

Prepare Children for Permanency

From the time the child welfare system enters their lives, children need information and support to help process the transitions they will experience. Children also need regular opportunities to express their views and to have their preferences acknowledged by family members, caregivers, and decision makers. These opportunities must be conducted in a manner that is attuned to their age and development and should include venues for the children to address feelings about the events of their lives. These types of interventions are needed for all children in out-of-home care, regardless of their path to permanency. As a result, children who are adopted or enter a guardianship arrangement should have been prepared throughout their entire experience in out-of-home care. Even with this ongoing preparation, adoption requires specialized preparation and support as observed by Hanna (2007, p.1):

“Adoption issues often arise at developmentally significant times in a child's life and adoptive parents may need to continue working with the child, building on the foundation of preparation work done by the child's caseworker or therapist. If the preparation work is insufficient or ineffective, adoptive parents may face greater challenges as they help the child resolve issues related to their past, present and future.”

Preparation for permanency involves addressing issues of trauma loss, and process of family integration. Three key tasks that must be addressed have been outlined in *The 3-5-7 Model for Preparing Children for Permanency*, developed by Darla Henry, Ph.D., and summarized in the National Resource Center for Adoption's *Adoption Competency Curriculum* (2012, pp. 35-40):

1. **Clarification:** Assist children in understanding what has happened in their lives.
2. **Integration:** Help children develop the ability to understand their membership in more than one family and manage feelings regarding loyalty conflicts.

3. **Actualization:** Support children to begin the process of visualizing themselves as a member of one specific family and developing a sense of belonging as a permanent member of that family.

Comprehensive Assessment of Children

Assessment of the needs of children prior to adoption or guardianship begins with an active information gathering process and results in a comprehensive written profile. Profiles should accurately summarize and evaluate all of the information that is available regarding children's history, current functioning, strengths, needs, relationships and preferences. A competent assessment recognizes the impact of trauma.

Assessment and preparation for permanency are closely related. Information gained in the assessment process can be used to assist preparation for permanency, and information gathered in preparation activities can strengthen the assessment. The completed assessment serves as the foundation for developing service plans, making placement decisions, and disclosing background information to prospective adoptive or guardianship families. In addition, the assessment provides children with a sense of their history, providing critical information about their living arrangements while in care, medical conditions, and birth families.

When writing an assessment, the professional should be guided by the following two key questions:

1. What would I want to know if I were this child, later in life?
2. What would I want to know if I were the prospective adoptive parent or guardian of this child?



For additional information along with practice strategies, see the Child Assessment and Preparation Module of the National Resource Center for Adoption's (NRCA) *Adoption Competency Curriculum*.

Practice tips for direct service workers and coaching strategies for supervisors can be found in the recent tip sheets on *assessing* children and youth and *preparing* them for permanency at <http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/childwelfaretopics/>.

Engagement of Children in the Permanency Planning Process



An asset-based approach that helps children build positive relationships, opportunities, skills, and values has been found to assist them in considering adoption and achieving positive

outcomes (Howse, Diehl & Trivette, 2010). Older youth need factual information about adoption and guardianship as options, as well as opportunities to explore their fears, hopes, concerns, and preferences. Older youth should be given the opportunity to determine the role that they want to play in the adoption planning process, including participation in decision-making teams. They should have opportunities to express their opinions and preferences and to hear directly from adults who are working on their behalf.

A variety of approaches and examples of youth engagement in planning teams can be found in the *Youth Permanency Toolkit, Component #3*, developed by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. http://www.nrcpfc.org/toolkit/youth-permanency/brief_history.html

The Child Permanency Comparison Chart is a tool that caseworkers can use directly with older youth to explain adoption and guardianship. To see how the New York State Office of Children and Family Services incorporated the chart in its *Kinship Guardianship Assistance Practice Guide* go to: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/toolkit/youth-permanency/>. (The Child Permanency Comparison Chart is Appendix E, pages E1-E6.)

Responding to Children who say No to Adoption or Guardianship

When children express reluctance or opposition to the idea of adoption or guardianship, they benefit from low-key discussion that focuses on understanding their concerns, and finding solutions whenever possible. This is sometimes referred to as “unpacking the no.” For instance, reluctance may center on a need to continue contact with birth family members, to live with siblings, or to avoid changing one’s name. It may be difficult for older youth to see adoption, or any form of permanency, as a positive option for themselves when they can’t comprehend the concept in a manner that is applicable to their lives. Children generally find real value in direct conversations with other children who have obtained permanency through adoption or guardianship.

Increasing Your Agency’s Capacity to Respond to Prospective Parents and Prepare Older Youth for Adoption, developed by the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, provides practical information on working with older youth in the adoption process. http://www.nrcdr.org/_assets/files/using-customer-service-concepts-to-enhance-recruitment-and-retention-practices.pdf

NRCA’s *Adoption Tapestry* features audio stories from adopted persons and their families throughout the country: <http://www.nrcadoption.org/map/>. These three to four minute audio clips may be a useful tool to help children learn about adoption and how it has impacted other children.

Additional Resources on Preparation

Many resources are available to assist in the preparation process, beginning with the Lifebook as a central tool for preparing children:

- The Child Assessment and Preparation section of NRCA’s *Adoption Competency Curriculum* offers detailed practice guidance. <http://www.nrcadoption.org/wp-content/uploads/TG-Child-Assessment-Preparation-JAN-2012.pdf>
- The Child Welfare Information Gateway publication, *Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency* discusses the evolution of preparation for permanency, summarizes existing preparation models, and details practice principles and interventions. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/preparing_youth.pdf

- For Information on the 3-5-7 Model, see the Darla Henry and Associates' website at <http://darlahenry.org/>.
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network website offers numerous information resources as well as access to intervention tools and resources. <http://nctsnet.org/>

Local Examples

- The Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) includes *Child Profile and Child Preparation services* among a full array of services for children in need of permanent families. <http://www.adoptpakids.org/>
- Anu Family Services in Wisconsin provides treatment foster care, family-preservation, post-permanency supports, and intensive permanency services. Anu's guidebook, *Creating a Permanency Driven Organization*, describes organizational strategies to improve permanency outcomes as well as direct practice interventions to engage children and prepare them for permanency. <https://www.anufs.org/>.
- Many more program examples and resources are described in the Child Welfare Information Gateway publication, *Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency*. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/preparing_youth.pdf.

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