



Fact Sheet

How Relationship Education Leads to Stronger Foster and Adoptive Families

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Parenting children with a history of trauma in their lives can be challenging; parents often feel isolated and hesitant to share their challenges with other family members and friends. When parents are frequently called to school meetings for behavioral issues and face a revolving door of mental health therapists, they may wonder if they made the right choice to become a foster or adoptive parent. Integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into services for foster and adoptive families is critical to helping families stay together so they can provide a strong base for their children's well-being.



Background

Approximately 415,000 children were in foster care in 2010 and nearly a million children have been adopted domestically, internationally, and from foster care over the past 15 years.¹ Even strong families face difficult challenges upon foster and adoptive placement; children who have experienced multiple placements, abuse, neglect, and trauma place high demands on a family's capacity to meet their complex needs. Investing in additional supports for foster and adoptive parents is important. Failed placements can have a tremendous negative impact on the child in addition to the increased

fiscal and workload burden on the child welfare system.

Placement stability is a critical factor in helping adopted and foster children succeed in school and life. While the vast majority of foster and adoptive families manage to be largely successful with their placements, there are some disturbing statistics:

- Only 33% of children who have been in foster care for more than 24 months have had two or fewer placements.²
- Older teens, ages 15-17, have the highest rate of re-entry to foster care (close to one-third). The majority experience re-entry because of behavioral issues.³
- According to a recent study of children who re-entered out-of-home care after adoption from October 2004 through September 2005, 44% of these children re-entered care due to behavioral problems and 18.2% for caregiver inability to cope. The median age of these children was 14.4 years and they were found twice as likely as non-adopted children to be placed in group or institutional care.⁴

Benefits

Building stronger family relationships requires parents to place an emphasis on communicating well with each other. This principle applies whether the parents are biological, foster, or adoptive. If a couple is strong and united, they will be happier and more effective as parents. Healthy marriage and relationship education helps parents recognize, strengthen, and model their healthy

relationship skills, including constructive problem-solving and healthy conflict management.



Children learn best by observing their parents and caregivers, particularly how they talk and work out their differences with each other. When children who have grown up in dysfunctional families observe repeated healthy relationship skills in action—such as communication and conflict resolution—they learn to become more resilient and to break out of dysfunctional family relationship patterns.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has used healthy marriage and relationship education as a post-adoption service through demonstration projects beginning in 2004.* Evaluations of these projects showed several positive findings:

- Relationships were improved among the couples;
- Parents felt less isolated;
- Reduced percentage of divorces compared to standard divorce rates;
- Increased sense that couples could communicate more effectively.⁵

Both foster care and adoption have changed dramatically. Today, foster parents have become a critical part of the child welfare delivery system, often acting as mentors and partners to birth parents when children come into foster care.

Dr. John Gottman has identified several key attributes that keep marriages strong:

- Behaving like good friends.
- Handling conflicts in positive ways.
- Strengthening friendships by understanding their partner's "inner world" and supporting their partner's dreams.
- Constructive relationship problem solving by understanding how to deal with conflicts.
- Learning to work towards compromise during disagreements.
- Repairing and recovering relationships after disagreements.
- Building emotional connections through intimacy and affection.
- Healing past wounds by exploring hardships and understanding them.⁶

*Since 2002, the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has approved 15 waiver demonstration projects and eight discretionary grants to allow child support programs and other organizations to pursue a variety of strategies to promote healthy marriages. As of May 2011, over 15,000 couples and individuals have received healthy marriage, couples skill-building, and child support education through these programs. Also, in 2005, Congress enacted the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants program, administered by the Office of Family Assistance, which authorized \$100 million per year for five years for programs that promoted healthy marriages. Another \$75 million was authorized in 2011.

Foster parents can have a powerful impact on birth parents as they co-parent with them to bring stability and solid parenting habits into the birth family, and they can also be the drivers of reunification by assisting social workers.

Helping families that have subjected a child to abuse or neglect is a tough job, but experienced foster families know how important their role is and can take satisfaction that they have done their job when a birth parent thanks them for their help and guidance.

For adoptive families—who are often the foster families initially—birth family connections can be more complex, but these families know that by keeping connections they are helping their child understand his or her history.

Integrating Relationship Education Services

The post-adoption and marriage education demonstration projects funded by ACF used several different models based on the needs of the population and type of service delivery system: some organizations did intensive weekend training seminars that gave couples instruction and the opportunity to have a weekend away from home; other organizations looked at multiple classes over several weeks; and some programs did more intensive individualized work with couples in combination with classes.

Agencies looking to integrate relationship education programs need to evaluate program models based on several factors:

- Density of population group;
- Funding for supportive measures (such as child care); and
- Intensity and length of training.

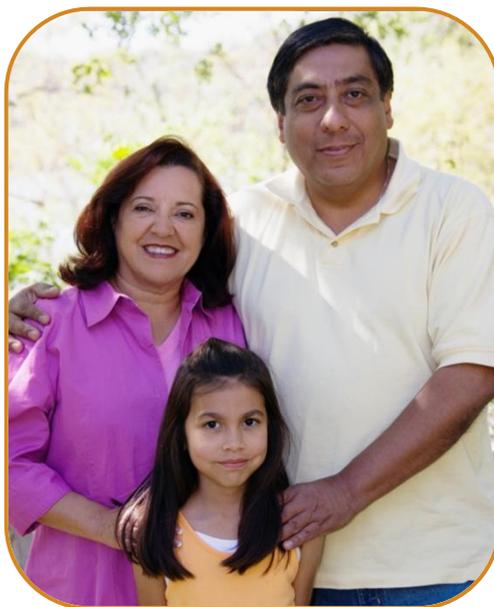
Outreach strategies

Outreach strategies are important and critical to success. Some State or county agencies used partnerships with faith-based organizations to connect with foster and adoptive families. Other States used State adoption assistance records to target families for training. While outreach through agencies, parent support groups, social media, and websites can be effective, families who participate in successful programs often became the best ambassadors.

Additional supports for families

Additional supports for families are important during relationship education programs. Couples working on their relationships may be digging deeply into their own personal history and traumas. Successful programs use multiple resources to support couples: referrals to mental health therapists with expertise in

working with couples (as well as adoption and foster care issues); support groups; extra learning opportunities; libraries; tip sheets; and parent mentors. Providing stipends or childcare services during workshops is helpful for retaining families in multi-week sessions. Some organizations have had success with small stipends for “date your mate” nights during trainings. In general, personalizing workshops and supports to address clients’ needs is a good strategy for intensifying the success of relationship education programs.



Evaluation

Evaluation is critical for agencies to understand impact and plan for the future. Agencies need to consider how they can effectively evaluate their programs in a cost-efficient manner.

Evaluation can be done in various ways; for example, with simple pre- and post-tests. Agencies may gather and analyze demographic information about the couple as well as a child within the family. Agencies with qualified staff may take advantage of standardized measures and tools to test the families pre- and post-services, at one month, three months, one year, and five year intervals. Paper evaluations, online surveys, and longitudinal evaluations (through relationships with universities) are all ways to evaluate. Each agency should look carefully at its capacity for evaluation and choose an approach that is well-suited to its specific circumstances.

Learn more about evaluation strategies and available tools:

- **Tools for Evaluating Training Curricula and Materials from the Child Welfare Information Gateway**, available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/training/assessment/tools.cfm>
- **Conceptualizing and Measuring “Healthy Marriages” for Empirical Research and Evaluation Studies from Child Trends**, available in the virtual library at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org

Conclusion

Strong, healthy foster and adoptive families are critical for an agency to make a positive impact on the lives of the children served. Supporting caregiver relationships is necessary and beneficial because stabilizing children in families, whether temporarily in foster care or permanently in adoptive homes, helps ensure efficient service provision that makes a difference to families and children.

Work Consulted

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement. (n.d.). *Child Support Fact Sheet Series: Health Family Relationships (Number 5)*. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ocse/healthy_family_relationships.pdf

Notes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2011). *Child welfare outcomes: 2007-2010 report to congress*. Author; Smith, S. L. (2010). *Keeping the promise: The critical need for post-adoption services to enable children and families to succeed*. New York, NY: Donaldson Adoption Institute.
- ² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2011). *Child welfare outcomes: 2007-2010 report to congress*. Author.
- ³ Casey Family Programs. (2012). IV-E Waiver: To apply or not to apply? Using data in the application planning process [PowerPoint Slides]. Child Trends Conversation.
- ⁴ Festinger, T. & Maza, P. (2009). Displacement or post-adoption placement? A Research Note. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, (3): 275-286.
- ⁵ James Bell Associates, (2011). *2004 Demonstration projects in post-adoption services and marriage education*. Arlington, VA: Author.
- ⁶ Ellingson, C. & Laibson, J. (2011). *Our home our family: Facilitator's training manual*. Retrieved from: <http://ourhome-ourfamily.org/Home.aspx>

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