

Find Families with Capacity to Meet the Needs of Children in Care

When children cannot safely remain with their birth parents, the child welfare system faces an immediate need to find families to care for them. Placements that begin as short-term arrangements may turn into long-term relationships. Some of these placements may ultimately turn into permanent families for children who are not able to be reunified. Finding the right families for children needing care poses problems for many systems. A common dilemma is the existence of a mismatch between the preferences and abilities of prospective foster/adoptive parents and the ages and needs of children waiting for families. Several approaches have been identified that help to assure children can be placed in families that are willing and prepared to meet their needs. These methods include: (1) family search and engagement; (2) targeted recruitment of foster and adoptive families; and (3) child-specific recruitment for adoption.

Family Search and Engagement

Perhaps the most effective strategy to find families for children needing care is to begin with people who already have relationships with the children and are willing and able to safely care for them. The practice of Family Search and Engagement is taking root across the spectrum of child welfare services. It is being used not only to identify relatives and other caring adults as placement resources but also to provide a network of support for families and children. This movement is supported by a growing body of research indicating that children in kinship care experience greater placement stability and better adjustment in many areas of well-being than those in non-kinship foster care (Winokur, Holtan & Batchelder, 2014).

Kinship parents need education and support that is tailored to their unique circumstances. They differ from traditional foster parents in that they have little or no time to consider or prepare before taking on the caregiving role, and they must also address complex relationships and shifting roles within their own families. They may be stressed by financial challenges as well as by the need to respond to the trauma and loss experienced by the children in their care.

They need agency assistance in the form of education, support, and concrete services to help them adapt to the caregiving role, navigate the child welfare system, and meet the needs of children. Kinship parents should have the opportunity to learn about all of the permanency options available to them so that they can make informed decisions. Tools and resources related to kinship care and permanency can be found at the following sites:

- *Child Welfare Information Gateway* has collected many state and local examples related to *achieving permanency in kinship care*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/kinship/permanency/statelocalexamples.cfm>
- The *National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections* website offers access to many materials and practice examples on *family search and engagement*. <http://www.nrcpfc.org/is/family-search-and-engagement.html>
- The *National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness at Seneca Family of Agencies* has a large collection of resources on family search and engagement, including archived documents from the *California Permanency for Youth Project*. <http://familyfinding.org/resourcesandpublications.html>

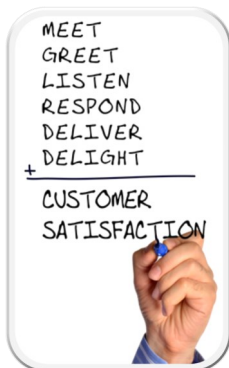
Targeted Recruitment of Foster and Adoptive Parents

Even when relative resources are widely used, there continues to be a need for a pool of foster and adoptive parents who have the capacity to provide nurturing homes for children in care. Attracting these families is rooted in how well a system can analyze their child base and then craft a community message designed to appeal to families with the characteristics indicated as needed by the data. Once the message is crafted, the system needs to invest resources in getting the message out to the community.



Often times this requires creativity in being able to think “outside the box” to identify groups of people that may have the skills necessary and the desire to foster/adopt. Agencies need to be careful in crafting their message so that they do not mask the true needs of the children in care or the skills that foster/adoptive parents will need to effectively parent children who have endured traumatic events. Agencies have to push themselves to move away from the “heart and home messaging” and be upfront and realistic about the needs of children and some of the challenges that may arise in parenting.

An important component to targeted recruitment entails customer service. For profit businesses have learned the importance of making their customers feel supported and heard. Publix, a large grocery store chain in the South, has coined the term, “Where Shopping is a Pleasure.” Publix backs this term with customer service from the time a person enters their store to the time they are getting in their car. Employees are trained and expected to go out of their way to meet the needs of shoppers. Customer service is also exhibited in their hours of operation, which are convenient to the customers, informed employees, who can answer questions, friendly staff, who answer calls, and a robust customer service department, that effectively and efficiently handles complaints.



For too long, child welfare agencies have failed to recognize quality customer service as a direct linkage to effective recruitment. Word of mouth is one of the primary ways of recruitment. If foster/adoptive parents feel that the system supports them throughout the process then they are more likely to encourage their friends and relatives to foster/adopt. Agencies need to have policies and procedures in place that welcome families who express an interest, and

efficiently move them through the licensure process, if it appears they would be good resources for children. This support needs to start at the initial inquiry and continue throughout their time of service as foster or adoptive parents.

The National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment (<http://www.nrcdr.org/>) has developed many tools and resources to assist agencies in their efforts to recruit, support, and retain families including:

- The *Diligent Recruitment Navigator* is a customizable online tool to assist States, Tribes, and Territories through the process of developing a comprehensive,

multi-faceted, diligent recruitment program. The Navigator provides suggested discussion questions and people to include in the process of developing a diligent recruitment program tailored to the needs of each jurisdiction. <http://www.nrcdr.org/diligent-recruitment/dr-navigator>

- A collection of materials on *Using Social Media in Recruitment and Retention* contains links to publications about different types of social media and a selection of social media platforms. <http://www.nrcdr.org/develop-and-support-families/ideas-from-the-field#social-media>
- Using *Customer Service Concepts to Enhance Recruitment and Retention Practices* provides child welfare agency leaders with an overview of customer-service concepts that can help with recruitment and retention of foster, adoptive, and kinship families. http://adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/using-customer-service-concepts-to-enhance-recruitment-and-retention-practices.pdf
- *Going Beyond Recruitment for 11 to 17 Year Olds* provides information about strategies, resources, and key steps for building capacity to recruit and retain families for 11 to 17-year-old youth and to prepare these children for adoption. http://adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/going-beyond-recruitment-for-11-to-17-year-olds.pdf
- *Building Successful Resource Families: A Guide for Public Agencies*, available from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, is another useful publication. This guide shares information and examples based on the Foundation’s experience helping many jurisdictions strengthen their programs to recruit, develop, and support adoptive, kinship and foster care families. <http://www.aecf.org/resources/building-successful-resource-families/>

Child-Specific Adoption Recruitment

For children with a plan of adoption who do not have identified families, individualized efforts are necessary. Today, these efforts are likely to include a combination of family search and engagement (as described above) along with recruitment strategies that make the children’s need for families visible to a large pool of potential adoptive families.

Programs and Resources

- The *Wendy's Wonderful Kids Program* (<https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/what-we-do/wendys-wonderful-kids/>) of the Dave Thomas Foundation provides individualized recruiters to serve small caseloads of waiting children. They work aggressively to find each child a family “through the starting points of familiar circles of family, friends and neighbors, and then reaching out to the communities in which they live.” A five-year *evaluation* (http://childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/WWKEvalRpt_Summary.pdf) of Wendy's Wonderful Kids found that children served by the program are three times more likely to be adopted than those who do not receive the service, and the likelihood of adoption was highest among the oldest youth and those with mental health disorders.
- The National Resource Center for Adoption's *Adoption Competency Curriculum* is a comprehensive tool to train child welfare staff on all phases of the adoption process, including child-specific recruitment. <http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/curriculums/home/trainers-guide/>
- National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, has two *publications related to child-specific adoption practice*: *Lasting Impressions: A Guide for Photolisting Children* (http://www.adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/lasting-impressions.pdf) and *Finding a Fit that will Last a Lifetime: A Guide to Connecting Adoptive Families with Waiting Children* (https://www.adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/finding-a-fit-that-will-last-a-lifetime.pdf).

References

- Malm, K., Vandivere, S., Allen, T., DeVooght, K., Ellis, R., McKlinton, A., Smollar, J., Williams, E. & Zinn, A. (2011). *Evaluation report summary: The Wendy's Wonderful Kids initiative*. Child Trends: Washington, D.C. Retrieved from https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Evaluation_Report_Summary.pdf
- Winokur M., Holtan A., & Batchelder K.E. (2014). *Kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment*. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Issue 1. Abstract retrieved from <http://summaries.cochrane.org/CD006546/kinship-care-for-the-safety-permanency-and-well-being-of-maltreated-children>

*National Resource Center for Adoption Permanency Support and Preservation Model, 2014.
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