



Never too old for family: Wendy's Wonderful Kids

by Rita L. Soronen, President & CEO, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

The Calhoun family

The Adoptive Families Association of BC is proud to be one of the partner sites for the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's signature program, Wendy's Wonderful Kids. In this article, Rita Soronen, the Foundation's president & CEO, explains the program's evidence-based and highly successful approach to finding families for some of North America's children and youth who wait the longest.

Children enter foster care through no fault of their own—they have been abused, neglected, or abandoned. They have experienced not only the trauma of abuse, but also the grief and loss of family separation and, too often, the stress of frequent moves or care unresponsive to their cultural, emotional, and physical needs.

Today, more than 30,000 children are waiting to be adopted from foster care in Canada. The hard reality is that too many children linger in care for years and age out of the foster care system without an adoptive family, putting them at an elevated risk of negative outcomes, including homelessness, unemployment, early parenting, and substance abuse. It is essential that adoption advocates and professionals work together to maximize every avenue to find permanency and stability for these children, including our older children and youth.

Wendy's Wonderful Kids: serving youth who need our help the most

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption began Wendy's Wonderful Kids as a pilot program in 2004 with seven grant-funded sites in the United States. The first grant in Canada was issued in Ontario in 2006. We had a singular goal: to focus on permanency for those children and youth most at risk of aging out of foster care, including children aged nine and older, sibling groups, children with mental or physical challenges, and children who have been in care for so long or have experienced such significant trauma that they have given up hope of ever having a family of their own.

As Dave Thomas, our founder, who was also adopted, always said, "These children are not someone else's responsibility. They are our responsibility."

The Foundation provides grants to local public or private foster care adoption agencies and children's aid societies to hire a skilled Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter, who serves a small caseload of the longest-waiting children. The recruiter

- completes a thorough review of the case file;
- develops an in-person relationship with the child;
- collaborates with all adults in the child's network;
- performs a diligent search—including an exhaustive case record review, online searches and ongoing conversations with the child, birth parents, relatives, social workers, educators and other important people in the child's life—to identify all potential adoptive parents;
- ensures the child and potential parents are prepared for adoption; and
- executes a detailed adoption plan.

The model works—and it challenges the systemic perception that some children are simply unadoptable. That notion was unacceptable to us.

When a rigorous five-year evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids in the United States was released in 2011, revealing that children served by the program are up to three times more likely to be adopted, the Foundation began scaling up this proven program through a co-investment public/private partnership strategy.

As of December 2018, there are 33 Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Saskatchewan. Together, they have found adoptive homes for more than 340 children, and another 103 are in pre-adoptive placements.

“Every day is a new adventure.”

John and Carly Calhoun knew they wanted to grow their family through adoption. In 2010, the Abbotsford couple welcomed their son, Cash, as a newborn through a licensed adoption agency. Two years later, their family expanded to include three siblings, Angelina, 9, Louis, 7, and Roxy, 4, who had spent their entire lives in foster care. Soon after, they met Kirsty Stormer, a Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiter at the Adoptive Families Association of BC.

Kirsty informed the Calhouns that Angelina, Louis, and Roxy had more siblings in foster care. “We were asked about making contact with them and keeping in touch,” Carly recalls. “John and I said, ‘Well, let’s do better than that. Let’s try and adopt them.’” In February 2016, the Calhouns finalized their adoptions of Alicia, 18, and Tristin, 10. “Our kids are such strong individuals: unique and funny, weird and introverted, extroverted and beautiful,” says John. “It’s like they have always been with us.”

As their Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiter, Kirsty offered critical support to John and Carly along the way. “She would come and visit our kids and take them on one-on-one outings, chatting about the weather or any concerns they had about the adoption,” says Carly. “She was someone the kids began to trust.”

The process of coming together as a family hasn’t been easy, but the Calhouns love to share how their family grew through adoption. They want anyone considering adoption to know that children in foster care are more than what’s on paper.

“When our sons and daughters joined our family, it was overwhelming at first. But we persevered and have become an inseparable unit. They are such a gift to our family, because there is so much love, and every day is a new adventure,” says John. “Bringing all the kids together was so exciting, and we knew how much it does and will mean to these kids if they grow up knowing each other.”

Every child deserves a permanent home and a loving family

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption’s Wendy’s Wonderful Kids program is changing lives for a growing number of youth in North America. To date, more than 8000 children are in permanent homes as a direct result of the work of the more than 400 Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiters across North America. But our work is far from done.

With our eyes firmly focused on a future when every child has a permanent family, no matter their age, the circumstances of their journey through the child welfare system, how they identify themselves, or the borders that define them, we must continue to act on behalf

8,000+ ADOPTIONS

400+ Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) Recruiters

THIS MODEL IS UP TO 3x MORE EFFECTIVE at serving children who have been in foster care the longest.

The infographic features a background image of a young boy with curly hair, wearing a black t-shirt and shorts, looking down at a basketball on a court. The text is overlaid on this image in various colors and fonts. The top left section has '8,000+' in large yellow font and 'ADOPTIONS' in white. The bottom left section has '400+' in large white font on a yellow background, followed by 'Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) Recruiters' in white. The right side has 'THIS MODEL IS UP TO' in white, '3x' in large yellow font, and 'MORE EFFECTIVE' in white, with a subtext 'at serving children who have been in foster care the longest.' in white.

of the tens of thousands of children across North America who are waiting, simply waiting, to be adopted.

Here’s how you can help

- Learn about vulnerable youth and families in your community
- Foster, adopt, or mentor a child from foster care
- Share free resources at www.davethomasfoundation.ca, such as the Foundation’s Finding Forever Families: A Step-By-Step Guide to Adoption
- Support the work of agencies like the Adoptive Families Association of BC and other partner agencies across Canada
- Give the gift of family by donating at www.davethomasfoundation.org/ca/give

Children are never too old to want, need, and deserve a permanent home and loving family. Together, we can change lives and build stronger families and communities for generations to come. ●

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is a nonprofit, public charity dedicated exclusively to finding permanent homes and loving families for the nearly 155,000 children waiting in North America’s foster care systems. To learn more about the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption–Canada visit www.davethomasfoundation.ca and follow the Foundation on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Connect with Rita Soronen on Twitter at [@rsoronen](https://twitter.com/rsoronen).