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## What Helps and Hinders Me from Being Adopted

*Voices of Youth in Foster Care from the  
Wendy's Wonderful Kids Evaluation*

October | 2011

Prepared by:



## **AUTHORS**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to acknowledge Kerry DeVooght, Tiffany Allen, Amy McKlindon, and Karin Malm, who contributed to the development of this brief. Most importantly, we would like to thank all the youth who participated in the interviews and shared their experiences with us.

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Ellis, R. (2011). What Helps and Hinders Me from Being Adopted: Voices of Youth in Foster Care from the Wendy's Wonderful Kids Evaluation, Child Trends, Washington, D.C.

One of the central purposes of the child welfare system is to identify and secure permanent homes for children who are unable to safely return to the custody of their biological parents. Ideally, this permanent home is with an adoptive family. Legislative mandates such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)<sup>1</sup> of 1997 and research on the benefits of having a permanent family have contributed to adoption being deemed the preferred permanency outcome. Research suggests that adoption helps children to develop a positive self-image and provides stability, continuity, and long-term family connections that can assist children in navigating their lives throughout adulthood (Cahn & Johnson, 1993; Barth, 2002; Plunkett & Osmond, 2004; The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004). Since the passage of ASFA, more children have been adopted but this success has been seen disproportionately among adoptions of younger children. According to recent national data on foster care adoptions, the average age of children who were adopted was 6 years old, although nearly half of the children waiting to be adopted were between the ages of 10 and 17 (DHHS, 2010).

This brief summarizes previous research regarding challenges to adoptions of older children in foster care and presents new data from the voices of youth in foster care who received services from the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) adoption recruitment program. The youth interviews were conducted as part of a larger **evaluation of the WWK program**. (See textbox.)

### **What previous research has shown**

Older child adoptions have been identified by researchers, practitioners, and community stakeholders as challenging. Older child adoptions are more likely to disrupt<sup>2</sup> than younger child adoptions due to issues such as behavioral and emotional challenges and the emotional toll that a prospective adoptive family suffers when dealing with these challenges (Barth & Berry, 1988; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988; Smith, et. al., 2006; Wright & Flynn, 2006). Historically, there have also been challenges in finding prospective adoptive parents willing to adopt older children although states have been able to increase the number of families open to older

### **WENDY'S WONDERFUL KIDS**

Since its inception in 1992, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA) has aimed to increase the numbers of adoptions for children waiting in the U.S. foster care system. In 2004, DTFA launched the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) initiative to further this goal.

The WWK program is unique for several reasons, among which is that it represents a corporate philanthropic commitment to solving a social problem. To support the program, Wendy's restaurants and their customers raise funds for DTFA, which in turn issues grants to local adoption organizations in the neighborhoods where the funds are raised. The agencies hire WWK adoption recruiters who spend 100 percent of their time finding permanent, loving families for children in their local foster care systems who are considered challenging to place in adoptive homes due to age, sibling group membership, or disability.

The DTFA describes the WWK model of adoption recruitment as "child-focused," requiring WWK recruiters to focus exhaustively on an individual child's history, experiences, and needs in order to find an appropriate adoptive family.

The program has grown considerably since its inception, with 122 recruiters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as in four Canadian provinces. For more information on DTFA and the WWK program, visit **[davethomasfoundation.org](http://davethomasfoundation.org)**.

child adoptions over the past decade with the assistance of federal legislative efforts. For example, ASFA included a provision to offer financial incentives to states for the number of children adopted. Additionally, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 extended the Adoption Incentive Program through 2013 and doubled incentive payment amounts for special needs and older child adoptions.

Youth opposition to adoption also has been identified as a challenge to adoptions of older children. This issue is complicated by the fact that children as young as 10 years old are required by statute in many states to consent to the goal of adoption before a judge approves this goal (Ellis, Malm, & Bishop, 2009). Reasons that contribute to youths' opposition include experiencing past adoption disruption or dissolution<sup>3</sup>, preferring to remain in current foster placements, hoping to be reunited with their biological parents or to keep those relationships intact, believing no one would want to adopt them, focusing on independence and leaving the foster care system, and feeling too old to need parent figures (Bush & Goldman, 1982; Chambers, Zielewski, & Malm, 2007). Several judges in one study reported that misperceptions and a general lack of knowledge about adoption also contribute to youth opposition to adoption (Ellis, Malm, & Bishop, 2009). Although youth opposition has been documented by multiple sources, minimal research still exists that explores foster youths' perceptions. Likewise, little is known about what may help foster youth to consider or reconsider adoption.

## Youths' perceptions of challenges

### Individual-level barriers

During interviews (see textbox), youth were asked if anything about being in foster care makes it difficult for kids to be adopted. Although the question was intended to yield responses about the foster care system, many youth seemed to internalize this question and provided a list of personal characteristics that make foster youth less appealing to prospective adoptive parents. For example, some youth reported that talking back to adults, running away from home, and missing curfew make them less appealing. The youth also

## METHODOLOGY AND YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

In-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted between July, 2009 and May, 2010 with a sample of foster youth affiliated with the WWK program. A total of 74 youth participated in the interviews, representing a 63 percent response rate. Youth ranged in age from 12 to 18; over half were male (55 percent), and the majority were African American/black (65 percent) or white (31 percent). Youth eligible to participate in the 30-minute interviews were: 1) at least 12 years old, 2) had been involved in the WWK program for at least three months, and 3) active in the past nine months. Five eligible foster youth from the caseloads of each of the WWK recruiters in the 17 participating states and the District of Columbia were randomly selected to receive an invitation to participate in an interview. The majority of interviews took place in the youth's current placement, while a few took place in other settings, such as a park or restaurant.

At the time of the interview, half of the youth were residing in a foster home while one-fourth were residing in a pre-adoptive/adoptive home (24 percent) or group home (22 percent) at the time of their interview. Youth had been in foster care for an average of eight years, in an average of seven different placements.

**KEY FINDING:**

Poor behavior and being opposed to adoption are barriers.

said that a number of characteristics commonly reported in the literature as making it more difficult for foster youth to secure an adoptive placement, such as being an older child, being an ethnic minority, being part of a sibling group, and having a physical or developmental disability (Breland-Noble, et. al., 2005; Lu, et. al, 2004). A few youth also acknowledged that some of their peers may need to remain in a more restrictive environment due to severe emotional disturbances. Lastly, some youth also identified an opposition to adoption as a reason why they had yet to secure an adoptive home.

**KEY FINDING:**

Community misperceptions about foster youth and adoptive parents' unrealistic expectations are perceived as barriers.

**Community-level barriers**

In addition to individual-level characteristics, some youth reported a number of community-level issues that make it difficult for them to be adopted. These include a lack of prospective adoptive parents in their communities willing to adopt older children and a general community perception that all foster youth have behavior and emotional problems. Unrealistic expectations of prospective adoptive parents were also identified as making it difficult for foster youth to secure an adoptive home. Several youth explained that an adjustment period occurs once a foster youth is placed in an adoptive home, which may include some acting-out behaviors. The youth did not perceive prospective adoptive parents as understanding the difficulty of this period. Further, prospective adoptive parents were described as not understanding common challenges that come with raising a teenager (e.g., general rebellion), which was perceived as leading parents to request that a youth be removed from their home.

**System-level barriers**

As for the foster care system, the youth identified three main issues they perceived as making it difficult to achieve adoption — caseworkers and their documentation process, extended foster care spells, and placement instability.

**Caseworkers and their documentation process.** Several youth reported caseworkers who were not committed to the goal of adoption for a youth and/or were overworked, resulting in less attention to recruiting adoptive parents and ensuring that the youth were appropriately matched with a family. Additionally, some youth identified caseworker documentation of

**KEY FINDING:**

Caseworkers who are uncommitted to recruitment and negative information in case records are perceived as barriers.

incidents as hindering youth from achieving adoption. For example, youth described how caseworkers typically document negative behaviors rather than focusing attention on positive behaviors and individual strengths. These case notes were described as troublesome for the youth because they give a negative perception, potentially discouraging prospective adoptive parents.

**KEY FINDING:**

Long stays in foster care are a perceived barrier; they create feelings of anger, depression, and poor self worth.

**Extended spells in foster care.** Many youth also perceived the experience of lingering in the system for extended periods of time as creating feelings of anger, depression, and poor self worth, making it difficult for them to be presented in the best light by adoption recruiters. Specific experiences that were described as evoking these feelings were most commonly related to not having the same freedoms as youth who are not in foster care and generally being unable to live a normal life. For example, one youth shared his experience of having to sign a document in order to confirm receipt of any money exchanged between him and his foster parents, while another youth explained how she had to subject her friends' families to background checks in order to visit a friend's home.

**KEY FINDING:**

Placement instability is a perceived barrier; it discourages youth from forming new relationships.

**Placement instability.** Placement instability that is often experienced by youth who remain in foster care for extended periods was also identified as making it difficult for them to achieve adoption. For example, in order to cope with experiencing multiple changes in placements and the subsequent loss of relationships with foster siblings and school friends, some foster youth reported making conscious efforts to refrain from developing close relationships. This coping mechanism is perceived as contributing to challenges in building relationships with prospective adoptive families.

**Youths' perceptions of what helps them be open to adoption**

During the interviews, the youth were also asked about their feelings toward adoption prior to working with the WWK recruiter. Almost half of the youth reported not wanting to be adopted prior to working with the WWK recruiter or feeling unsure or conflicted about being adopted. Several youth said their opposition was driven by a lack of hope in being adopted. Experiencing past adoption disruptions and recognizing the reality that teenagers are less sought-after than younger children were reported as contributing to this diminished sense of hope. Other youth reported that their opposition was due to a desire to not be moved to another home, a desire not to change their last name, or a desire to be reunified with their biological families or to sustain the legal and personal relationships with their birth families. A few youth also noted not wanting to be adopted because they distrusted anyone new in their lives, or feared being mistreated by an adoptive parent.

**KEY FINDING:**

Youth reported being more open to adoption after working with a WWK recruiter.

Youth also were asked about their feelings regarding adoption since working with the WWK recruiter. Those youth previously opposed to adoption were significantly more likely to feel open to adoption since working with the WWK recruiter. More than one in four of these youth reported openness to adoption. The youth reported several techniques used by the recruiters that contributed to these changes. These techniques are described below.

**Emphasize the advantages of adoption**

Recruiters emphasized to the youth the advantages of being adopted, such as having a permanent home and having a forever family that cares for them, meets their needs, and will be there to help them navigate their lives as adults. Realizing the benefits of adoption helped several youth become open to adoption.

**KEY FINDING:**

It is helpful to emphasize the multiple benefits of being adopted.

**Seek relatives and other connections to adopt**

Recruiters focused on seeking relatives and other connections currently in a youth's life who might be open to adopting him or her, such as a current foster parent. One in six of the youth reported that their recruiter asked if they knew of anyone who might be able to provide a permanent home for them. Having a specific person with whom they have a personal relationship express interest in adopting them helped several youth become open to adoption.

**Be open and honest about the adoption process and possible outcomes**

Recruiters were open and honest with the youth about the challenges involved in securing an adoptive home (e.g. the process can take a long time, many families prefer younger children, etc.) while remaining hopeful and positive about finding an adoptive home for the youth. Some youth expressed their appreciation for the recruiter's honesty and felt that this approach helped them to become or remain open to adoption.

**Empower youth throughout the adoption process**

Recruiters emphasized to the youth that it was ultimately their decision to be adopted. They were open to hearing the youths' desires in a family, incorporated these desires into their recruitment plan, and inquired about the type of recruitment, if any, in which the youth would like to be involved. Making it a priority to find a family with similar interests

and empowering the youth with choices as to how they would like to be involved in the recruitment process seemed to be well-received by the youth, and were reported by some as being key to their becoming or remaining open to adoption.

**KEY FINDING:**

It is helpful to empower youth by emphasizing that adoption is the youth's choice and involving them in the recruitment process.

**Address questions and concerns**

Recruiters were described by many youth as serving as an information resource and frequently answering questions about adoption, particularly about things that were important to the youth. For example, one youth stated, "If I ever had a question, she [recruiter] would answer it carefully. She didn't want to offend me. I wanted to know if my parents relinquished their rights or had their rights terminated and she found out for me." Some youth noted that their recruiters helped them to understand how their actions (e.g., shutting people out, exhibiting poor behavior, etc.) could hinder adoption efforts, and worked with them to improve their social skills. Obtaining more general information about adoption and about the adoption recruitment process specifically through discussions with the recruiter was reported as helping some youth become open to adoption.

A few youth also noted safety concerns and general fears about adoption as topics discussed with their recruiter. Being reassured through discussions with their recruiters that the adoptive family was there to help and not harm them was also reported as a reason why some youth became open to adoption.

**Build a relationship with the youth**

In addition to assisting with adoption recruitment, the recruiters often met the emotional and material needs of youth, which helped build a positive, trusting relationship. This relationship assisted some youth in becoming more open to discussing and considering adoption. Spending leisure time with the youth during their monthly in-person meetings was noted as facilitating the development of a bond between the youth and their recruiter. The recruiters were reported as taking the youth out to eat, to the mall or zoo, and walking or driving around town during their visits.

A few youth reported that the recruiter helped them to obtain material needs, such as clothing, and provided helpful referrals to such services as mental health programs. They also reported that recruiters facilitated parent and sibling visits and attended adoption-related events with the youth. A few youth also reported that the recruiter came to the hospital to check on them when they were ill or injured. Several youth noted that the recruiter gave them advice and encouragement about their education, career aspirations, and relationships with their peers, and was there to lend an ear if they needed to talk about anything.

**KEY FINDING:**

It is helpful to build a relationship with the youth by meeting emotional and material needs.

## Implications and conclusions

The results of the youth interviews have several implications for adoption policy and practices. Specifically, the voices of these youth call for urgency in adoption recruitment efforts and ensuring youth are adequately prepared for adoption, increased awareness that caseworker attitudes and perceptions directly affect recruitment efforts and overall youth involvement in adoption recruitment efforts.

### Urgency of adoption recruitment and adequate adoption preparation

The youths' responses about the difficulties of having normal lives and the negative impact that placement instability and a lack of permanency can have on a child's emotional health are well-supported in existing research (Halfon, Mendonca, & Berkowitz, 1995; Lee & Whiting, 2007; Plunkett & Osmond, 2004). Further, youths' responses that convey self blame for much of their current circumstances and having yet to be able to secure a permanent family provides evidence that some youth are experiencing emotional challenges. These unintended consequences of foster care speak to the urgency with which adoption recruiters should be working to find adoptive parents. It is not surprising that having emotional issues would result in difficulties interacting with prospective adoptive parents and make youth less appealing to prospective parents. Adoption recruiters should seek to become aware of any personal issues that may hinder a youth from becoming adopted by speaking with the child's primary caseworker and/or therapist, reviewing the case file and incorporating them into the youth's adoption preparation plan. Likewise, adoption recruiters should also educate prospective adoptive parents about potential issues that foster youth may exhibit and prepare parents on how to be sensitive to the needs of the youth.

#### KEY FINDING:

The WWK model component — relationship building — is viewed as key to acceptance of adoption.

### Addressing caseworker attitudes and perceptions

The youth also offered insightful thoughts about how caseworkers can be a barrier to achieving adoption. Past research supports the claim that caseworkers' attitudes and perspectives can influence whether a foster child is adopted (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004). Child welfare administrators need to remain conscious of caseworkers' level of influence on case success and ensure that each child is being provided quality case management services. Further, administrators should evaluate their current case documentation practices and policies to ensure that caseworkers are a strengths perspective. For example, Lee and Whiting (2007) suggest that child welfare staff reframe their perceptions and the perceptions of others to view the emotional and behavioral challenges that foster youth exhibit as signs of strength and youths' ability to develop new defenses and coping mechanisms as an attempt to maintain their sense of self in the face of loss, abandonment, and other painful experiences.

### Including youth perspectives in adoption recruitment

The youth in this study also provide insight into why some foster youth oppose adoption, a key issue for adoption recruiters to explore in order to develop strategies for how best to work with these youth. For example, it is evident by some youth reports of not wanting to change their last name that some youth are opposed to adoption due to misperceptions about it. Identifying and addressing misperceptions with the youth may diminish their opposition to

adoption. Further, exploring such options as an open adoption or post-adoption contact agreement may diminish the opposition of those youth who desire continued contact with their birth families.

The youth voices also speak to the importance of the WWK child-focused recruitment model and how it can help youth become or remain open to adoption. This study found that those youth who were previously opposed to adoption were significantly more likely to feel open to adoption after working with the WWK recruiter. It appears that specific components of the model, such as building a relationship with the youth and different techniques used by the WWK recruiters, make the adoption recruitment process enjoyable and well-received by the youth. It will be important for public and private adoption agencies to explore using similar techniques in an effort to help more foster youth, who cannot safely return home to their birth parents, secure adoptive families.

For more information on the research, please visit [davethomasfoundation.org/research](https://davethomasfoundation.org/research). For more information on the Foundation, visit [davethomasfoundation.org](https://davethomasfoundation.org).

<sup>1</sup>ASFA implemented tighter timeframes for moving children from foster care into permanent homes, re-emphasized adoption, and provided states incentives for increasing the number of children adopted who have special needs.

<sup>2</sup>An adoption disruption is the termination of a placement before the adoption is legally finalized.

<sup>3</sup>Adoption dissolution is the termination of an adoption after it is legally finalized.

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