to inquiries

To gather information from prospective and current adoptive families about your inquiry response system, you may want to survey all or a sample of those you serve. Their answers will help you assess the quality of your response system and can also provide some outcome data, such as whether families are progressing through training or the home study process or if they have had a child placed.

Tracking tool

AdoptUSKids has a Family Intake Tracking Tool that states and counties can use to track inquiries from prospective families—both inquiries made through the AdoptUSKids photolisting and their own direct inquiries. Contact us at 800-901-6911 or support@adoptuskids.org to learn more about whether this tool would be a good fit for your agency.

Shortly after inquiry

Initial surveys can assess the quality of your customer service and the information provided. You may want to ask questions like those below, with the specific content of the questions shaped by the information you are asking your staff to share with prospective adopters.

Sample survey

- Please rate your satisfaction with the staff you talked to when you called [agency].

- Would you like to share anything else about your discussion with the staff?

- What prompted you to contact us to learn about adoption (an ad or billboard, a specific child, a friend, something else)?

- Did you inquire about a specific child or sibling group? What interested you about that child or sibling group?

- Please rate your current understanding of the following topics:

  > The characteristics of children and youth in foster care

  > The impact of trauma on children and youth in foster care

  > The steps and process for adopting in your state

  > The need for support systems and services for families who foster and adopt

  > The importance of parenting with patience, acceptance, flexibility, and a good sense of humor

Several months after inquiry and periodically thereafter

Over time, your surveys can help determine if people are continuing to pursue adoption and if they are encountering barriers. You can adapt the sample questions below based on your need for information and what you are most interested in.

Sample survey

- Please check all the steps that apply to your most current effort to adopt from foster care. Please do not include information related to any previous adoption processes you've been through. Check all that apply.

  - ☐ Have attended orientation or an information meeting
  - ☐ Have attended a parent support group
  - ☐ Have completed an application to adopt from foster care
  - ☐ Currently working with an agency
  - ☐ Have completed family training
  - ☐ Have completed the home study process
  - ☐ Currently licensed, approved, or certified:
    - ☐ To foster
    - ☐ To adopt
    - ☐ To foster and adopt
  - ☐ Currently registered on [agency's] photolisting website
  - ☐ Currently registered on the AdoptUSKids photolisting website
  - ☐ Currently have a child or sibling group placed in our home
  - ☐ Had an adoptive placement disrupt; my family is continuing in the adoption process
  - ☐ Finalized an adoption of a child(ren) from the foster care system
    - ☐ Did you find the child on the [agency] photolisting?
  - ☐ Discontinued the process of adopting from foster care
  - ☐ None of the steps above apply to our family's most current process

- Which of these barriers have you encountered, if any, in your most current efforts to adopt from the foster care system? Please do not include information related to previous adoption processes. Check all that apply.

  - ☐ The process of being matched with a child has taken too long.
  - ☐ Personal circumstances have changed (moved, changed jobs, etc.).
  - ☐ The type of child we want has not been available.

- ☐ The process has been too difficult (for example, too much paperwork).

- ☐ Agencies have not returned our calls or emails.

- ☐ Agencies have provided inaccurate information.

- ☐ We have encountered barriers working across county, district, or state lines.

- ☐ Necessary services or resources have not been available or have not been sufficient.

- ☐ We have not been receiving the emotional support that we need from child welfare agencies.

- ☐ Other barrier. Please explain: _____

- ☐ We have not encountered any barriers in our process to become an adoptive parent.

Your surveys should also ask demographic data about the family and on any children they have adopted.

Assess if your efforts to implement changes are making a difference

With any effort to reform or change your system, you need to carefully monitor if you're seeing the changes you wanted and expected. For example, you might need a periodic compliance review of profiles of children waiting to be adopted to determine if they meet your guidelines and have an overall positive feel.

Assess if changes are happening

You'll need to compare data from when you started your system-change effort to now. Comparisons might include:

- Are you publicly recruiting for more children?

- Are more of your narratives positive and complying with your guidance?

- Are responses happening within the suggested timelines?

- Have inquiries increased?

- Are children receiving more inquiries? If so, which children?

- Are families moving more quickly or successfully through the process now that you have protocols for responding quickly and following up?

Determine causes and address barriers

Because so many elements will affect final outcomes for children waiting for adoption, the data can't tell you cause and effect. You'll want to review data and discuss it with a team of key players at various levels to help decide what the data are suggesting and how you might respond. Questions the team might address include:

- If narratives aren't improving or meeting guidelines, are the reviews happening? Have you had turnover in key staff? Have staff received the right materials and training?

- If profile updates aren't done every 6 to 12 months, is it clear who is responsible for doing the updates? Are staff overloaded?

- If photos aren't good enough, what are the barriers to getting up-to-date, high-quality photos? How are other agencies successfully overcoming these challenges?

- If inquiry responses aren't happening on time, do you have enough staff assigned? Should you consider engaging a partner to help with this?

- Have the follow-up surveys identified any bottlenecks in the system or barriers you need to address?

- If families are regularly dropping out in certain spots (such as after training or licensing), how can you increase your connection with them? Can you create groups for waiting families or provide additional support to keep them engaged?

Hosting quarterly meetings for a few champions and key staff members involved in this effort can help you assess your progress and decide where you can make changes to your implementation plans. During the meetings, you can review data, discuss what people are hearing from staff, and find out if anything you hadn't planned for is complicating your system-change efforts.

10 Creating an implementation plan

As you move forward with the ideas in this guide, you may want to create an implementation plan that addresses policies and procedures, staffing, training, and evaluation. The plan will help you capture details and manage information, such as:

- Timelines for smaller or incremental steps; information about what to do first and what will take more time or a larger effort

- Specific people to involve for particular activities or for ongoing engagement

- Workgroups and key meetings that could support the activities in the plan

- Other important initiatives or events that need to be considered as you conduct the strategies and activities in you change effort

In addition to developing a long-term plan, you can identify smaller tasks to do soon. Consider convening a small team to develop your implementation strategy and identify what you might do over time, such as the steps outlined below. You may find it helpful to include your implementation plan—or higher-level details from the plan—in your Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) and your Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR), as part of your description of how you're using photolisting within your diligent recruitment plan.

Implementation over time

Steps you could take in one month

- Review the child narratives in your state or local photolisting or on AdoptUSKids. Are they compelling? Is there information in the narratives that you think should not be public?

- Ask staff to read *Creating Effective Narratives for Children Waiting to Be Adopted* and watch the AdoptUSKids webinar *Effective Photolisting: Best Practices for Developing Strengths-Based Narratives*.

- Share with your staff sample narratives (ones you've found or the ones in *Creating Effective Narratives for Children Waiting to Be Adopted*). This gives them an idea of what you're aspiring to and helps them think differently.

- Begin discussions with staff about how you're doing with narratives and where you could improve. Ask staff to identify colleagues or volunteers who have great writing skills and could help with editing efforts.

- If there are narratives you really loved during your review, find out who wrote them. That person may be a great trainer or champion for this effort. They could also take the lead on editing narratives for others.

Steps you could take in three months

- Review your existing policies, if any, on which children are photolisted, what is included in child narratives, and how often your narratives and photos are updated.

- Create or update guidelines or policies about what should and shouldn't be in a child's public narrative to be most protective of children's safety, privacy, and dignity.

- Decide how to communicate with prospective parents about your policies on public child narratives. Make sure you're letting them know when they'll receive more information and giving them general information about the effects of trauma on children and adoptive families' need for ongoing support.

- Create a plan to revise narratives to meet your standards. Identify staff members who will review narratives for quality and compliance with your guidelines. Make sure you're considering the role of caseworkers, recruiters, and any others involved in developing narratives and how they will work together as a team.

- Develop a process through which you'll share more private information with families who have a home study and have signed a confidentiality agreement. Outline what is shared in these private narratives versus what is saved for later through discussions between families and the child's worker.

- Review how your agency responds to families who inquire about specific children and who handles the response. Identify any policies related to the public and home-studied families and required response time. Determine if you are providing support and follow-up with families who inquire.

- Determine what data you're collecting now on how successful your photolisting and similar efforts are. Figure out if you track how many inquiries are generated by these efforts or how many children are placed as result of local, state, or national photolisting.

- Review the data you currently have about responses to photolisting and similar efforts and decide if you need more data. Develop a plan to answer questions such as: Is your system working? Do families get connected with children through your process? Are there specific places or ways the system falls short?

- If you don't have the data you need, work with staff to develop a plan to collect it.

- Convene a work group to discuss what changes you need to make at which levels to improve your child narratives and response system. Include participants from public and private partners, as well as recruiters, caseworkers, managers, and supervisors.

Steps you could take in six months

- Create a team that will review what's working and where you need to continue to improve. Conduct a review of what you've done to date: Are the narratives more positive and engaging? Are they more up-to-date? How do staff feel about the new guidelines and the review process?

- Assess how many children you are seeking families for through photolisting or similar recruitment—both at the local level and nationally. Answer the questions: Who is left out of this type of recruitment and why? Are you doing all you can to find families for the children in your care?

- Integrate training on creating strengths-based narratives into your existing education program for new and existing staff.

- Implement new efforts to better engage young people in contributing to or writing their narratives. Have staff develop and share sample interview questions and forms for workers to use with children, and add training on effective, protective youth engagement.

- Develop protocols for your response time to inquiries and for what information you share with the public such as information on the needs of children, how the adoption process works, and what their next steps are. Share this information will all staff, volunteers, or contractors who are handling inquiries.

- If necessary, identify volunteer parents or staff who can help respond to inquiries, especially if you have a backlog of people who haven't been responded to.

Steps you could take in one year

- Assess staffing structure and needs to see if making additions or changes would help you have more effective child narratives and inquiry response system. Assess if current staff have the competencies you need (writing skills, commitment to being strengths-based, effective skills at building rapport with youth, customer-service orientation). If not, develop a plan to build their skills, change job descriptions, or add to your staff.

- Update performance reviews or implement other methods for showing staff how committed you are to being strengths-based and responsive.

- Determine if you need to update your contracts with private providers to include more information about your policies or procedures related to photolisting, child narratives, and response systems.

- Explore options for partnering or contracting with adoption exchanges, foster/adoptive parent associations, or others for the development of narratives or responding to inquiries.

- Analyze the data you have been collecting over the past six months to a year. Have your team review what's working and where you need to continue to improve: If you've shifted to more positive narratives, have you seen an increase in inquiries? Can you tell if those individuals are still connected and moving forward in the process? Are there data elements you are still missing?

Moving forward

All of your work as a child welfare administrator or manager is dedicated to ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. Children benefit from having permanent, loving families, and families across the country have stepped forward to care for children of all ages and abilities. Using photolisting and other child-specific public recruitment efforts is one of many ways to accomplish similar success stories and ensure that every child has the permanent, loving family they need to grow and thrive.

Using these recruitment efforts while also protecting children's safety, dignity, and privacy may require a shift in thinking or practice for some agencies. We hope this guide will make it easier for you to take steps necessary in your system to use child-specific public recruitment safely and effectively.

As you move forward with planning and implementation, AdoptUSKids is here to help. You can contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org for more information and support, including ways to connect with your peers to share ideas and learn from each other. In addition, we have helpful tools and resources, including the following mentioned in this guide:

- *Creating Effective Narratives for Children Waiting to Be Adopted*

- *Using Customer Service Concepts to Enhance Recruitment and Retention Practices*

- *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*

- Publications and tip sheets on interjurisdictional placements

- *Is Your Response System Family Friendly?* (assessment tool)

- *Effective Photolisting: Best Practices for Developing Strengths-Based Narratives* (webinar)

Checklists

Below are two checklists to help with your implementation efforts—one for administrators and other leaders and a second for staff who are actively engaged in creating child narratives.

Administrator's checklist

The checklist below offers an overview of the things you might do as you begin to implement a system that features strengths-based narratives of children waiting to be adopted.

Overall implementation

☐ Identify key staff and contractors who should be involved.

☐ Develop an implementation team and discuss your overall goals.

☐ Develop an implementation plan with at least some objectives and timelines.

Photolisting and other child-specific public recruitment efforts

☐ Find out which children you are photolisting or otherwise doing public child-specific recruitment for and if there is a formal policy about which children are involved.

☐ Examine whether other children would benefit from this type of recruitment.

☐ Determine if you need a new policy in this area to include more children.

☐ Share your policy and requirements with all staff.

☐ Discuss as a team how to overcome barriers to recruiting for more children (such as barriers to interstate placement that affect decisions to photolist children nationally).

☐ Determine if you have protocols and supports in place related to working with youth who will be photolisted or recruited for. Update these as necessary and share with staff.

☐ Assess current efforts to track and evaluate the results of your efforts. Decide if enhancements are necessary.

☐ Share with staff individual success stories and positive data about photolisting and other similar recruitment efforts.

Child profiles

Public narratives and photos

☐ Review existing public child narratives and photos; decide if they are strengths-based and how much you need to change.

☐ Review policy or written guidelines about what can be included in public narratives.

    ☐ If you don't have guidelines, create them.

    ☐ If you have guidelines, consider if you need to update them to be more strengths-based.

☐ Consider requirements to have positive information and strengths included in case files, both to ensure strengths-based practice and to provide materials for narratives.

☐ Review any policy or written guidelines about engaging youth in contributing to or developing their narratives.

☐ Review your policy or written guidelines about photo quality and content. If you don't have them, create them.

☐ Decide if a partnership with professional photographers is a good fit for your recruitment plans.

☐ Determine if you need to develop a policy or written guidelines about how often narratives and photos should be updated.

    ☐ If you have guidelines, determine if you are meeting them.

☐ Decide how you can use a pre-publication review process to ensure narratives are of high quality and adhere to your policies.

    ☐ Decide if you also need a compliance review process for already published narratives to make sure they meet your guidelines and help determine if there are gaps in training, information sharing, or draft review.

☐ Make sure all staff involved in creating public child profiles have:

    ☐ Understanding of how important strengths-based practice is.

    ☐ Copies of your policy or guidelines.

    ☐ Samples of narratives that engage readers and present children well.

    ☐ Information about how to successfully engage children and youth in contributing to or developing their narratives.

    ☐ Training on the importance of strength-based narratives and your guidelines.

    ☐ Clear understanding of the review process.

☐ Determine if you can integrate ideas on strengths-based photolisting and other child-specific public recruitment in existing staff training.

☐ Consider if there is a better way for you to develop child narratives than your current plan, such as by designating a few talented writers or editors or by contracting out the work.

☐ Share information with prospective adoptive parents about how and why you share information on a continuum.

☐ Determine how you should track and evaluate the results of the reforms you seek to implement.

Private narratives

☐ Determine if you have a process through which you share more private information with home-studied families.

    ☐ If you do, decide if you're sharing the right amount of information at the right time. Determine any policy or guidelines updates needed.

    ☐ If you don't, develop a plan for creating policy and practice standards.

☐ Share information with staff about your process, policy, and guidelines.

☐ Decide if you should have prospective families sign a confidentiality statement or agreement before receiving more information.

Responding to inquiries

☐ Determine who is currently responding to inquiries from the public and from home-studied families and if it's the most effective use of staff resources.

☐ Review any policy or written guidelines you have on timeliness of response to prospective adopters.

    ☐ If you have one, decide if it meets your current goals.

    ☐ If you don't, determine if you should create a policy or guidelines.

☐ Determine if you're currently explaining to prospective adoptive parents when they can receive more information about children waiting to be adopted.

    ☐ If you're not, decide where you can add information (such as on your website, in your photolisting information, in email information packets, and in other resource materials you share with prospective parents).

☐ Assess current efforts to track and evaluate the results of your work. Decide if enhancements are necessary.

Staff checklist

Below is a checklist you can share with staff who are developing public profiles of children and teens waiting to be adopted.

Before writing the profile

☐ Have you reviewed the guidelines about what to include, what not to include, and what to be careful about?

☐ Have you read some sample narratives that you find inspiring?

☐ Have you (or someone else) gathered as much information from the child or teen about what they like, what they are proud of, and who they are?

☐ Have you made sure any information you have is accurate and up to date?

☐ Do you have any quotes from the child or others in their life (including you, if you know the child) that will make it more interesting?

☐ Do you have a current, high-quality photo of the child? If it's a sibling group, are they pictured together?

After drafting the narrative

☐ Have you presented the child's or sibling group's strengths, likes, hope, dreams, and personality?

☐ Did you include accurate and positive details and descriptions?

☐ Have you reviewed it and thought about how it makes you feel? Do you think you'd want to learn more about this young person?

☐ If you don't know the child personally, have you run it by the people who do?

☐ Has someone else reviewed the narrative and photo to see whether it meets your agency's guidelines?

☐ Has someone reviewed the narrative for typos or writing errors?

☐ If developmentally appropriate, has the child or teen had an opportunity to read it and make suggestions for changes?

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