A Family for Life:
The Vital Need to Achieve Permanency for Children in Care
A Policy Perspective from the Donaldson Adoption Institute.

Introducing a Forthcoming Compendium of Practices for Facilitating Adoptions of Children in Care

By Susan Livingston Smith & Institute Staff

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Policy Perspectives are research-based Adoption Institute publications that focus on important and timely issues in the field. This brief report introduces a more-extensive Compendium that will be published as a book in the U.S., England and Canada later this year. The report was authored by Institute Program & Project Director Susan Livingston Smith and edited by Executive Director Adam Pertman. Institute staff members Dr. David Brodzinsky, Dr. Martha Henry and Dr. Jeanne Howard – along with two attorneys, Meredith Tenison and Elizabeth Lyons – assisted in the research and writing of the full Compendium. We also would like to thank those who provided extensive input or reviews, including Dr. Julie Selwyn of the University of Bristol; John Simmonds of the British Association for Adoption & Fostering; Bruce Boyer of Loyola University School of Law; Howard Davidson of the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law; Pat Fenton, adoption social worker, Toronto; Cheryl Fix, Alberta Ministry of Human Services, Child and Family Services Authority; Suzanne Kingston, New Brunswick Adoption Foundation; Kathy Ledesma of AdoptUSKids; Dr. Gary Mallon of Hunter College; Dr. Ruth McRoy of Boston College and the Adoption Institute; and Sarah Pedersen of the Adoption Council of Canada.

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OVERVIEW

This Issue Brief is intended to provide a preview of and introduction to a book-length Compendium that the Donaldson Adoption Institute plans to publish in late 2013. It is based on extensive, years-long research throughout the United States, England and Canada on 22 specific practices that facilitate the adoption of children from foster care, and it provides a synthesis of knowledge related to these practices, research on outcomes and recommended resources. Despite the growth of adoptions from the U.S. child welfare system over the past 15 years, over 26,000 youth “age out” of care annually, so state-of-the-art policies and practices are needed to help governments and practitioners fulfill their responsibility to truly serve children’s best interests. Examples of innovative practices identified through the Adoption Institute’s research include:

• The Department for Education in England publishes “Adoption Scorecards” for local authorities, which are publicly available. These scorecards show how quickly children in need of adoption are placed, and they graph local authorities’ performance on several key indicators in relation to the country as a whole, thus giving those local authorities the opportunity to monitor their own performance and compare it to others.

• The strategic use of specialized adoption staff has been linked with improved adoption outcomes; for example, following the addition of a block of 25 new adoption workers in New Brunswick, Canada, the number of adoptions from care increased by 300%.

• A project in Colorado, Denver’s Village, uses six Community-Based Diligent Recruitment Teams to target specific geographic areas. When the project began, children waited an average of 34.6 months after termination of parental rights to achieve permanency; after the project’s first four years, the average dropped to approximately 13 months.

• The Province of Alberta established a photolisting service in 2003 and conducted an evaluation during its first year, reporting a 63 percent increase in applications received and screened and a 29 percent rise in those approved during the first year after its launch. Among applications approved during the year, 20 percent were due to the webpage.

• In 2011 a rigorous evaluation of Wendy’s Wonderful Kids – a child-specific recruitment model funded by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption in over 120 sites in the U.S. and Canada – found that children in the test group were 1.7 times more likely to be adopted, with the greatest positive impact on older children and those with mental health disorders.

• England requires adoption agencies to assess and plan for any contact that children adopted from care will have with their birth families and to offer all parties support in maintaining contact. Research there indicates a large majority of adoptive parents in direct contact arrangements remained satisfied that contact was in their children’s best interests.

The Adoption Institute chose to study practices for achieving permanency through adoption or guardianship in the U.S., Canada and England because these three countries all promote adoption as an alternative for foster children who cannot return to their original families. As a result of our
review, the Institute offers the following recommendations to improve well-being and permanency outcomes for children in need of permanent and loving families:

- In statute and policy, provide clear requirements for achieving permanency for every foster child who cannot return home and operationalize this expectation through organizational leadership and culture.

- Facilitate tracking outcomes at every level of the system in order to understand the barriers to permanency and to enforce accountability for achieving it.

- Use aggressive family-finding and engagement to maximize the use of relatives as permanency resources for children in care, as this contributes to their well-being.

- Reduce barriers and disincentives to adoption or guardianship with adequate, reliable subsidies to those who make the commitment to becoming legal parents to children in care.

- Incorporate sound casework practices that minimize damage to children and youth in the child welfare system by initially placing them with families who are likely resources for alternate permanency; supporting them to understand and cope with traumatic experiences; and minimizing the extent of their losses by stabilizing placements, requiring Lifebook work, and facilitating the level of openness in their best interests.

- Monitor court timeframes in order to avoid unwarranted delays in achieving permanency – delays which themselves lessen a child’s chances for adoption.

- Employ a range of recruitment and retention strategies to find permanent families for children and youth in care, including promoting consumer-friendly practices to retain families who apply to adopt.

- Provide a continuum of adoption support and preservation services to stabilize at-risk placements and enable families to successfully parent children to adulthood.
A Family for Life:
The Vital Need to Achieve Permanency for Children in Care

*Permanency equals a sense of belonging. When it comes to permanency for youth in care, there’s one simple fact: it’s a basic human need that everyone should be entitled to. We should all know where we go at Christmas.*

Lisa Davis

This quote from a young woman providing testimony to a Canadian parliamentary committee (HUMA Committee, 2012, p.1) underscores the overwhelming and essential nature of belonging in a family – something that most of us take for granted and can scarcely imagine being without. The Donaldson Adoption Institute will publish a Compendium later this year that will examine permanency for youth separated from original family from an international perspective. It will do so by reviewing what we have learned from research about the outcomes of various care options for these children, examining permanency policies and practices across three countries (the U.S., England and Canada), and identifying promising practices that facilitate achieving permanency through adoption or guardianship for children in care.

Developed countries with advanced economies have systems to protect children whose well-being is challenged by maltreatment or their parents’ inability to provide for basic needs. Most countries use foster or residential care to meet such children’s needs; only a tiny number of children are adopted annually from the child welfare systems in most Nordic and European countries (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). In contrast, there are a few countries that pursue alternate permanent families for children in out-of-home care who cannot safely return to their original families.

In the U.S., England and Canada, where drifting through temporary situations is viewed as contrary to the best interest of children, governments are empowered to terminate parents’ rights without their consent so that permanency can be achieved for maltreated children through adoption or guardianship. The number of adoptions from these countries’ child welfare systems has grown over recent decades, but far too many children – particularly older youth – are still “aging out” without any enduring family to call their own. In the most recent statistics, the number was over 26,000 in the U.S. and over 6,000 in England. (National counts are not available in Canada.) This reality raises important questions:

- **Would these youth be better off if permanent adoptive or guardianship families could be found for them?**
- **What can governments and professionals do to offer youth who cannot return home the best prospects for finding a permanent family?**

Later this year, the Adoption Institute will publish a Compendium that addresses these questions by examining child welfare research, policy and practice across England, the United States and Canada. It will analyze the body of research underlying the value of permanency – that children need a consistent, nurturing family to promote optimal development and emotional security, not only when they are young but throughout their lives. The Compendium also will review promising
solutions for children in care who cannot safely return home, including permanency with kin, adoption, guardianship and long-term foster care, and the evidence documenting that legal permanency is indeed better than remaining in foster care.

What is in the Best Interest of Children who Cannot Safely Return to their Families of Origin?

The permanency planning movement, with a focus on adoption as a primary alternative to remaining in care (when children could not safely return to their families of origin), was established in the U.S. and in England around the same time in the 1970s; it arose out of the recognition that many children were remaining in “temporary” circumstances for long periods and that “drifting” in care had harmful effects on them (Rowe & Lambert, 1973; Fanshel, 1976, 1978). For example, in Fanshel’s study of children in foster care in New York City, 36 percent were still in care five years after their initial placements, and those who were emancipated from care when older had been in care close to 10 years, on average. Over the past three decades, the child welfare systems in the U.S., England, and Canada have instituted changes in laws, policies and practices aimed at achieving permanency for these children, although they differ somewhat in the types of permanency alternatives that are considered and emphasized.

A substantial body of research attests to the reality that adoption is better for children than institutions or long-term foster care. Specifically, the research indicates that:

Adoption offers greater stability than other permanency alternatives. Any type of placement, including reunification, can result in failure or impermanency, but studies show a lower breakdown rate for adoptions than for long-term foster care. Since 1990, most U.S. studies show overall ranges of adoption disruption (breakdown before finalization) from about 6 percent to 11 percent (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006). British studies of adoption failures do not distinguish between disruption and dissolution (breakdown after finalization), and most report slightly higher failure rates long-term; for example, a study by Quinton and Selwyn (2009) reports an adoption failure rate of 17 percent 6-11 years later, but a 46 percent failure rate for long-term foster care placements. This somewhat higher disruption rate than the rate reported in the U.S. may be due to a higher proportion of matched or stranger adoptions in England than in the U.S., since new placements have a higher disruption rate than do foster parent or kin adoptions. Very little research exists on adoption dissolution or on post-adoption placement into foster care or residential treatment. Festinger (2002) reported that 3.3 percent of 516 adopted children in New York had been in foster care or
other out-of-home placements within four years of their adoption; however, many of these children were expected to return home.

The reality that adoption is linked with family stability and permanence to a much greater degree than continuing in foster care is poignantly illustrated by a DVD made by the Adoption Council of Ontario Youth Network (2011), which can be viewed on the internet.¹ Ten youth, holding up signs with numbers, take turns stating: “It’s not how many pieces of gum I chew” … “This is not how many pages of homework I have” and other similar comments, followed by this statement from all of them: “It’s how many times I’ve changed families,” averaging about seven per child. At the conclusion, they all hold up cards with the number “0” saying: “This is the number of new families I’ve had since I was adopted.”

Adoption offers children optimal potential for resiliency, particularly if it occurs when they are younger. Most children adopted from care have elevated risks for developmental, emotional or behavioral challenges due to adverse experiences in their early lives; these range from unhealthy prenatal environments such as exposure to toxic substances, to abuse or neglect, to multiple placements, to other traumas. Adoption clearly benefits children who otherwise would likely grow up in less stable or nurturing situations. As a group, adopted children from higher-risk early environments are resilient and make rapid gains in their new families. Indeed, research indicates the majority of youth adopted from care are in the normal range on standardized measures of behavioral/emotional functioning, and well over 90 percent of parents are satisfied with their adoptions (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992, 1994; Howard & Smith, 2003; Howard, Smith & Ryan, 2004; Dance & Rushton, 2005; Simmel, Barth, & Brooks, 2007).

Using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, which is a U.S. longitudinal study with a nationally representative sample of children receiving child welfare services, Lloyd and Barth (2011) analyzed the developmental outcomes of 353 children who were less than 13 months old when they entered care. Outcomes were compared for three groups – 191 who were adopted, 63 who returned home and 99 who were still in foster care. They found that the children’s development at ages 6-7 was influenced by their long-term child welfare placement. Those still in care had the poorest developmental outcomes overall. The adopted children, despite having the highest percentage (79%) assessed as high risk for neurodevelopmental problems soon after entry into care, had the highest developmental achievement overall, and their parents scored significantly better on most HOME scales (a measure of caregiver responsiveness and stimulation) than both birth and foster parents.

Children’s best prospects for maximizing their recovery from early trauma, deprivation or other maltreatment, and for realizing their developmental potential, come from living in an adoptive family that provides a healing environment and remains committed to them in the face of challenges. Furthermore, research generally finds better outcomes for children placed for

¹ http://adoptontario.ca/Public/Default.aspx?i=165&n=Youth+Network
Adoption at earlier ages and with fewer moves in care (Festinger, 1986; Barth & Berry, 1988; McRoy, 1999; Howard & Smith, 2003; Simmel, 2007).

Adoption best promotes children’s emotional security, sense of belonging and general well-being. One of the most harmful aspects of entering foster care is the lack of continuity in caregivers, which undermines children’s ability to develop a secure attachment and sense of emotional security. Studies find that foster placement instability has more of a negative impact on children than the single event of removal from original family and placement into foster care (Ryan & Testa, 2005; Lewis, Dozier, Ackerman, & Sepulveda-Kozakowski, 2007). Foster care instability predicts an increase and intensification of behavior problems and other developmental deficits, increased usage of and costs for mental health services, sense of pervasive loss and the development of internal barriers to closeness such as distancing behaviors and distrust (Rubin, Alessandrini, Mandell, Localio, & Hadley, 2004; Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Rubin, O’Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007; Samuels, 2008).

While adoption does not automatically lead to emotional security and well-being, studies reviewed for the Compendium found that youth in adoptive families are more likely to report feeling a sense of belonging and closeness to parents than are those who remain in care (Triseliotis, 2002; Selwyn & Quinton, 2004).

Adoption offers children support to assist them in the transition to adulthood and a lifelong family. Over the past few decades, the time between adolescence and independent adulthood has lengthened as young adults take longer to complete their education, become established in careers and repay college loans, and get married and have children. A significant minority of youth who were adopted from or aged out of care have serious learning or developmental challenges that mean they are not ready for independence at age 18 or soon thereafter, and need help to transition to adulthood. We know that youth who are emancipated from foster care often face difficulties in early adulthood as they struggle with poor educational attainment, insufficient employment and low income, inadequate housing, early parenthood, involvement with the criminal justice system, substance abuse, and physical and mental health problems (Berzin, 2008; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Rapp, 2010). For many, there is no dependable adult to serve as a safety net, such as the example of a former foster youth who was filling out a job application and was asked to give an emergency contact person. “He wrote 911. He had no one else.” (Holtan, 2004, p. 35).

Research and experience teach us that permanent, emotionally sustaining and committed relationships with adults are imperative for youth to reach self-sufficiency and to thrive in early adulthood. The body of research reviewed in the Compendium indicates that adopted youth are more likely to have sustaining parental relationships and also attain more positive outcomes (education, employment and self-support) in adulthood than those in long-term foster care (Triseliotis, 1980, 1983, 2002). Family connections beyond age 18 count for a lot more than a financial safety net, however; a family for life means sustaining emotional support and belonging, a home to return to on holidays, siblings who typically are the longest relationships we sustain in our lifetimes, parents to consult on difficult decisions, grandparents and aunts and uncles for our children, and a secure sense of belonging.
Use of the Range of Permanency Options in England, the U.S. and Canada

When birthparents are provided with a range of services and resources but are still unable to adequately care for their children, then the objective is to move these children from the child welfare system into permanent families. The three countries that are the focus of the Adoption Institute’s Compendium approach this objective somewhat differently, although children attaining permanency or remaining in care reside in the same types of placements. These include placement with relatives, adoption, guardianship, ongoing foster care with stability as the ideal, and residential care for those who require it. The Compendium explores variations in the use of these alternatives and examines research regarding their benefits and limitations.

Permanency with Kin. The use of kinship care has increased in recent years, particularly in the U.S., where approximately one-third of foster families are relatives (26% of all placements); 32 percent of adoptions are by kin; and a substantial number of those exiting care are guardianships primarily with kin (6%) or discharges from care to live with kin (8%) (USDHHS, 2012). There is considerable variation among states, however, in their reliance on kinship care for state-supported foster placements, ranging from 6 percent to 46 percent (AECF, 2012). It is important to recognize that most children cared for by relatives are not part of the child welfare system – only 4 percent in the U.S. and 5 percent in England (AECF, 2012; Selwyn & Nandy, 2012). Formal foster or adoptive placements with kin are used less often in England; according to the most recent statistics ending March 2012, 15 percent of foster placements were with relatives or friends – or 11 percent of total out-of-home placements (DFE, 2012). The proportion of adoptions or “special guardianships” with kin is not reported in England’s national statistics. Kin care both within and outside of the child welfare system is increasing in Canada, but specific data on these placements is not available (Swift, 2011).

Many studies find kin placements are much more stable than those with non-relatives (Barth, Courtney, Berrick & Alpert, 1994; Testa, 1997; Koh, 2010). For example, a Canadian study found non-kin placements were four times more likely to end within the first month, and kin placements remained more stable long-term (Perry, Daly, & Kotler, 2012). A British meta-analysis of factors associated with outcomes for looked-after children reviewed 92 studies, finding kin placements were linked not only to greater placement stability but also to fewer total placements, fewer emotional and behavioral problems, and less mental health service usage (Jones, et al., 2011). Another U.S. study found that even after controlling for baseline risk and placement stability, children initially assigned to kin care had fewer behavior problems than those in other kinds of foster care or those moved to relatives after significant time in other foster homes (Rubin, Downes, O’Reilly, Mekonnen, Luan & Localio, 2008).
Studies also have found that most relatives will consider adoption when they are properly informed and supported (Testa, 2001; Testa, Shook, Cohen & Woods, 1996; Geen, 2003); indeed, relatives – who often had been ignored or deliberately excluded – have been the major source of new adoptive homes since implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997, accounting for dramatic increases in adoptions of children from care (Testa, 2004). For example, in 1998, 16 percent of U.S. adoptions were by relatives, compared to 31 percent in FY2011 (USDHHS, 2012). Kin adoption or guardianship appears to benefit children, and it also seems to be good for the adults as well; i.e., when kin adopt from foster care, they report a higher level of satisfaction and better child outcomes than do other adopters (Fuller, et al., 2006; Howard & Smith, 2003; Ryan, et al., 2010).

**Adoption.** The most common type of adoption today in the United States, England and Canada is of children placed from their child welfare systems. In the U.S. this number has soared since ASFA was passed and federal financial incentives to the states were implemented in the late 1990s – – increasing from about 15,000 in 1988 to 31,030 in 1997 and peaking at 57,466 in FY2009; the most recent figure, for FY2011, was 50,516. In the 10 fiscal years preceding ASFA (1988-1997), about 211,000 children were adopted from care; in the most recent 10 years (FY2002-2011), 524,495 adoptions were reported – roughly two and a half times as many. According to the most recent statistics, 31 percent of the adoptions were by relatives, another 54 percent by foster parents, and 15 percent by new or matched adopters (USDHHS, 2012). Despite these increases, the percentage of youth who leave care through emancipation in the U.S. has grown steadily, from 7 percent in FY1998 to 11 percent in FY 2011 (USDHHS, 2012).

In 1998, England’s government took measures to increase the use of adoption, establishing a goal of raising them by 40 percent for 2004/5 and by 50 percent for 2006. The number of children adopted from care rose from 2,200 in 1998/9 to 3,770 in 2005, more than meeting the target; that has been followed by a slow decline, however, with 3,050 adoptions in 2011. The most recent data show 3,450 adoptions in the year ending March 2012, a 12 percent increase over the previous year. Twelve percent of adoptions from care in England were by foster parents in 2011 (DfE, 2012). The explanations for the decline in adoptions between 2006 and 2011 have included systemic inertia, severe delays in the court system, and the introduction of Special Guardianship orders which provide a legal permanency alternative to adoption (Selwyn & Sturgess, 2002; Selwyn, Frazer, & Quinton, 2006).

Canada’s Waiting Kids’ website reports that 22,000 of the more than 78,000 children in government care are waiting for adoption, and a parliamentary committee report estimated that about 2,000 girls and boys are adopted each year from care (HUMA, 2012).

The table below reports statistics on adoptions from care in the three countries (DfE, 2012; USDHHS, 2012; Canada’s Waiting Kids, 2012a; HUMA, 2012).
### Adoptions from Care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># in care</th>
<th># adopted</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% of exits</th>
<th>Mean age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>67,050</td>
<td>3,440</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>3.8 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>400,540</td>
<td>50,516</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>6.4 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>78,000</td>
<td>2,000 (est.)</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Guardianship.** In many cases, guardianship is a more achievable permanency alternative than adoption, particularly if there is a provision for financial support, such as subsidized guardianship in the U.S. or “special guardianship” in England and Wales. Guardianship creates a legal relationship between a child in care and a designated adult (usually but not necessarily a relative). This judicially created relationship is intended to be permanent and may offer financial and other supports similar to those for adoption from care. The child gains permanency and security, and the child welfare system reduces its caseload and oversight obligations. Other benefits of this form of permanency are that guardianship:

- does not require termination of parental rights, and the extended time period required to accomplish termination
- provides for permanency when reunification is not safe, but there is insufficient basis to meet the evidentiary standard to terminate rights (Testa, 2004)
- honors the wishes of children who do not want to irrevocably break legal ties to their first/birth parents by being adopted
- respects the cultures of groups such as African Americans, Native Americans and First Nations peoples with traditions of extended family involvement in child-rearing
- reduces conflict and pain within the family of having one member declared as an unfit parent while another relative assumes the parental role
- gives guardians legal decision-making authority for children, which relative foster parents do not have
- offers more flexibility than adoption in cases where it is believed the original parent may one day be able to resume legal rights/custody.

Guardianship orders do have limitations. For instance, they provide less protection against further litigation than does adoption, which grants adoptive mothers and fathers full parental rights. In a guardianship situation, a birthparent can sue to regain custody; in addition, guardianships expire when the children reach age 18.

In the U.S., the number of youth exiting foster care through guardianship has risen significantly over the past 10 years. From 5,916 (2%) in FY 1998 to 15,707 (6%) in FY 2011 (USDHHS, 2012). Generally research in the U.S. has indicated that subsidized guardianship is as stable as adoption (Testa, 2008; Howard, Smith, Zosky, & Woodman, 2006).

Beginning in December 2005 in England, “special guardianship” became an additional permanency option, providing a formal family bond for children until they reach 18 without legally severing the relationship with their birthparents. By 2012, 2,130 children exited the
country’s care system through special guardianship, comprising 7.8% of all those leaving care (DfE, 2012).

**Long-Term Foster Care.** England regards long-term foster care as an option in permanency planning, weighing whether it is as good a fit as adoption for a specific child’s needs. A care plan is developed through an in-depth process of social work assessment and consultation with the child, parents and other relevant parties, and is approved by the court if a care order is made. Generally, long-term foster care is used more often than adoption as a permanency option for children age 5 and older and for those with links to birth relatives that are deemed important to preserve or might still lead to reunification. While a single long-term foster home is intended to last until the child reaches age 18, many youth continue to move around the system (Sinclair, 2005; Bullock, Courtney, Parker, Sinclair, & Thoburn, 2006; Schofield, et al., 2012).

Several studies indicate that long-term foster care can provide a secure base that is viewed by both the youth and the parents as a permanent family; that is, they have a sustained commitment to one another and expect to continue their relationship beyond its legal termination (Triseliotis, 1983; Biehal, et al., 2009; Schofield, et al., 2012). Triseliotis’ (2002) review of eight studies on long-term fostering, however, found that around 43 percent broke down between two and five years after placement, and youth in some placements that continued until age 18 did not sustain their relationships after emancipation.

In the U.S., ASFA eliminated long-term foster care as an acceptable permanency plan; nevertheless, the case goal for almost 23,000 youth in care is still long-term foster care, and an additional 20,600 have a goal of emancipation (USDHHS, 2012). ASFA added APPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) as a case plan designation for children for whom there is no goal for placement with a legal, permanent family. Workers are to first explore all possible legal, permanent family options for the child before moving to APPLA, and even when APPLA is the case goal, they are to work toward building in sustaining relationships and supports for the youth, such as mentoring or an advocate. There is widespread concern among many in the U.S. about the overuse of APPLA as a case goal, with insufficient attention to the permanency needs of older youth in care.

**Focus of the Compendium**

Debates continue over the best pathways to permanence for children in care who cannot safely return home, but one reality remains across the three countries: far too many girls and boys remain in temporary placements and transition to adulthood without an enduring family to sustain them.
Much work remains to be done to adequately meet the permanency needs of these children. There are specific practices that are particularly important for providing children with the greatest likelihood of achieving permanency through adoption or guardianship.

The “Family for Life” Compendium examines 22 practices linked with successfully finding permanent families for children, along with research and practice knowledge and key resources related to each practice. These are practices that are important throughout a child’s journey through placement. Some minimize the trauma experienced by girls and boys in the child welfare system; others assist children in coping with life experiences and transitions, thus facilitating their adjustment and placement stability; and still others help to find families and to enhance their ability to successfully parent their children. These practices are grouped into five categories: organizational practices, court practices, recruitment and retention of permanent families, pre-adoptive casework processes, and supporting and preserving adoptive families. The Compendium provides the following for each practice: description, key program elements, lessons learned, outcomes and selected resources.

**Organizational Practices.** Organizational practices set the stage for achieving permanency – from the explicit requirement in law and policy to find permanent families for children who cannot return home to upholding the goal of permanency in all aspects of agency culture and operations. Contextual aspects of the child welfare system itself influence children’s likelihood of adoption, including the specific jurisdiction in which they reside. For example, one U.S. study found that the state in which children lived had an impact on adoption rates after controlling for youth and family variables (Snowden, Leon, & Sieracki, 2008); another found that across a single state, the child’s district of residence was the single most important predictor of successfully exiting to permanency, accounting for a seven-fold difference in the rate (Becker, Jordan, Larsen, 2007). Significant variations identified in local authorities’ adoption rates in England have resulted in the introduction of adoption “scorecards” for rating performance and enabling comparisons to overall national rates. Knowledge on four organizational practices that have been shown to increase permanency is synthesized in the Compendium:

- **Valuing Permanency through Adoption or Guardianship**
  Leadership at every level of the system must embrace permanency for all children and reinforce the role of adoption and guardianship in permanency planning. Research indicates that with special efforts, enduring families can be found for older youth with very complex special needs, even for teens in residential treatment centers (Avery, 2010). A worker who views a child as “unadoptable” is unlikely to put forth significant efforts to achieve this goal (Avery, 2000).

- **Using Data to Track Outcomes**
  Understanding the factors that influence permanency through adoption is critical to achieving it. When comprehensive assessments and data collection are coordinated within agencies and jurisdictions, as well as nationally, the data provide powerful evidence to inform policy and practice at every level of the system (Snowden, et al., 2008). These data are key to understanding the children in need of adoption and what factors predict permanency success.
Essential Training and Support to Workers
Adoption is a specialty area of child welfare that requires specific training regarding recruitment and retention of families, preparation of youth and families, and supporting and preserving placements. Improving the skills, knowledge and attitudes of professionals responsible for child welfare adoption is fundamental to placement stability and positive outcomes (Hill-Tout, Pithouse, & Lowe, 2003). Projects creating designated adoption units and staff to carry out or mentor other staff in completing adoption responsibilities have resulted in pronounced improvements in adoptions (Eggerton, et al., 2009; Farmer & Lutman, 2010; Coppermoll, 2011).

Availability of Subsidies
The availability and size of financial subsidies are powerful predictors of children in foster care achieving permanency through adoption or guardianship; they also contribute to increases in well-being and stability in their families and help achieve long-term financial savings for governments (Barth, 1993; Barth, Wildfire, Lee, & Gibbs, 2003; Testa, 2004; Dalberth, Gibbs, & Berkman, 2005; Kirton, Beecham, & Ogilvie, 2006; Hansen, 2007).

Court Practices. Moving children quickly and efficiently from foster care to permanency has long presented challenges to courts, with outcomes affected by factors ranging from legal timeframe requirements to judges’ caseloads. Knowledge related to three specific practices that have been found to facilitate timely permanency is synthesized in the Compendium.

Monitoring Timeframes
Jurisdictions have developed a variety of strategies for overcoming unwarranted delays in the court process, such as electronic case monitoring, ongoing workload assessment to control caseload size, tracking systems to coordinate between child welfare and legal systems, and holding monthly team meetings. Projects utilizing such strategies have demonstrated improved outcomes in timeliness, due process, safety, stability and permanency (Pew, 2009).

Permanency Planning Mediation
Mediation provides a less-adversarial, more-cooperative environment in which to resolve child welfare cases, and can be a powerful tool to lessen confrontation for the parties and to achieve more desirable results for children. In addition, evaluations document that mediation can reduce the length of time children remain in care by expediting adjudication of cases and reducing continuances (NCJFCJ, 2011; Summers, Wood, & Russell, 2011).

Assuring Continuity in Judicial Decision-Making
“One judge, one family,” a practice that facilitates consistency by having one judge involved in the duration of each child welfare case, promotes timely permanency. Other reported benefits include better caseload management, time savings, minimizing delays and better understanding by families of where they stand.

Recruitment and Retention of Families. A range of practices related to the recruitment and retention of adoptive or guardianship families is important for achieving permanency. The Compendium includes strategies linked with successful outcomes for general, targeted and child-specific recruitment, as well as family finding within the child’s kinship network. Research indicates that many prospective adoptive families are not retained even after application due to various obstacles within the system – such as not having phone calls returned and going long
periods of time with no communication – so retention is a target for needed reforms as well (McRoy, 2007; Geen, Malm, & Katz, 2004).

- **Family Finding**
  The family finding model provides techniques for identifying and engaging relatives and others who care about a child. The model is used both when a child enters care and for reconnecting older youth to kin. Placement with relatives supports the child’s well-being by minimizing the trauma of separation from original family and maximizing placement stability and the potential for adoption or guardianship if the child is unable to return home. For older youth who have been in care many years and do not have permanent connections to sustain them into adulthood, family finding can be used to reconnect them with relatives or previous significant others and to establish permanent connections ranging from legal permanency to a committed parent-like relationship (Seneca Center, 2012).

- **Maximizing Range of Recruitment Strategies and Consumer-Friendly Practices**
  A broad range of recruitment strategies are needed to effectively recruit families for the spectrum of children needing permanency. National adoption campaigns and other general recruitment efforts generate many times the number of inquiries as those who follow through, so consumer-friendly practices that address both client-centered and agency barriers are critical for maximizing the engagement, retention and success of qualified applicants.

- **Innovative Practices in Targeted Recruitment**
  Targeted recruitment seeks to find homes for a specific group of children or to reach a specific group of high-propensity perspective adopters. To be most effective, these efforts are built on data that inform considerations about where and how to reach the targeted audience, as well as collaboration with representatives of that community who can assist in developing and executing strategies.

- **Intensive Child-Specific Recruitment**
  There are a range of child-specific recruitment approaches, from media-based strategies to aggressive techniques that use recruiters for a specific child, such as the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids model. An evaluation of the latter model found that children in the experimental group were 1.7 times more likely to be adopted (Malm, et al., 2011).

*Pre-Adoptive Casework Processes.* There are practices that maximize children’s likelihood of adoption, extending from the time they enter care to after adoptive placement. Some practices serve to minimize the trauma that children can experience in the child welfare system, thereby promoting their healthy adjustment and reducing obstacles to adoption, while others maximize achieving timely permanency. Knowledge related to eight specific practices in this category is synthesized in the Compendium.

- **Concurrent Planning**
  Using concurrent planning strategies facilitates placing children as early as possible with caregivers who are open to adopting them if they are unable to return home, thus minimizing moves in care and interrupted attachments. Evaluations of concurrent planning projects find an increased rate of permanency attainment, greater placement stability and shorter stays in care (Potter & Klein-Rothschild, 2002; Laws, Wilson, & Rabindrakumar, 2012).
Minimizing the Trauma of Moves in Care
The initial removal from birth family and subsequent moves are often traumatic experiences, reinforcing children’s feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness, and creating and compounding difficulties in establishing trusting attachment relationships. Strategies for minimizing the trauma of moves and for supporting children through transitions that need to occur are discussed.

Increasing Placement Stability
Children who experience multiple moves in care are at greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems, as well as disruption of both foster and adoptive placements, so practices that reduce placement instability can increase the prospects for healthy adjustment and successful adoption. Some interventions, such as wraparound services and the multidimensional treatment foster care model, have been found to reduce placement disruptions (Clark, Lee, Prange, & McDonald, 1996; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Fisher, Burrraston, & Pears, 2005).

Lifebook Work
Lifebook work (sometimes called life story work) is a valuable method for helping children who have experienced separation, loss and trauma to reconstruct the pieces of their history, to make sense of what has happened to them and to promote a positive sense of self. It also provides children with the opportunity to process major life events and to work toward healing from trauma and loss, thus supporting well-being and mental health.

Involving Children and Youth in Permanency Work
Involving children in permanency work is not only their right, but also important for achieving successful permanency. Facilitating active participation in planning and decision-making, rather than leaving them to be passive recipients of information, benefits them by fostering self-determination, understanding and acceptance.

Sound Parental Assessment and Home Study Process
A comprehensive assessment of potential adoptive parents through a “home study” is required throughout the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. In addition to evaluating the safety and suitability of prospective parents and the type of child they are prepared to parent, the home study process provides an opportunity for them to learn about caring for a child with special needs and to explore their own concerns and needs. Research examining the use of SAFE (Structured Analysis Family Evaluation, a standardized home study process widely implemented in the U.S. and Canada) indicates it more effectively identifies most issues of concern than conventional methods (Crea, Barth, Chintapalli, & Buchanan, 2009a & 2009b).

Effective Adoptive Parent Preparation
Throughout the U.S., Canada and England, parent preparation is required for adoptions from care. In addition to group education and training, prospective parents need to receive individualized preparation related to understanding the history and needs of their particular child, the implications for the child’s ongoing development, and the services and supports that may assist them in parenting. Research indicates that preparation reduces placement disruption, fosters a more positive view of children, supports realistic expectations, improves parenting skills and leads to improved functioning (Barth & Berry, 1988; Groze, 1996; Reilly & Platz, 2004; Smith & Howard, 1999; Wind, Brooks, & Barth, 2007).
Maintaining Level of Openness in Child’s Best Interest
Determining and working to achieve the level of openness that is in an individual child’s best interest helps to minimize traumatic loss, maximize continuity of relationships and foster positive identity development. It is critical that contact arrangements are built on a thorough assessment of the child’s relationships, birth family and prospective adopters’ interest and capacity, as well as the child’s wishes and the quality and safety of contact. In England, the law requires adoption agencies to assess and plan for any birth family contact children will have after adoption; approximately 90 percent have some sort of contact plan, ranging from exchange of letters (the plan for most children) to face-to-face contact (Neil & Howe, 2004). Research there found a large majority of adoptive parents with direct contact arrangements were satisfied that they were in their children’s best interests (Logan & Smith, 2004; Neil, 2004).

Supporting and Preserving Adoptive Families. Given the traumatic life experiences that most children in foster care have endured, a substantial proportion of them will continue to have ongoing adjustment issues that may intensify as they age. Preparing and supporting adoptive and guardianship families both before and after placement not only helps to preserve and stabilize at-risk placements, but also offers children and families the best opportunity for success. A continuum of adoption support and preservation services is needed to address the information, support and therapeutic needs of children and their families. The overall body of adoption research generally has linked receiving post-adoption services with more positive outcomes, and unmet service needs is associated with poorer outcomes (Barth & Berry, 1988; Groze, 1996; Leung & Erich, 2002; Reilly & Platz, 2004; CWIG, 2012).

Adoption Education and Support Services
Research indicates that the amount and quality of support that adoptive families receive contributes to permanency and positive adjustment (Barth & Berry, 1988; Groze, 1996; Leung & Erick, 2002; Houston & Kramer, 2008). Common types of support services for adoptive families are parent support groups, mentoring programs and educational/training programs. Utilization of support groups is associated with greater parenting satisfaction, stabilizing placements and other positive outcomes (Reilly & Platz, 2003; Gibbs, Barth & Houts, 2005; Bryan, Flaherty & Saunders, 2010).

Therapeutic Interventions to Enhance Adoption Adjustment
Child welfare adoptive parents seek mental health services for at least 45 percent of children they adopt, and in several studies they rated counseling at the top of a list of services that they had trouble getting (Reilly & Platz, 2003; Howard & Smith, 2003; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). The Compendium explores common goals of therapeutic interventions, the nature of services provided, model interventions and outcome research.

Adoption Preservation Services to Stabilize At-Risk Adoptions
A minority of children and their families undergo periods of severe difficulty both in the months after initial placement and periodically thereafter, sometimes resulting in the breakdown of the adoption. A range of programs and services focusing on preserving at-risk adoptions is discussed and important practice strategies are reviewed; a brief synopsis of outcome research on adoption preservation is also provided.
Conclusions and Recommendations

While child welfare systems across the United States, England and Canada have made progress in law and practice to move foster children who cannot safely return home to permanent families, we are far from adequately meeting the needs of tens of thousands of children each year. Based on the range of practice knowledge and research synthesized in this Compendium, a number of recommendations appear self-evident.

1. In statute and policy, provide clear requirements for achieving permanency for every child in foster care who cannot return home and operationalize this expectation through organizational leadership and culture.

2. Facilitate tracking outcomes at every level of the system in order to understand the barriers to permanency and to enforce accountability for achieving it.

3. Use aggressive family finding and engagement to maximize the use of relatives as permanency resources for children in care, as this contributes to child well-being.

4. Reduce barriers and disincentives to adoption or guardianship by providing adequate and reliable subsidies to those who make the commitment to become legal parents to these children.

5. Incorporate sound casework practices that minimize harm: place children initially with families who are likely resources for alternate permanency, support children to understand and cope with traumatic experiences, and minimize the extent of losses they must endure by stabilizing placements, requiring Lifebook work, and facilitating the level of openness in the child’s best interest.

6. Monitor court timeframes in order to avoid unwarranted delays in achieving permanency – delays which themselves lessen a child’s chances for adoption.

7. Employ a range of recruitment and retention strategies to find permanent families for children and youth in care, including promoting consumer-friendly practices to retain families who do apply to adopt. (Strategies should include checks within the system to identify youth who are lingering in care and to provide expert support and consultation for workers to effectively resolve barriers to permanency.)

8. Provide a continuum of adoption support and preservation services to stabilize at-risk placements and to enable families to successfully parent children to adulthood.

Adoption provides a lifetime of benefits for children who cannot return to their families of origin, including the emotional security of caring adults and a committed family to ensure that their needs are met. Gaining a family for life not only transforms the futures of children in care, but also brings benefits to child welfare systems, governments and communities. For example, one economist found that every dollar invested in the adoption of a child from care returns about three dollars in public and private benefits (Hansen, 2006). Adoption also delivers societal benefits after these children become adults, such as reduced likelihood of their receiving public assistance, having criminal or substance abuse involvement, or experiencing a range of other difficulties affecting individuals, their families and the communities in which they live. Child welfare systems across all jurisdictions need to regularly assess their performance in achieving permanency for the youth in their care and to search for ways to better meet their needs, including incorporating practices described in this volume.
REFERENCES


Clark, H. B., Lee, B., Prange, M. E., & McDonald, B. A. (1996). Children Lost Within the Foster Care System:


