

More support needed for families adopting from foster care

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A new University of Illinois study of families adopting from foster care revealed significant declines in professional services and social support over the first three years of adoptive family life, even though parents indicated that they need continued assistance.

"Children who have been in foster care can have a host of medical issues and a history of multiple placements so parenting them can be a challenging task for adoptive parents," said Laurie Kramer, a U of I associate dean and professor of applied family studies.

If these children are to thrive, their families need continued access to an array of professionals, including therapists, school staff, adoption specialists, and trained child-care providers who have experience working with children who have social, emotional, and developmental challenges. These experts can teach parents how to help a [child](#) who's been in a neglectful or abusive home environment, she said.

"Families who adopt from foster care also need informal support networks, such as family, friends, and clergy. Peer support from other foster and adoptive parents who have experienced the challenges of parenting a previously traumatized child is also important," said Doris M. Houston, co-author of the study and an assistant professor in the School of [Social Work](#)/Center for Adoption Studies at Illinois State University.

The three-year longitudinal study assessed the social, emotional, and

behavioral outcomes of 34 families who were adopting a child out of foster care over a three-year period.

"We started working with 49 families when they began parenting their child. And we wanted to know how these parents were doing three years down the road. Nine of the adoptions hadn't been finalized, and we thought that was telling," said Houston.

Parents in the 34 families who followed through with the planned adoption and retained custody of their adoptive child were asked to complete a questionnaire that assessed current child well-being, the quality of family life, and the family's use of supportive services. Parents who no longer had custody of the child they adopted or had planned to adopt were asked to participate in an interview to shed light on the factors that contributed to the disruption.

"Families were more likely to be able to follow through and maintain the adoption when they had more contact with adoption agency staff during the pre-adoption period," said Kramer.

Part of the reason was that caseworkers were able to relay information about the child's history that parents needed to parent the child effectively, she said.

But the survey also showed that contact with all types of support had significantly decreased over the first three years of adoptive [family life](#), she said.

That loss of contact with adoption professionals hadn't occurred because the parents believed they no longer needed it. "Even though their needs may be different now, our data show that parents would still like more support from adoption caseworkers and other specialists as they raise the children they've adopted from foster care," she said.

Houston emphasized that continued contact can be beneficial even if the child doesn't have complicated issues. "Adoption professionals can help prepare parents for the developmental stages that adopted children may go through as they come to terms with separation and loss," she said.

"And, if families do need more help, professionals can link them with community resources. They can help families decide if there's a need for adoption-specific counseling services so they can address concerns before they reach a point of crisis," she added.

Why the decline in post-adoption services? "Adoption professionals are skilled at helping adoptive families face the initial challenges they encounter—helping families get the legal assistance they need, doing the case study, and shepherding them through the adoption process, but they may not have the resources to maintain an investment with these families down the road," said Houston.

She noted that infant adoptions have historically been shrouded in secrecy, and adoptive families often try to handle problems independently to avoid being singled out or appearing dysfunctional.

"Until recently, [foster-care](#) adoptions followed this model that assumed families should have privacy and be 'left alone' after adoptions were finalized. But this study shows that families adopting older children need ongoing support from a large network of support services," she said.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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