

# Fostering Adoption

*Exploring adoption and  
long-term foster care research*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Foster and adoptive parents make a significant contribution to the wellbeing of children and Canadian society. Many children need foster care for a brief time, but others require a permanent arrangement. The need for adoptive families is ever present in Canada with an estimated 30 000 children waiting to be adopted. Some children are placed in stable long-term foster care but for others an adoptive home is the best option.

The body of data and analysis on long-term foster care and adoption has many limitations but is growing. This paper examines long-term foster care and adoption studies that explore children's perceptions of their care arrangements and their sense of attachment with foster parents and adoptive parents. It explores the emotional and educational outcomes of children in foster care and those who were adopted and examines the variables that may influence adoption. Caution is required when examining the outcomes of children in foster care and those who were adopted, as children from these two types of care may exhibit different traits and history. What seems clear from the data is that a sense of security and permanency leads to positive outcomes. Long-term stability, particularly the kind of stability provided by adoption, leads to good outcomes for children. Where appropriate, adoption plans should be encouraged and promoted.

Acknowledging that a number of reports and panels have identified the inefficiencies within the public adoption system, this report focuses on two particular recommendations.

- Canadian decision makers would do well to consider creating a central foster care and adoption data collection system. Policy makers should consider an enhanced version of the Adoption and Foster Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) in the United States. This would assist in targeted policymaking and evaluation of policy and services
- Government agencies should be encouraged to continue working with stakeholders in the adoption community who can recruit and connect potential adoptive and foster parents with appropriate government departments and provide ongoing support



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Families are the central building block of a healthy society. Foster and adoptive families play an important role in society, providing nurturing family environments to children, sometimes intended to be temporary, and for others, on a permanent basis in the case of adoption. Some children find long-term stability in foster families. For many children, their care plan includes an adoption plan. The need for adoptive families in Canada has been identified through adoption awareness campaigns, provincial reports and the recent Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Approximately 30 000 children in Canada are waiting to be welcomed into a permanent family. It has been estimated that only eight per cent of waiting children are adopted each year. While some children find stability in foster care, others experience frequent placement changes for various reasons.

A number of reports have identified the obstacles within the public adoption system that prevent more waiting children from being adopted. Yet enacting change has proven to be cumbersome. Acknowledging this ongoing dialogue, this paper focuses instead on the overall outcomes of children in long-term government care and those who have been adopted. While care plans for individual children may determine that one form of care is preferred in a particular case, this paper explores how an adoption-friendly culture can be encouraged in Canada.

#### THE STATE OF FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION DATA

There are a number of challenges when exploring data on foster care and adoption. In Canada, foster care and adoption are provincial issues. Adoption services are administered differently from province to province. Obtaining data on national trends is difficult. For example,

a recent report on public adoption submitted by Canada to the 2010 Hague Conference on Private International Law did not have data from all provinces and territories. Canadian adoption advocate Robin Hilborn argues that there are significant differences in public adoption numbers between the Ontario provincial records and the report to the Hague on Private International Law.<sup>1</sup> All this to say that complete data on foster care and public adoption in Canada is difficult to acquire.

In addition to the issue of data collection in Canada, there are a number of important considerations when reviewing international data analysis and foster care and adoption literature. John Triseliotis, emeritus professor from the University of Edinburgh observed almost ten years ago that compared to studies on adoption, there was a “dearth of studies in long-term fostering that go beyond the snapshot type approach.”<sup>2</sup> He argued that comparative analysis of adoption and long-term foster care were difficult because many studies relied on small sample sizes, lacked baseline measures and lacked control, making comparisons difficult to assess. In short, the studies that were available had numerous limitations. A few years later, however, Professor Clive Sellick of the University of East Anglia observed that a growing interest in foster care of all kinds was rapidly developing among researchers.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps in time a greater quantity of robust studies on long-term foster care will be available.

Another issue raised by Triseliotis is the diverse use of terminology. In some cases, social service providers use similar terminology but with differing meaning.<sup>4</sup> For example, there is some confusion around what is meant by “long-term fostering” and “permanence.”

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1. Hilborn, R. (2010, August 16). *Ontario public adoptions drop every year, or do they? CAS numbers are contradictory*. Retrieved February 22, 2011 from <http://www.familyhelper.net/news/100816ontstats.html>
  2. Triseliotis, J. (2002). Long-term foster care or adoption? The evidence examined. *Child and Family Social Work*, p.23.
  3. Sellick, C. (2006). From famine to feast. A review of the foster care research literature. *Children and Society* 20, p. 72.
  4. Triseliotis, p. 23.

Triseliotis also warns readers to proceed cautiously when comparing outcomes of children in foster care with children who have been adopted. Comparing historical results with current data is not necessarily “like to like.” Some children in foster care today would have been in institutional care in the past, while some children with disabilities who previously would have been in foster care now receive support at home and never enter the system.<sup>5</sup> Even among children who have been adopted, outcomes can differ depending on the age at which a child was adopted.

Finally, child welfare policy influences data outcomes. For this reason, outcomes can differ substantially from region to region. Policy changes can also account for significant changes in outcomes over a protracted period of time.<sup>6</sup> Keeping these challenges in mind, the body of data can still be valuable in exploring how long-term government care and adoption function, and can be helpful in promoting permanent placement in appropriate cases.

## Long-term stability, particularly the kind of stability provided by adoption, leads to good outcomes for children

### CHILD ATTACHMENT AND SENSE OF BELONGING

An important goal of foster care and adoption is to provide a sense of stability in a child’s life. Researchers have explored how the issue of permanency and perceived

permanency impacts children. A number of inquiries have been made into how children in foster care perceive their security and legal position as well as sense of belonging.

### SENSE OF SECURITY

Children in long-term government care have reported feeling uncertain about the permanence of their placement. Studies have found that children in care can feel anxious and uncertain about the future of their placement. Some children feel lost between their foster family and their biological family. Others feel a loss of belonging amidst the uncertainty of their legal position.<sup>7</sup>

Placements can be disrupted and end for a variety of reasons. Historically, there is a higher placement disruption rate in the foster system compared to adoption. The disruption rate margin between the two forms of care has decreased over time, particularly evident in studies completed after 1990 of children under age twelve. In

addition to this change, overall placement disruption rates have declined for both foster care and adoption. It is likely that policy changes and placement practices have contributed to the decline in placement failure.<sup>8</sup>

5. Triseliotis, pp. 23-24.

6. Triseliotis, p. 24.

7. Triseliotis, p. 28

8. Triseliotis, pp. 24 – 27. Triseliotis notes that the age of children is a significant qualifier of placement stability, with older children more likely to experience a placement disruption.

This is not to say that long-term care placements cannot be beneficial or stable. In some cases children may prefer to remain in long-term care rather than pursue an adoption plan, particularly if they are older. Many loving foster parents make great sacrifices to provide a good home for children who cannot live with their biological parents. Studies have also found that where foster parents have adopted the children in their care, placements were less likely to be disrupted.

#### SENSE OF ATTACHMENT

Close relationships influence how children feel about themselves and how they behave.<sup>9</sup> Researchers have examined how children attach to an adult; how children pursue closeness and connect physically, behaviourally, emotionally and psychologically with adults.<sup>10</sup> Research suggests that the age at which family transitions occur have a significant impact on child attachment. Children who have been adopted within the first year of life have been found to form strong attachments with parents that are comparable to the attachment between children and biological parents. A meta-analysis conducted by researchers at Leiden University in the Netherlands found that foster children can also overcome early adversity to form healthy attachments. The study found that children living in institutional care, such as group homes, are more likely to demonstrate disordered attachments. By disordered attachment, researchers mean that children demonstrate inconsistent interaction with adults with whom they are attached, particularly evident during stressful situations.<sup>11</sup>

Another study from the United Kingdom analyzed children's sense of belonging. The researchers examined children adopted by strangers, those adopted by their

foster parents and those in long-term foster care. As part of the project, researchers conducted interviews with a small sample of children and parents. The researchers found that children adopted by strangers had the strongest sense of belonging to their adoptive parents. The children in the sample had been adopted early in their lives which may account for the robust sense of attachment to parents. Children who had been adopted by foster parents felt a strong sense of attachment, perhaps aided by the bonds formed before the adoption application as made. Children in long-term foster care with regular contact with biological parents

Child welfare policy influences data outcomes. For this reason, outcomes can differ substantially from region to region

maintained a reasonable sense of emotional security in their placement, while those who entered care as infants and had little contact with biological parents seemed to have a strong sense of belonging with foster parents. The study found that the children with the least settled

9. Neufeld, G. and Maté, G. (2005). *Hold on to Your Kids: Why parents need to matter more than peers*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Van den Dries, L., Juffer, van IJzendoorn, M.H. and Bakermans-Kraneburg, M. J. (2009). Fostering security? A meta-analysis of attachment in adopted children. *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, pp. 410, 419.

sense of belonging were in long-term care with irregular contact with biological parents. The researchers found that among this group, the children were more likely to report feeling troubled about their status despite their caregivers reporting a feeling of a strong parental bond with the children.<sup>12</sup>

There has been much dialogue about how to incorporate birth parents into the lives of foster children. Research suggests that such interaction, where appropriate, can be very beneficial for children.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, there has been a large shift over the past several decades towards open adoptions where birth parents have the opportunity to be involved in the placement process and continue to have a role in the child's life in an agreed partnership with the adoptive parents.<sup>14</sup>

#### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Research suggests that academic achievement and low educational attainment can be a struggle for some children in foster care. A state level study in the United States found that children in foster care in public schools scored lower than their peers on standardized tests by 16 to 20 percentile points.<sup>15</sup> Similarly a number of studies have found lower cognitive abilities and poor academic performance among children in foster care.<sup>16</sup> Early life history and other events and factors prior to entering care may contribute to these struggles. A number of

studies have found a correlation between frequent school transfers among some foster children and academic struggles. One state level study found that 65 per cent of the sample of foster care alumni had changed schools seven times or more during their elementary and high school years.<sup>17</sup> Other studies have confirmed similar patterns and efforts have been made to achieve improved outcomes among children in foster care in many jurisdictions.

Data concerning educational outcomes for children who have been adopted show that those who were adopted before the age of one tend to have comparable outcomes with their peers.<sup>18</sup> Studies have shown that children who have been adopted on the whole tend to lag behind their peers on some educational measures, however, these children benefit educationally over all from having been adopted. One study that examined educational attainment and income among young adults found that family factors were a significant variable in determining successful outcomes. The author of the study found that when the effects of family background were controlled, adoption did not have a significant impact on educational attainment or income.<sup>19</sup>

In studies that collected data from adults who were adopted as children, these adults emerged ahead in outcomes in a number of areas compared to adult alumni

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12. Biehal, N., Ellison, S., Baker, C. and Sinclair, I. (2009, September). Characteristics, outcomes and meanings of three types of permanent placement – adoption by strangers, adoption by carers and long-term foster care. *DCSF Research Brief*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
13. See Jones, L. and Kruk, E. (2005, December). Life in government care: The connection of youth to family. *Child and Youth Care Forum* 34 (6), pp.405-421.
14. See Baran, A. and Pannor, R. (1993). Perspectives on open adoption. *The Future of Children* 3 (1), pp. 119-124.
15. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008, December). "Educational outcomes for children and youth in foster and out-of-home care." *Fact Sheet*. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, p. 3.
16. Altshuler, S. J. (2003, January). From barriers to successful collaboration: Public schools and child welfare working together. *Social Work* 48 (1), p. 53.
17. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, p. 2.
18. Fagan, P.F. (2010, November). Adoption works well: A synthesis of the literature. *Research Synthesis*. Washington: Family Research Council, p. 26.
19. Spear, N. (2009). Adopted children's outcomes as young adults in regards to educational attainment and income. *The Park Place Economist* 17, p. 74.



of foster care.<sup>20</sup> Triseliotis argues that adults who as children were in long-term foster care and integrated into a family and maintained contact after they aged out of the system tend to report much higher satisfaction with their situation.<sup>21</sup> This would suggest that a sense of permanency is very important.

It cannot be forgotten that foster care provides homes for children who have experienced difficult circumstances. After examining two data sets, James Barber and Paul Delfabbro argue that children in long-term care show “positive developmental trajectories” in psychological adjustment measures.<sup>22</sup> According to these researchers, most children in long-term foster care have an overall positive experience.<sup>23</sup>

#### PREDICTORS OF ADOPTION

Researchers have found that a number of demographic characteristics act as predictors of the likelihood of being adopted or remaining in long-term foster care. Multiple predictors interact, meaning there are many pathways to adoption.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that predictors can be helpful in understanding how to promote adoption, but that there are diverse plot lines in every adoption story. There are no “hard and fast rules” when it comes to predictors of adoption, but the following variables are commonly identified.

**Age:** The age of a waiting child is strongly correlated with remaining in care. Older children are less likely to be adopted. One study found that once children in

care reach adolescence, they are 33 times more likely to be assigned a long-term foster care plan as a goal by caseworkers when compared to preschoolers.<sup>25</sup> The age at which children enter foster care is also a predictor of adoption. Another study determined that children who entered foster care at age five or younger were more likely to be adopted.<sup>26</sup>

**Mental and physical health:** By one estimate, children in foster care are nine times more likely to have a mental health issue compared to the general population.<sup>27</sup> Children in care are also more likely to have behaviour issues. The perception of these issues may inhibit potential parents; however, surveys of prospective parents suggest they are willing to adopt children with mild physical or developmental issues. This finding may also explain why some studies have found that children with physical disabilities are more likely to be adopted than children with emotional issues.<sup>28</sup> It has also been noted that children with physical or developmental issues are no more likely to experience a disrupted placement than children who do not have those challenges.

#### FAMILY AND PLACEMENT VARIABLES

While data on the correlation between demographic characteristics and adoption are readily available, there is less data concerning the correlation between family and placement variables and adoption. Available research suggests the following factors are correlated with placement type.

20. Triseliotis, p. 30.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Barber, J. and Delfabbro, P (2005). Children’s adjustment to long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 27, p. 329.

23. Barber and Delfabbro, pp. 329, 339.

24. Snowden, J., Leon, S. and Sieracki, J. (2008). Predictors of children in foster care being adopted: A classification tree analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review* 30, p. 1319.

25. Schmidt-Tieszen, A. and McDonald, T.P. (1998). Children who wait: Long-term foster care or adoption? *Children and Youth Services Review* 20 (1/2), p. 24.

26. Snowden *et al.*, p. 1322.

27. Snowden *et al.*, p. 1319.

28. Snowden *et al.*, p. 1326.

**Poverty:** The data suggests that foster children who were born into poverty are less likely to be adopted.<sup>29</sup>

**Removal history:** The reason for removal also influences the type of placement. Data suggests that children are less likely to be adopted if they were removed from the family home because of sexual abuse or physical abuse.<sup>30</sup> This covers some of the most traumatic causes for removal.

**Placement history:** One study found that children placed in group homes are less likely to be adopted than children in foster care.<sup>31</sup> Another study suggests that foster parents who have received specialized training in working with children with extra needs were more likely to consider adoption.<sup>32</sup>

Good policy decisions require good, accessible data. Without better information, it is difficult to assess challenges and measure the impact of policy

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29. Snowden *et al.*, p. 1319.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Snowden *et al.*, p. 1320.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

How can the lives of society's most vulnerable children be improved?

Good policy decisions require good, accessible data. Without better information, it is difficult to assess challenges and measure the impact of policy. In the United States, each state is required to contribute to the Adoption and Foster Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). This system collects case level information on children in the care of the state as well as data on children who have been adopted under the state's public child welfare agency.<sup>33</sup> Critics have argued that the system could be improved if it followed children from year to year providing longitudinal data. More detailed data would also provide greater insight into child welfare trends.<sup>34</sup> A similar system should be considered in Canada.

A number of reports have acknowledged that the public adoption system in Canada has some challenges. For example, the Expert Panel on Infertility and Adoption chaired by David Johnston, now Governor General of Canada, recommended that Ontario create a public adoption agency separate from Ontario's Children's Aids Societies.<sup>35</sup> This would allow Ontario's Children's Aids Societies to concentrate their resources on child welfare while the adoption agency promotes and facilitates adoption. A provincial adoption agency would create another layer of bureaucracy and expenditure; however, each child in the Ontario foster care system already costs the province nearly \$45 000 a year.<sup>36</sup>

Government agencies should be encouraged to continue working with stakeholders in the adoption community. These stakeholders include adoption charities, churches and community groups that have expertise and can assist in connecting potential adoptive and foster parents with the right government agencies and can assist in providing post adoption support to families.

## CONCLUSION

Adoptive and foster parents make a significant contribution to the lives of children and to the wider Canadian society. Despite their good efforts, many Canadian children are waiting for a permanent home.

Long-term stability, particularly the kind of stability provided by adoption, leads to good outcomes for children. Where appropriate, adoption plans should continue to be encouraged and promoted.

Many studies and reports have identified the various challenges within the public adoption system. While addressing these challenges are important, collecting and assessing good data would enhance child welfare policy making. The current state of data collection in Canada must be improved. Furthermore, governments should continue to work with community stakeholders who can connect and support potential foster and adoptive parents.

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33. For more on the Adoption and Foster Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/index.htm>

34. Snowden *et al.*, p. 1327.

35. Johnston, D. (2009). *Raising expectations: Recommendations of the expert panel on infertility and adoption*. Toronto: Ministry of Children and Youth Services. The report is available at <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/documents/infertility/RaisingExpectationsEnglish.pdf>

36. Adoption Council of Canada. (2010, November 15). Ontario must act now to find homes for waiting children and youth. Ottawa: Adoption Council of Canada. Retrieved February 23 from [http://www.adoption.ca/ACCNewsRelease\\_Nov%2015%202010.pdf](http://www.adoption.ca/ACCNewsRelease_Nov%2015%202010.pdf)