

# Prepermanency Services for Adoptive and Guardianship Families



## Definition of Prepermanency:

Prepermanency is the point in a child's or youth's permanency plan after a permanency decision has been made for adoption or guardianship and before the adoption is finalized or the order of legal guardianship is issued.

Adoption or guardianship is often the permanency goal for children and youth in foster care when biological family reunification services have ended or reunification is not possible. Adoptive and guardianship families need support **before** and **after** they adopt or take guardianship of a child. Structured information, training, and resources provided to families at multiple points throughout the adoption or guardianship process promote safety, permanency, and well-being and may limit the number of unsuccessful adoptive and guardianship placements (Smith, 2014). **Structured supports** consist of formal information and services provided routinely and includes supports to address the individualized needs of families.



**Structured prepermanency support can act as a bridge for a successful transition to adoption or guardianship by preparing families to overcome potential challenges they may face after permanency.** For instance, specialized training and educational resources—provided before permanency—can prepare prospective adoptive and guardianship families and children for the transition from foster care to permanency and raise awareness about the specific needs of their child. This may help families be better prepared to handle challenges that may arise postpermanency. Specialized training on and experience with permanency issues for children getting ready to transition from foster care is also needed for service providers that support children and families, such as mental health professionals. Research indicates that there is a gap in mental health professionals' expertise and awareness about the specific needs of children and families in the process of transitioning from foster care to permanency (Brodinzyk, 2011; Smith, 2014). Additionally, many mental health providers that provide services for foster youth transitioning from care, are not necessarily adoption or guardianship competent and may not understand the complexities that these children may be experiencing. In a recent survey, fewer than 25 percent of a sample group of adoptive parents and adopted persons working with mental health professionals believed the professionals understood essential aspects of adoption (Atkinson, Gonet, Freundlich, & Riley, in press).

## Potential Prepermanency Needs of Prospective Adoptive and Guardianship Families and Children:

- ◆ Structured support through formal training, resources, and information to help families and children address their experiences, emotions, and individualized needs before permanency takes legal effect
- ◆ Awareness that feelings of loss, disconnection, anxiety, or anger may surface at different developmental stages for children and youth, including before, throughout, and after the transition to permanency
- ◆ Awareness of potential mental health needs resulting from early childhood trauma and loss due to separation from the child's birth family
- ◆ Awareness of potential behavioral, cognitive, or developmental needs that may arise after permanency
- ◆ Knowledge of services and supports available to eligible adoptive and guardianship children and families to meet their individual needs
- ◆ Knowledge of birth family history at different points in the child's life
- ◆ Assistance in making and handling birth family connections

## Prepermanency and Postpermanency Services – Families Need Both!

Prepermanency and postpermanency supports provide similar information and resources in order to promote health, stability, and well-being for families and children through the permanency process.



While prepermanency supports are provided before permanency takes legal effect, postpermanency supports are provided after permanency has taken legal effect and are vital to support the ongoing needs of families—especially families dealing with mental or behavioral health issues (North American Council on Adoptable Children, n.d.). Many agencies across the country offer postpermanency services to adoption and guardianship families. However, participation in these services is voluntary and often only sought out when families are actively experiencing a problem or are in the midst of a crisis. Prepermanency supports can be provided to all families early on to proactively prepare them to meet the individualized, present and future needs of their children. Further, when agencies engage prospective adoptive and guardianship families early on, they are more likely to receive productive engagement from families throughout the process and postpermanency.

While prepermanency supports are offered in many jurisdictions, there is still limited information available to agencies on the importance of permanency services at this critical time in the process. Providing prepermanency supports, along with postpermanency supports, in a structured way will better prepare families for potential issues related to their needs and their child's current and potential ongoing needs and equip them to identify appropriate services.

# Providing Families, Children, and Youth With Prepermanency Support

The transition from foster care to adoption or guardianship is life changing for children and families. Prepermanency supports that agencies can build into their programs to better prepare and equip prospective adoptive and guardianship families and children for the transition to permanency include:



- ◆ Resources to help social workers and families talk with children about adoption, guardianship, and foster care at different developmental stages and encourage children to talk about their own stories
- ◆ Education materials on how families can advocate for their children with teachers, doctors, and other important individuals in their lives
- ◆ Prepermanency family counseling to help prepare children and families for the transition to permanency
- ◆ Support groups and social activities for families and children with other adoptive and guardianship families
- ◆ Mandatory trainings for families and family-friendly handouts around the unique needs of children transitioning from foster care, including topics such as:
  - Adolescent and child brain development
  - Mental and behavioral health needs of children who have experienced trauma
  - Needs of children and families when transitioning from foster care to permanency
  - Developmental stages of grief and loss
  - Impact of prenatal drug or alcohol use
  - Raising children and youth of a different race or culture
- ◆ Information, including contact information and instructions, about financial resources to help with current and future needs that families may be eligible for, such as tax credits and subsidies, charitable grants, and mental health or community-based program grants (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013)
- ◆ Information about clinical professionals with expertise in adoption, guardianship, and permanency
- ◆ Information about community resources and services that are available to assist families and children, such as:
  - Community youth organizations that provide therapeutic services for children and youth
  - Education advocates
  - Religious or charitable institutions specializing in adoption and guardianship needs
- ◆ Complete information and timely updates about the child and the birth family in writing, including explanations of the child's placement history and medical history
- ◆ Information about options and boundaries around birth family engagement and the importance of birth family connections, including how permanency families can encourage strong birth family connections when appropriate

## Prepermanency Support Through Community Engagement

Agencies can also build effective prepermanency supports into their programs through community engagement to better prepare and equip prospective adoptive and guardianship families and children, including:

- ◆ Resources and training for mental health professionals about the unique needs of adoption and guardianship families
- ◆ Partnerships with community-based providers that can help support adoptive and guardianship families before, throughout, and after the permanency transition

## Suggested Prepermanency Trainings and Resources for Agencies to Use and Provide:

- ◆ ACT – An Adoption and Permanency Curriculum for Child Welfare and Mental Health Professionals  
<http://www.kinshipcenter.org/education-institute/classes/professional-classes.html>
- ◆ Caring for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma: A Workshop for Resource Parents (2010)  
<http://www.nctsn.org/products/caring-for-children-who-have-experienced-trauma>
- ◆ Child Welfare Information Gateway “Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child” factsheet  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-transition/>
- ◆ Continuum of Development for Adopted Children  
<http://ocwtp.net/PDFs/Trainee%20Resources/Assessor%20Resources/All%20Post%20Final%20Handouts%202015.pdf>
- ◆ Families NOW Solutions for Enduring Permanence: AB 1790 Draft Toolkit and Guide  
<http://familiesnow.org/solutions/enduring-permanence/>
- ◆ Impact of Foster Care and Adoption in Treating Children, Youth, and Families: A Training to Enhance Skills and Improve Outcomes  
<https://www.nacac.org/get-training/training-by-request/adoption-competency/>
- ◆ National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI)  
[http://adoptionssupport.org/adoption-competency-initiatives/national-training-initiative-nti/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1499879511.6773900985717773437500](http://adoptionssupport.org/adoption-competency-initiatives/national-training-initiative-nti/?doing_wp_cron=1499879511.6773900985717773437500)  
<http://adoptionssupport.org/adoption-competency-initiatives/national-training-initiative-nti/about-nti/>
- ◆ Pathways to Permanence 1: Parenting in Real Life/Family Assessment/Parent Preparation Classes  
<http://www.kinshipcenter.org/education-institute/classes.html>
- ◆ Pathways to Permanence 2: Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma and Loss  
<http://www.kinshipcenter.org/education-institute/classes.html>
- ◆ The National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG)  
[www.qic-ag.org](http://www.qic-ag.org)
- ◆ Training for Adoption Competency (TAC)  
<http://adoptionssupport.org/adoption-competency-initiatives/training-for-adoption-competency-tac/>
- ◆ Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE) – Coming soon: Free trainings for child welfare and mental health professionals:
  - You Gotta Believe
  - Pathways to Adoption: Parent Training out of Utah

## Additional Resources for Supporting Prospective Adoptive and Guardianship Families:

- ◆ Adoptive Parents Committee – [www.adoptiveparents.org](http://www.adoptiveparents.org)
- ◆ AdoptUsKids – [www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org)
- ◆ American Academy of Adoption Attorneys (AAAA) – [www.adoptionattorneys.org](http://www.adoptionattorneys.org)
- ◆ Capital Adoptive Family Alliance Post Permanency Resources – [www.postadoptionlink.org](http://www.postadoptionlink.org)
- ◆ Child Welfare Information Gateway – [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)
- ◆ Child Welfare League of America – [www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org)
- ◆ Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute – [www.adoptioninstitute.org](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org)
- ◆ National Council for Adoption (NCFA) – [www.adoptioncouncil.org](http://www.adoptioncouncil.org)
- ◆ North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) – [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org)
- ◆ The Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE) – [www.adoptionssupport.org](http://www.adoptionssupport.org)

## Assessing Agency Readiness to Provide Prepermanency Services

The following steps and questions, adapted from Families NOW's draft AB 1790 Toolkit, can help agencies assess staff skills, experience, and attitudes on issues specific to the prepermanency needs of adoptive and guardianship families (Families NOW, 2017). For the full assessment, see <http://familiesnow.org/solutions/enduring-permanence/>. This tool can help agencies identify opportunities for program improvement, assist in professional development planning, and be used to inform organizational policy change (Families Now, 2017).

### Conduct a survey of your staff's skill, experience, and awareness of the need for prepermanency services.

- Does your staff receive training about the need for supports to adoptive and guardianship families before permanency has taken effect?
- Do staff have sufficient knowledge and awareness of viewpoints around mental health problems (including their own, those of their family and friends, colleagues, and clients)?

### Review what, if any, structured prepermanency supports your agency currently provides to families.

- Does your agency offer mandatory prepermanency training and educational material to prepare and support families through the prepermanency period? If so, how many hours of training are offered?
- Is written and verbal information provided to prospective families at various points during the transition to permanency, including information about the specific needs of the child as well as information directly related to the transition from foster care to permanency?

### Review what, if any, policies your agency has around prepermanency support and whether those policies are effectively implemented.

- Does your agency integrate prepermanency service policies into preexisting family support or postplacement support policies?
- Does your agency ensure staff are aware of prepermanency service policies and understand how to best implement them in their direct work with prospective adoptive and guardianship families?

### Conduct a survey of your staff's skill and experience in talking to families, children, and youth about their experiences in foster care and about permanency planning, and highlight the need to engage families, children, and youth in the permanency process before permanency takes effect.

- Are staff trained to effectively engage children and youth around permanency issues at their developmental level?
- Do staff appreciate the value of knowing when to ask for help to role model this behavior to families, children, and youth?

### Review any community partnerships you may have to better support families during the prepermanency period.

- Does your agency have any active partnerships with local mental health agencies or other community organizations to cofacilitate support groups for parents, children, and youth?
- Does your agency have an active database of mental health providers with experience in mental health issues for children and youth transitioning from foster care to adoption or guardianship?
- Does your agency collaborate with community partners and conduct joint trainings with clinicians and child welfare staff on the unique issues of prospective adoptive and guardianship families, children, and youth?
- Does your agency keep an active list of community organizations that can provide services to adoptive/guardianship families, children, and youth?

## References

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