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**NTDC Right Time Training  
ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORTS  
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Question 1: Why is it important for parents who are fostering or adopting to connect with services and supports in their community?**

The needs of children who have experienced trauma, separation or loss differ from the needs of children who have not had those experiences. These experiences often have long-lasting effects on all areas of how a child functions, including physical, mental, behavioral and social. A child who has experienced trauma, separation or loss or a combination of all three often shows typical child behaviors that parents find challenging; but the child tends to show these challenging behaviors more often, for longer times and at greater intensity than other children. The frequency, intensity and duration of the child's challenging behaviors can stress families beyond their ability to cope.

The parenting skills that you have developed (or learned from your parents) might not always be effective with children who have experienced trauma, separation and loss. You may need to find support and assistance from professionals and other families who have fostered or adopted children. It is important for you to identify the services and supports available in your community. You need to find out how to "plug into the service network" to access these services even if you don't need them right now. Getting to know the service system and how to access services **before** a need arises is a positive, *proactive* approach. This proactive outreach is important preparation. It will let you know which services and supports are available and how to access them when a challenge does arise.

Other proactive steps include: 1) staying connected with your caseworker or the local child welfare agency so that you have up-to-date information about new services and training opportunities available to you and 2) working with your caseworker to understand the child's history and life story, which can help you to identify needs that may arise in the future. It's easy for these proactive steps to get pushed aside by the demands of everyday life, but don't let that happen to you. One of the most important steps in preparing to foster or to adopt a child is to connect with services and supports long before you, the child or your family is in crisis. Remember that the long-lasting effects of trauma, separation and loss do not disappear just because the child is in a safe place. You might need different types and levels of support and services over time. As children reach different developmental milestones and life transitions, it is common for families to need different supports and services to meet their children's changing needs.

**Question 2: What are some strategies that parents who are fostering or adopting can use**

### **to find local services?**

One of the most effective ways to find local services and supports is to ask other parents who have experience fostering or adopting a child. They can tell you which professionals or services they have used that truly understand the unique needs of children who have experienced trauma, separation and loss. Groups for parents who are fostering and adopting often meet in person and are organized through a local child welfare agency. Some parenting support groups “meet” online and hold online discussions that you can join. Most states and tribes have some type of association or coalition for families who are fostering or adopting children. You can find the type of parenting group that your state or tribe offers by going to [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov) and typing in the search bar “State Foster/Adoptive Family Associations/Coalitions.” It may be important to check in with a tribe to find out which resources are tribally relevant for that tribe’s children and/or the parents who are fostering or adopting.

If you are fostering a child, the child’s case manager should be able to connect you with services and supports. Likewise, if you have adopted a child, you can contact the local child welfare agency for help finding local services and supports. These will vary greatly from one community to the next, but almost all communities will offer training opportunities at various times during the year. Attending parent trainings can be extremely helpful because the training gives you the chance to increase your knowledge, to learn new skills and to connect with other parents and professionals in your area who are involved with foster care or adoption.

Furthermore, there are national groups for parents who are fostering or adopting. These groups hold various training opportunities and conferences during the year. They are also good resources for information that can be helpful to parents who are fostering and adopting. Examples of these national groups are the North American Council on Adoptable Children ([www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org)) and the National Foster Parent Association ([www.nfpaonline.org](http://www.nfpaonline.org)). Another national group, Generations United ([www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)), focuses specifically on families caring for children through kinship guardianship.

### **Question 3: Why is it important for parents who are fostering or adopting to find providers and programs that are trauma-informed, adoption-competent, or both?**

The term ***trauma-informed*** refers to care and services that recognize that experiencing trauma, separation or loss has long-lasting effects on an individual's life. The term ***adoption-competent*** describes professionals such as health-care providers, therapists or teachers who have received special training in understanding adoption and the unique needs of children who have been adopted and families that have adopted children. An adoption-competent provider is trauma-informed and has special insight into the complex issues in adoption, including the language, loss and grief, attachment, expectations, norms, family dynamics and range of feelings in the adoption experience.

Many families report that professionals who are not trauma-informed providers or adoption-competent providers, or both, do not understand the issues that can arise for children and

families who are involved with the foster care system or with adoption. This is true even of the best, most highly respected providers in the community. Because providers without special training in trauma or adoption don't fully understand the complex issues that can arise, they may end up treating a child as if the child had a mental-health diagnosis versus treating the separation and loss that may be at the core of the child's issues. When behaviors are misdiagnosed, the treatment provided doesn't actually address the child's core issues. Likewise, providers who are not adoption-competent, trauma-informed, or both, are more likely to give out information and to make suggestions to parents who are fostering or adopting that might be unhelpful or might bring shame and guilt to the family. It is important to remember that children who have experienced trauma, loss or separation often do not respond well to traditional parenting, educational, mental health and other practices.

**Question 4: What is a therapeutic network, and how do you develop this type of network?**

A **therapeutic network** is made up of professionals, providers and program leaders who are working together to meet all of a child's needs. In other words, the purpose of a therapeutic network is to make sure that there is a group of professionals surrounding the child and family who understand the child's needs and are actively working together to meet those needs. One of the most important steps in creating a therapeutic network is to obtain an in-depth, high-quality assessment of the child's needs so that you (and the child welfare agency if the child is still in care) can identify the providers, programs and services that can address those needs. If the child is in foster care, the child's case manager will be primarily responsible for developing the therapeutic network. Remember that you are crucial to this network as the advocate for the child. The insights you have about the child's behavior and emotional patterns on a daily basis is vital information for the network in determining how best to meet the child's needs.

After you have identified the members of the child's therapeutic network, it can be helpful to plan how you will share information across the network. One strategy is to get the network members to agree to a regular schedule of meetings. If you are fostering the child, the child's caseworker likely will organize these meetings. Holding regular meetings will help to ensure that everyone is on the same page and understands the care plan and goals for the child. Sometimes members of a therapeutic network have differing opinions about the best treatment approaches. At the network's first meeting, the members should discuss how they will handle disagreements and should agree on a process for talking about and resolving these differences.

**Question 5: When should parents who are fostering or adopting begin to look for supports and services?**

The best time to locate the services and supports available in your community is **before** you need them, especially because finding providers who are available and have expertise in the

areas needed may take time. Check with your child welfare agency about services and support that they provide and/or are aware of within the community. If the child is an enrolled tribal member, this may impact access, referrals and coordination of services in the tribal communities. Tribal nations may have resources that children who are enrolled members can access even if they don't live in the tribal community. Families who are fostering or adopting need to identify all of the services and supports available in their community so that they will know where to go and whom to contact when a need arises. Families need to be proactive not only in identifying these services but also in contacting the service providers before a specific service is needed.

Seeking services is a normal part of preparing to foster or to adopt because a family needs to be prepared to address issues that a child is currently facing as well as the challenges that might arise as the child ages and develops. The more supports and services that can be put in place early on, the better prepared a family will be to handle whatever situations arise.

The effects of trauma, separation and loss on a child do not go away quickly. This impact likely will ebb and flow over time, and it might increase at different times throughout the child's life. Even when life has been going well, a new developmental stage, a life transition (such as moving from middle school to high school) or a milestone (such as the anniversary of an important event, a birthday or a holiday) can bring up new questions from the child. When a new developmental stage or milestone is approaching, you need to watch for signs that the child might need additional support. You might notice changes in the child's mood, eating habits or sleeping patterns. If you see such changes, create more opportunities for the child to talk with you; and be prepared to "plug into" your service network to get additional support for the child and yourself.

### **Question 6: How can parents who are fostering or adopting be effective advocates?**

Being an *advocate* for a child means that you speak out in the best interests of the child. Advocacy can mean that you push for something, argue in favor for or against certain services or even plead for something that the child needs. Sometimes a parent who is fostering or adopting will need to advocate for services or supports that the child needs. This advocacy can occur in numerous places, including in the child's school, on the child welfare team and with local service providers. A parent who is fostering or adopting has unique knowledge that comes from living with the child and understanding the child's needs and how those needs are changing over time. As a result, it is important for a parent who is fostering or adopting to stay involved with the child welfare team and the child's service providers to make sure that the child is receiving the supports needed to excel.

Listed below are some strategies that you can use to be an effective advocate for a child that you are fostering or adopting:

- If the child is involved with the child welfare team, make sure to consult with the team and the case manager before you do any type of advocacy.
- Attend meetings and events, and stay informed about the child's progress in school and other areas.
- Keep a record of services that the child has been offered and those that have been requested.
- Use ***child-first language*** to identify the issue or need in a way that refers to the child first and the issue or need second. For example, instead of saying "an autistic child," say "a child with autism." Instead of saying "Jayme is developmentally delayed," say "Jayme has difficulty being focused and completing tasks."
- Assume that everyone has the child's best interests at heart.
- Express the issues of concern to you clearly, and state the outcomes that you want.
- Understand and address the issue not only from your own viewpoint but also from the opposing point of view. This will help you to anticipate questions and to reduce the potential for a "No" response.
- Do your research; know what is available and what is required.
- Talk less, and listen more. Often, the other party eventually will get to the answer you need if you let that person talk.
- Bring a backup. Having someone with you will help you to stay focused on your goal. Your backup can take notes and offer suggestions. Choose someone who is emotionally neutral, professional and able to act as a notetaker.

**Question 7: How can a parent who is fostering become an active partner with the child welfare team to ensure that the child's needs are being met?**

Open communication with the child welfare team is essential to making sure that the child's needs are met. The team can get information from the child's history, but you have the day-to-day information about the child. Together these produce a full picture of the child's needs. Keep track (preferably in a logbook or notebook) of all the issues and strategies you have used successfully to address the child's needs. Document milestones and important events as well to keep a record of the child's successes, interests and talents. Keep the case manager informed of the child's progress, and alert the case manager about any issues that arise. Attend meetings held by the child welfare team; bring along documentation related to the child's school, medical care, dental care and mental health providers.

**Question 8: What is the Child Welfare Information Gateway?**

The Child Welfare Information Gateway ([www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)) is a resource-rich, online "virtual library" of everything related to child welfare in general, foster care, adoption, kinship care and more. It includes hundreds of easy-to-understand articles about a wide range of topics, including parenting, children's issues, school, transitions, medical and mental health

issues, parenting teens and more. The website has a search option; so, you can type a few key words into it to find what you need! You also can find a listing on the site for each state or tribe's foster care and adoption manager and their contact information. The Child Welfare Information Gateway also includes information about each state or tribe's laws and regulations related to fostering and adopting a child. The website additionally includes your community's child welfare data.

**Question 9: What are some of the informal supports that you potentially can use when raising an American Indian Alaskan Native child?**

American Indian Alaskan Natives always have had built-in networks of persons who can be depended on to help, especially with raising children. These networks of individuals and groups can be considered family through blood relation or "like kin." Perhaps similar to your own experience in your upbringing, a child of American Indian Alaskan Native heritage may refer to pseudo family members (fictive kin) as the child's other mom or dad, uncle, auntie, siblings, cousins, mentors, coaches and teachers who are like kin to the child. This is in keeping with the view that all of life is relational and that many communities are one large extended family of relatives whose basis is respect.

It is important for you to gain knowledge and understanding of the child's pre-existing relations (those prior to and while in foster care) to maintain healthy connections for the child, when possible. Your support for positive relationships -- particularly those that involve culture -- is essential to the child's well-being. Culture is an important factor in the well-being of American Indian Alaskan Native children. These types of informal networks can be elders, tribal mentors and others who are knowledgeable concerning tribal traditions and who keep crucial tribal customs. These culturally relevant resources can be particularly helpful meeting a child's needs, especially in helping the child to have and to support a sense of belonging.

You cannot assume who or what is important to a child; so, it is never too late to ask and to involve these individuals in the life of the child in your care, when possible. Below are some examples of questions to ask the child and others connected with the child, including the child's family and members of the child's tribal nation. You might ask open-ended questions (those that elicit answers to who, what, when, where and why):

- Who is important to you and your family and the child?
- Whom do you call when you need help?
- What can you tell me about the people who help you or other members of your family or [Fill in the name of the child.]?
- How do they help you, other members of your family or [Fill in the child's name.]?

- What overview can you give of tribal or clanship affiliation; tribal traditional or informal adoption practices; other ways of knowing who is kin or “like kin” through blood, cultural or other recognized tribal practices; American Indian Alaskan Native community structures that can provide inclusive, culturally safe environments for the child and the parents fostering or adopting the child?

To gather perspectives about the degree of helpfulness and strength of these informal networks and supporters, you might ask questions of the child or the child’s family such as:

- Whom do you see or talk with regularly?
- How does the [Fill in the individual, community or group name.] help to support you?
- Which supports that we have talked about are particularly helpful for you, your family or the child, if any?
- Which supports that we have talked about not particularly helpful for you, your family or the child, if any?
- Which supports that we have talked about are stressful for you, your family or the child, if any?

All of the informal resources outlined for the child can be applicable as well to the parent who is fostering or adopting. Interviews conducted with American Indian Alaskan Native parents who are fostering or adopting have revealed that peer support through informal groups is especially helpful. Those interviewed found that peer support, among other factors mentioned, helped them not to feel alone or defeated when they faced parenting challenges.