

Forging Family Connections: Adoption Plans for Special Children
Adoption Opportunities Grant # 90-CO-0943

ASSESSMENT

Association for Children of New Jersey
January 2004

I. Introduction and Background for the Project

The New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) applied for and received a three year federal adoption opportunities grant in 2000 to improve permanency services for children who were in foster care but would not be adopted by their current caretaker, necessitating placement in a select adoption home. For the most part, these children were the most difficult to find permanent homes for, based on their age, their history of placement and their specific needs, such as physical and/or emotional handicaps. These were special needs children who required a different case management approach, additional resources and the commitment of special adoptive home parents who would be willing to support the growth and development of these children into adulthood in permanent homes.

The project, ***Forging Family Connections: Adoption Plans for Special Children***, was designed to increase the likelihood of adoptions for these children in several ways:

- Creating and supporting special units within the Division to focus on children who would not be adopted by their foster parents, but would need select home placements;
- Funding and supporting private agency attempts to recruit families interested in special needs adoption; and
- Providing an array of comprehensive post-adoption services to ensure the success of these special needs adoption placements.

The impetus for the project resulted from the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), enacted by the federal government to address the problem of children in out-of-home placements languishing interminably in foster care without a permanent plan. Although the Division's permanency efforts were considerably better than many other states, a large number of children remained in foster care in New Jersey for years without any hope of either being reunified with their families or being adopted by their foster parents. Furthermore, it was believed that addressing the backlog of children in placement prior to the enactment of ASFA as required in the law, would increase the number of children needing select home adoption.

The project was also consistent with the mandates and mission of legislation adopted in New

Jersey in 1999 to bring the state into compliance with ASFA. Both the federal and state legislation illustrate public policies to address the permanency needs of special needs children, the most difficult children for which to find adoptive homes.

The Division engaged the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) to conduct a project assessment, from the point of view of those involved: adoptive parents, Division staff and private agency providers. In year one, ACNJ solicited their opinions of the quality and functioning of existing system regarding select home adoption, utilizing surveys of select home adoptive parents and focus groups with Division staff, community agencies providing post-adoption services and adoptive parents. This information was shared immediately with project staff in the Division and was used to develop some of the changes that were implemented in the grant. It was also used to provide baseline data for the project update in year two and final evaluation in year three.

The central hypothesis of the federal grant was that competent and comprehensive post-adoptive services provided in support of these special adoptive homes would result in more successful permanent placements for these children and that they would flourish in their new environments. A second hypothesis was that a specialized practice model to develop and support select home adoptive families would increase the number of select adoption homes and decrease adoption disruption.

The Logic Model was the basis for this approach and New Jersey adopted this model in the implementation of the grant. The Logic Model defined a series of objectives, activities and interventions that were related to a series of immediate, intermediate and long-term outcomes, all of which were related to the successful placement and adoption of special needs children. The Logic Model posited that consistent, continuous and intensive services and supports would yield successful outcomes for these special needs children. The grant provided the resources necessary for those services and supports.

In addition to strengthening post-adoption services, the Division also undertook two major structural changes designed to address the needs of the target population. First, the Division created a new regional office (a Select Home Office) to focus exclusively on children needing select home placement. Second, specialized select home units were created in each of the remaining Adoption Resource Centers (ARC). The over-all objective was to improve all aspects of the select home adoption process including recruitment, selection, training, case management and ongoing supports during the adoption process and after the adoption process.

It should be noted that the post-adoption services actually commenced as soon as placement in the special adoptive home occurred so the adoptive parent and child could receive the full benefit of these supportive services.

This assessment will review the activities undertaken by the Association for Children of New Jersey on behalf of the Division during the three project years, the baseline data, the project findings and conclusions and recommendations for future activities. Again, this assessment focused on the opinions of key actors within the adoption system: adoptive parents, Division

staff and private agency staff.

II. Project Activities and Methodology

ACNJ embarked on a number of activities to obtain feedback from key actors in order to assess changes in Division case practice with respect to select home adoption during the three-year period. ACNJ assessed changes in case practice by soliciting the opinions and attitudes of adoptive parents, Division staff and the staff of the post-adoption agencies that provided services to these select home adoptive parents. The assessment focused on several areas or themes:

- Case practice
- Communication among workers and with adoptive families
- Timeliness of activities
- Availability and quality of post-adoption services
- Satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the over-all experience
- Recommendations for improvement

The following activities were conducted to provide the baseline data and assessment of the project outcomes:

A. Surveys of Adoptive Parents

Surveys of select home adoptive parents were conducted three times during the three-year grant period. No sampling was required - every select home adoptive family who had adopted in the previous calendar year received a survey (i.e. families with a select home placement in 2000 were surveyed in May 2001). Surveys were received from 142 respondents, out of a total population of 436 families. The surveys sought information from the adoptive parents in four areas: information about the background of the adoptive family; information regarding the placement itself including the type of placement requested and the type of placement that actually occurred; the family's assessment of the process; and the family's prediction of the need for post-adoption services.

It should be noted that the survey response in years two and three of the project significantly increased, with a response rate of 37%. This was due to a change in the survey process. In year one, adoptive parents were offered a \$10 compensation for each returned survey. In years two and three, \$10 gift certificates to Wendy's were included in every survey.

B. Focus Groups with Adoptive Parents

Following the surveys, focus groups were conducted to explore some of the survey responses in more depth. Five (5) focus groups were conducted, with sixty- three (63) parents participating. The focus groups took place in May and June of 2002 and in June of 2003. In each focus group, participants were asked to rate or comment on the following issues:

- Effectiveness of the DYFS system in preparing families for adoption
- Training of adoptive parents
- Adoptive-parent –child matching process
- Timeliness of the adoption process
- Communication between DYFS and the adoptive families
- Need for post adoption services
- Other suggestions, comments or recommendations

It should be noted that a change in methodology also improved participation in the focus groups. In year one, despite interest from adoptive parents who returned the surveys, only one adoptive parent attended a scheduled focus group, due to the difficulty of finding a location that was convenient to families from across the state. ACNJ staff conducted individual phone interviews with adoptive families who were interested in participating in the focus groups, but could not attend.

In years two and three, ACNJ conducted the groups via teleconference, significantly improving the ability of adoptive parents to participate. Families were given a scheduled date and time (in the evening between 8-10 PM) and a toll-free 800# to call. Since training for foster and adoptive parents is routinely done via teleconference, this was a technique that many participants had experienced, which enabled them to participate in the focus groups in greater numbers. In many instances, both adoptive parents in two-parent families participated on the call, since babysitting was not necessary.

C. Focus Groups with Division Staff

The opinions of Division staff were solicited through focus groups held in years one and three of the project. One focus group was held for DYFS staff at the outset of the project in April 2001. Approximately 35 staff participated. At the project conclusion in 2003, individual focus groups were scheduled for DYFS staff in the regional ARC offices. Four groups were held, with ninety-two (92) workers participating. These focus groups addressed the following questions:

- Length of time working within the select home office or unit
- Nature of the select home unit caseload
- Assessment of specialized training
- Effectiveness of the select home practice model
- Access to and benefits of the Enrichment Fund
- Most and least successful experiences in select home adoption
- Identification of the services most helpful for adoptive families during the adoption process and after the adoption is finalized
- Strengths of the current system and suggested improvements

D. Focus Groups with Post-Adoption Contract Services Staff

Pre- and post-project focus groups were also held for staff of the private community providers.

These are the agencies with which the Division contracts for post-adoption services. The first group occurred in April of 2001; twenty (20) workers participated. The second occurred in June 2003 and 15 workers participated. The focus group questions were directed towards the following areas:

- Needs of adoptive families for post-adoption services
- Assessment of the existing system of post-adoption services
- Assessment of DYFS' ability in preparing families for adoption

E. Focus Groups with Children

Focus groups were conducted with children who had been placed for adoption in select adoption homes. Groups were conducted in the summer of years two and three of the project. The groups took place during Adoption Camp and were facilitated by Dr. Alice Nadelman, a trained psychologist who provided technical assistance to the grant project. These groups were very informative and moving. However, they tended to provide more information on individual experiences in adoption, rather than on an assessment of case practice within the Division. With the permission of the children and adoptive families, a video was produced of the first focus group to utilize as a training tool.

F. Case Studies

Five cases were selected for a more in-depth assessment of case practice and potential impact of the grant project. The goal of the case studies was to highlight best practices and how they could be replicated. Case records were reviewed and all those involved in the adoption were interviewed, including adoptive parents, Division staff and the child, where appropriate. The results are summarized in the project findings and conclusions. Three of the case studies are detailed in a report included in the appendix of this assessment.

III. Baseline Assessment: Year One

The surveys of adoptive parents and focus groups with Division staff and post-adoption service providers, which were conducted in 2001, the first year of the grant project, provided baseline data for the project. The findings of the focus groups and surveys confirmed the assumptions that formed the basis for the grant application. These findings also identified some additional issues or problems that needed be addressed by the Division, encouraging the Division to embark on some immediate changes that have had an impact on the eventual grant outcomes. The issues identified in the focus groups and surveys were similar, whether identified by Division staff, post-adoption service provider staff or adoptive parents. These issues are outlined below, first reflecting comments of the adoptive parents and then the comments of DYFS and private agency staff.

A. Issues Identified by Adoptive Parents

- Poor perception of DYFS adoption practice, which was described as disorganized, based

on individual worker opinion/expertise, in need of management control.

- Insufficient information on various levels: workers did not know their children, too little information was shared with adoptive parents, sometimes DYFS did not even have the information to share
- The process took far too long on every level: termination of parental rights, approval of the adoptive homes, placement process and finalization; adoptive families blamed the delays on DYFS staff
- A perception that there was prejudice against transracial placement by some DYFS staff. Some families saw this as DYFS policy, others saw it as individual worker prejudice, which had an impact because of strong worker control. The consensus was that families interested in transracial placement had to prove themselves above and beyond the normal assessment of adoptive families.
- A feeling that too little value was attributed to them as adoptive parents: the training was too negative and their questions and opinions were seen as threatening by some workers. Several families talked about wanting to adopt a second time and being treated by DYFS as if they were a new family who had never adopted before.
- There was a sense of isolation – many of the families talked about how important it would be to meet other adoptive families during training and to continue some sort of support group after finalization.

B. Issues by DYFS and Private Agency Staff

- Concern that the select home practice was weak. Specialized efforts did not exist regarding recruitment of homes, training, preparation, matching, placement or supervision, due in great part to staff turnover and large caseloads.
- Concern that the ASFA law would make the issues of select home adoption more critical, due to the increased number of children needing placement for adoption, exacerbated by the age/length of time in placement of children in the “backlog” that must be considered for adoption under ASFA – i.e., more difficult children needing adoptive homes.
- There was a sense that recruitment of homes for these children would be far more difficult and present a challenge to normal recruitment activities, since many of the children had severe emotional disturbance; it would also present a challenge to the preparation, training and support of adoptive homes.
- The courts did not trust that DYFS would be able to find Select Home adoption homes and were hesitant to terminate parental rights unless it was a foster parent adoption.
- The system of post-AH services, while once a strong and innovative aspect of DYFS

practice, had fallen into disarray: the Post Adoption Contract Services (PACS) providers did not meet routinely, they had not kept pace with changes in law and policy under ASFA, and post-adoption services were used for foster home adoptions.

- Increased staff turnover in the PACS agencies had weakened what once was expertise in this area of practice.
- The therapeutic community knew very little about adoption issues; therefore, even if funding was available for therapeutic services, there was no relevant services, since most therapists did not understand adoption.
- There was a strong undertone of discouragement – these issues were not new, there was not funding, appropriate families did not exist and even if money were available, the services did not exist.

IV. Summary of Project Findings

In general, the findings from the assessment indicate that the Division met its primary project goal of strengthening its case practice in placing special needs children in select adoptive homes. Improvements were identified in several key areas from year one to year three of the project. These improvements can be summarized as follows:

- The ***timeliness*** of the process improved at every level: approval of prospective adoptive families, placement of children in these homes and finalization of the adoption.
- ***Communication*** improved, especially between Division staff and adoptive families.
- The ***coordination*** of services improved at several levels: among Division staff and with the post-adoption service providers.
- Case practice improved; a ***specialized case practice*** for special needs children needing select home placement was successfully designed and implemented.

A. Surveys of Adoptive Parents

The individual reports of the 2001, 2002, and 2003 surveys of adoptive parents are included in full in the appendix to this report. A comparison of the surveys results from year one to year three reveals the following:

- More adoptive families were single (from 20% to 39%)
- Fewer families had children in the home prior to adoption (from 57% to 25%)
- The majority of families had no prior adoption experience according to the surveys (60%,

62% and 79% respectively)

- The requests for placements in term of children's ages and gender illustrate two significant differences, i.e. more older children are being requested and a preference for a specific gender appears to be diminishing
- Actual placements reflect an increase in "two children" adoptions (from 26% to 35%), a decrease in the number of infant placements (from 22% to 17%), an increase in placements for older children (from 2% to 20%) and an increase in the number of females actually placed (from 28% to 56%).
- There appears to be a decline in the identification of special needs services by adoptive parents (from 74% to 46%) which is a surprising finding.
- There is an improvement in the number of finalized adoptions and in the timeliness of the process (from 90% to 95%) which is a very welcome finding.
- Chronic problems identified by respondents to both surveys include: DYFS response to initial and ongoing inquires, adequate information provided about the child(ren), accessibility/availability of caseworkers, training and orientation for adoptive parents and the supervision of workers.
- There is a slight decline in the percentage of respondents who would recommend adoption through the Division (76% to 71%) although there is a slight increase in recommending DYFS to a friend interested in adoption (81% to 85%).
- Over half of the adoptive families indicate that their child(ren) will need some post-adoption services

Several conclusions can be inferred from the three-year comparison of survey data:

- Adoptive parents provided a generally favorable assessment of the adoption process. This conclusion is offset by the comments made by some respondents whose experiences reflected delays, frustrations and unanswered questions. It appears that there is significant variation in the training and competencies of the DYFS caseworkers in that some of the experiences were notably positive while others were clearly not. Staff supervision appears to be a major issue and an area that may not be consistent between and among DYFS offices.
- The types of children that are available for adoption present some sobering choices for prospective adoptive families. They tend to be older, with siblings and in need of extensive services.
- The communication between the Division and potential adoptive families could be

enhanced and improved in several areas: more information about the child, the steps in the adoption process and what parents can expect, and the supportive services provided by DYFS to adoptive families during the adoption process itself and post-adoption.

- The expansion of post-adoption services is needed, especially for families who have adopted children with special needs some of which are chronic conditions that will not disappear over time or be remedied in a short amount of time. Many of the adoptive parents described the availability of these services as a key factor in the success of their adoption.

B. Focus Groups of Adoptive Parents

The feedback from adoptive parents obtained in the interviews in year one and the focus groups in years two and three of the project was consistent with the survey data. The focus group conducted in year three in particular identified improvements in several areas: the timeliness of the process, the quality of the casework services and the availability of post-adoption services. Additionally, the issues raised in years one and two concerning a perceived bias by DYFS staff against transracial placement, was not identified as an issue. Finally, there were some additional issues identified in the focus groups, which provide some interesting feedback about the select home practice model in particular and adoption services in general:

- Many adoptive parents commented on the negative portrayal of the children during the pre-approval orientation and training. While they acknowledged the importance of being honest and realistic about the special needs of children in need of select home placement, they felt that the description of the children was too negative and may discourage families interested in adoption.
- The relationship between the individual caseworker and the adoptive family was key to the adoption placement. Over and over again, adoptive parents described the importance of having a caseworker who was experienced and knowledgeable about adoption, who shared information with them and who was supportive and responsive to their needs and the needs of the children. The trust between the caseworker and the adoptive parent was important to the placement.
- The inadequacy of the foster care system was a theme in each of the focus groups. Adoptive parents were critical of their child's foster care experience and identified improvements in foster care as the key to improving adoption. Two issues were identified as problematic: the length of time it took to legally free the child for adoption and the quality of the foster home placement.
- The integration of the children into the adoptive families was impressive. Over and over again, adoptive parents described their children as "perfect" and credited the Division's ability to select the appropriate child for them as the key. Their commitment to the children was very moving and compelling, especially in the context of the special needs that many of the children demonstrated.

C. Focus Groups of Division and Private Agency Staff

Feedback obtained in the focus groups held in year three of the grant with DYFS and private agency staff was generally positive and reflected some of the improvements made in practice during the three-year project. Specific comments also reflected how specialized aspects of the project (training, enrichment funds, Adoption Camp) impacted positively on successful placement and permanency outcomes for special needs children in select adoptive homes. The following themes/findings emerged from the focus groups:

- The Division modified its case practices in order to provide focused, comprehensive and continuous services to these children, i. e. communication, information-sharing and decision-making were vastly improved from the time before the project was undertaken.
- The creation of a Select Home Office and the modification of the Adoption Resource Centers to establish special select home units lead to better case practices and outcomes.
- The Division strengthened its contracts with a number of community-based agencies to improve post-adoption services so that the adoptive homes (both parent and child) could receive supportive services throughout the process; regular meetings with Post Adoption Contract Service providers were re-instated and strengthened.
- The Division was able to streamline the entire process so that the timeliness of the process was significantly improved.
- The Division developed and supported training for workers (both DYFS and post-adoption provider agency staff) that was essential for the project outcome, i.e. the training was intensive and continued throughout the project, engaging outside experts to assist both caseworkers and post-adoption clinicians.
- The Division established and maintained an array of post-adoption services for families that was largely responsible for the adoptive parents satisfaction with the project; by the end of the project, this included an adoption clearinghouse for post adoption services.
- The Division established an Enrichment Fund that was enormously helpful to maintain children in the selected homes while the adoption process took place and after the adoption had been finalized.
- The Division created some fairly innovative incentives and supports to ensure the success of this project including a certificate program in adoption for therapists, social workers and others in conjunction with the Rutgers School of Social Work, an adoption camp for children with select home families and the enrichment fund (described above) that provided resources for workers to use on behalf of children.
- The Division improved its matching process (linking children with adoptive homes) and

the recruitment and development of adoptive homes by attempting to identify an adoptive home from the child's community or adult's in the child's background such as a teacher, child care worker or nurse who were willing to become the child's permanent parent.

- Therapists were better prepared to treat issues related to adoption as a result of expanded training and the new certificate program in adoption. This also resulted in stronger linkages and better communication with the post-adoption service providers, enhancing services to children and families.

D. Case Studies

Five case studies were conducted to provide a more in-depth look at placement of children with select adoption home families. In general, the findings of the case studies reflect the findings of surveys and focus groups. They provide more specific examples of how improvements in the adoptive home process occurred. For example, the case studies illustrate the need for flexibility within adoptive home parents, the need for competent and accessible caseworkers functioning as advocates for the child and the parents, the need for post-adoption resources and services after placement and the benefits of specially dedicated resources, such as the Enrichment Fund. They also describe the innovative practice implemented by the Division to identify adoptive homes from the child's community: i.e. teachers, nurses, child care staff.

A more detailed report reflecting a summary of three of the five case studies is included in the appendix. The following themes were identified in the case studies as critical factors in the success of the adoption placement:

- Caseworker support was critical. The adoptive parents interviewed for the case studies identified the positive relationship they had with the caseworker as key to the success of the adoption. They trusted the caseworker and relied upon the caseworker for honest information, support and access to services. Most important, they felt they could talk to the caseworker when they were experiencing difficulty. They described the caseworker's support and encouragement as invaluable.
- The child and family matching process was very helpful in selecting the appropriate adoptive family. The caseworkers said that the process helped them to identify the child's strengths and needs and to assess the ability of a specific adoptive applicant to meet those needs. Adoptive parents felt that the child's summary described the child accurately and provided the honest information they needed to make a decision about the adoption.
- Smaller caseloads were a key factor in the adoptive placement. Caseworkers noted that smaller caseloads enabled to get to know the child better. This was important in several ways: it helped them identify the appropriate home for the child and it enabled them to provide support to the adoptive parent after placement.
- Access to enrichment funds and post-adoption services was very helpful. One worker described how the enrichment funds were used to fund an activity that boosted the child's

self-esteem, making him more positive and open to the idea of an adoption placement.

V. Conclusions

Based upon the feedback received from key participants, it is clear that the project met or exceeded its basic goal of improving its case practice for children with special needs needing placement in select adoptive homes. These improvements can be instrumental in increasing the number of children placed in permanent adoptive homes and decreasing adoption disruption. While the project experienced some typical implementation delays and obstacles in its first year, all of the factors reviewed by ACNJ over the three-year period showed improvement from year one to year three of the project:

- Timeliness of the approval and placement process improved
- Stronger working relationships were established with post-adoption services providers
- Communication with adoptive homes improved
- Case practice and case management in select home adoption were strengthened
- Accountability for decision-making improved

There were many factors that contributed to the success of this effort. The implementation of changes in practice, such as the child/family matching process, and the availability of additional supports, such as reduced caseloads, the enrichment fund and increased access to post-adoption services, were all instrumental. The structure of adoption services within DYFS was also critical to the project's success, providing a solid foundation of adoption case practice and experienced staff members responsible to implement the changes in case practice. The ability of the staff to focus on adoption issues, not distracted by protection and investigation issues, at least in the first two years of the project, was important in the development of a specialized select home practice. Finally, the strong leadership ability of the ARC management was key. Effective leadership, coupled with additional resources, are the two criteria that have been instrumental in the project's achievements.

Comments made in the surveys and by participants in the focus groups were complimentary about the adoption process and noted the impact of the improvements on their ability to function within the adoption system, whether as Division staff, private agency staff or adoptive parents. It should be noted, however, that not all comments were positive or complimentary. These comments and observations should be used by the Division to generate continued improvements in the adoption process and they include the following issues or areas that merit the Division's attention.

The success of the adoption experience is clearly attributable to having well-trained, competent and committed caseworkers supported by equally competent and dedicated supervisors. In the surveys and focus groups, adoptive parents identified specific DYFS caseworkers for their competence, noting their positive contribution to the adoption process. However, there was some dissatisfaction with other DYFS caseworkers. The criticisms about these caseworkers reflected perceptions that these workers did not know the process, were unresponsive to questions from adoptive parents and did not seem to be committed to controlling or directing the activities

towards a successful outcome.

The issue for the Division is the variance in behavior among its staff. The Division needs to review this variance and take whatever steps are necessary, such as additional training or stronger supervision, to ensure reasonable uniformity among its staff with respect to knowledge of the process, communication with clients (including responses to inquiries), decision-making and knowledge of support services that may be needed by these children and their adoptive families. Events of the last year and the public scrutiny and pressure upon the Division may have contributed to these issues. However, it is important to note that the unevenness in staff competence was an issue identified by adoptive parents in the first set of surveys and interviews in year one.

In addition, there were several other issues identified by participants in the assessment that the Division must address to strengthen its adoption practice:

- Access to medical and therapeutic services must be expanded. In discussing their potential needs for post-adoption services, adoptive parents said that medical services and therapeutic services were their priority. Finding medical services – doctors, early intervention – was difficult.
- The quality of foster care must be improved. There was strong consensus among adoptive parents that the quality of foster homes was problematic and that children suffered as a result – both physically and emotionally. When asked what they would recommend to improve adoption, the majority of adoptive parents said to improve foster care so that the children are not damaged by their foster care experience.
- The timeliness of the adoption process must be improved. While the home approval and placement process appeared to have shortened, there was a significant backlog in the process to finalize the adoption after placement. Adoptive parents also raised concerns about the length of time it took to free children for adoption placement.

The restructuring of the ARC offices to create a specialized Select Home Office and to implement specialized units within the existing ARC offices clearly yielded positive results. As the Division considers agency-wide reforms and agency-wide restructuring in light of recent criticisms, it needs to consider how to best sustain and expand the achievements of this project. It would be counterproductive and counterintuitive to dismantle or discontinue an effort that has been inarguably successful in terms of its goal achievements. Whatever restructuring takes place, however, should not abandon or lose the positive aspects about case practices learned from this project.

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CASE STUDIES

Case Study #1: Joshua

I. Background and Placement

Joshua is a seven-year-old boy who was placed in foster care at age four, in March 2000. He was placed in his adoptive home in September 2002 and his adoption was finalized in August 2003. He was born with fetal alcohol syndrome, resulting in developmental and educational delays. He was subsequently diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and mild autism. During his 2-½ years in foster care he lived in six homes. Three changes in placement were at the request of the foster parents because of his overwhelming behavior and need requirements. His last foster placement was with a Special Home Service Provider (SHIPS) who was not interested in adoption.

The Child Summary described Joshua's strengths as: "friendly, loving, shows warmth." His needs were described as: "excessive adult attention, potty training, structured environment, fetal alcohol syndrome, short attention span, aggressive behavior, help with ADHD, developmental delays, advocate."

Joshua's adoptive parent is a single career woman who never had children. The caseworker said she was matched with Joshua because she recognized that she was not perfect and so she was not looking for the perfect child. She was open to working with DYFS and therapists and wasn't afraid to be looked at differently by the community because she did not have the perfect child. She was willing to accept a child with special needs.

During the supervisory meeting when the child summary and medical are presented, the adoptive mother expressed concern that she may not be able to handle his needs. The caseworker and home finder felt that once she saw this little boy and how he interacted, his needs would be put in perspective, and she would see the boy the way he really is. The arranged a "blind" meeting in the park so the adoptive mother could see Joshua. Once she saw him, she knew she could care for him.

Since Joshua was placed in his adoptive home in September 2002, he has made great strides. The adoptive mother described the initial days following his placement as almost unbearable. Joshua needed her attention every minute. He was functioning at the level of a 2-3 year-old child. One year later, Joshua is functioning at the level of a five-year-old. His behavior, attention span and independence has greatly improved She can trust him to play alone in his room and down the street. Her goal for Josh is for him to lead an independent adult life.

II. Factors in the Success of the Adoption

A. Caseworker Support

The adoptive mother indicated that she felt secure in the fact that she had the caseworker there to help her through the hard times. She described the caseworker as very accessible. She responded to all her questions and was always there to help. "Really, really liked my caseworker. Very understanding. She would say things like birth parents sometimes get very frustrated with their kids --- that's normal. You feel guilty until you learn your feelings are normal. They have always been there with services and words of encouragement."

The caseworker reported that adoptive mother's biggest worry was what would happen if something came up after adoption, something for which she was not prepared. The caseworker tried to ease the adoptive parent's mind, letting her know she always has someone here. She told her she could call her anytime – that she is not alone in the process. "We remain in contact after finalization." In addition, the caseworker arranged for the services of post-adoption counselor (PAC) and an adoptive parent support group. The adoptive parent considers post-placement support as very important. "The caseworker has been there for me, even after he was adopted. I will occasionally call my caseworker at DYFS even though the case is closed. When I would get to the end of my rope, the caseworker was always there to help. She gave me a lot of help."

B. Select Home Child/Family Matching Model

The caseworker cited the select home model selection staffing as a "huge" factor in the success of the matching. "It makes you sit down and concretely look at child's needs and what a prospective parent can offer. This parent scored the highest. She was very open, wasn't looking for perfection, was willing to work with Division, and committed to sticking with DYFS and Josh. Josh needed someone to stick by him – he needed someone to look beyond what was written about him on paper." The fact that the adoptive mother rescued Boston terriers, was an indication to the caseworker that she was sympathetic to issues of abuse/neglect. The process also allowed the caseworker and adoptive parent to identify other concerns. In this case, the adoptive mother suffered from depression. Knowing this, the caseworker could anticipate services she may need, such as therapy, and put services into place.

C. Post-Adoption Services

The adoptive mother indicated that the caseworker offered counseling, respite, everything that she needed, as soon as Joshua was placed in her home. She credits counseling as the single most helpful service, describing it as a good support system, a must-have. "I don't know what I would have done without that." She indicated that both she and her son got a lot of support from the PAC counselor. She could bounce ideas off of her, get guidance on discipline, impulse control, potty training. The PAC counselor also provided services to Joshua, helping him understand adoption and make him more secure in the home.

The adoptive mother acknowledged that there were a lot of things she didn't understand. She was a first time parent - and a single parent. She would call the therapist a lot in-between visits and said that the therapist was there to answer her questions. The caseworker also cited the PAC support as a critical success factor. "With the help of the PAC, she has learned how to access Josh's needs and meet them. She has learned how to be a parent to a special needs child."

D. Smaller Caseload Size

The caseworker cited the select home model's lower caseload size as critically important. It allows for increased caseworker time with the child, thus providing a better understanding of the child and the kind of parent needed. On paper, Joshua's problems presented a daunting challenge. The adoptive mother went over the Child Summary, was excited, but very overwhelmed by all his problems. The usual procedure is to ask the prospective parent to make a commitment upon reading the Child Summary. However, in this case, because the adoptive mother was apprehensive the caseworker and homefinder arranged for the adoptive mother to see Joshua interact with the caseworker at the park. "The instant she saw him, she forgot about the bad stuff and the excitement took over. She saw the little boy we were talking about in the light that we saw him. She was smitten from the first meeting. If it wasn't for this meeting, I don't know if she would have gone through with the adoption."

E. Enrichment Funds

After three months in his adoptive home, Joshua was asked to leave his after school program due to inappropriate behavior. School staff indicated he was putting other children at risk. Enrichment funds (\$700) were used to hire a "shadow" for Joshua so he could return to the after-school program. This provided the adoptive parent much needed respite.

Case Study #2: Barbara

I. Background and Placement

Barbara is a 2½ year old girl. She was born in January 2001 and placed in foster care two months after, in March 2001. Parental rights were terminated in April 2002. She was placed in her adoptive home in October 2002 and her adoption was finalized in June 2003. During the year and a half she was in foster care, Barbara lived in two placements, Hudson Cradle and a medically fragile home. Barbara was born cocaine- exposed, resulting in fetal alcohol syndrome, mild retardation, borderline microcephaly (small size head), an unusual lump/mass on left side of her chest, one vertebrae only half developed, and developmental delays. Barbara's strengths, as described on the Child Summary are: "very happy, easily pleased baby, adorable, tends to smile often." Her needs were described as: "a stable home, structure, love, patience, understanding, engaging care and supervision, early intervention services."

Barbara was adopted by a two-parent family, willing to adopt a baby with disabilities. The couple reviewed the Child Summary and the twenty-page medical history with the caseworker and supervisor on October 2, 2002. One day later, they informed the caseworker they wanted to adopt and arranged for placement ten days later. One year after placement, the caseworker describes the family as flourishing. The adoptive mother reports that when Barbara was first placed in their home, she didn't interact with them, did not display much personality, was distant and did not respond. Now, says the adoptive mother, "She became who she is – so different. Nurture can really overcome a lot. She is so loving – gives us hugs and kisses all the time."

II. Factors in the Success of the Adoption

A. Caseworker Support

The adoptive mother was extremely positive about the home study and caseworker. She felt that she was "treated with respect by every DYFS worker." The adjustment period was helped by the worker's preparation in terms of the child's limitations, cultural differences, and connection to the foster parent, who remains a resource and support.

B. Select Home Child/Family Matching Model

The caseworker and adoptive parents credit the matching process with the success of their adoption. It enabled the Division to understand what the adoptive family wanted in terms of the child's young age. It helped the adoptive parents understand the child's needs and to prepare them for the care that Barbara would need. The adoptive mother felt the Child Summary described her daughter very well and that the Division did not hide anything. She was pleased that the caseworker was "upfront" and that the information was given to them in writing.

Case Study #3: Mathew

I. Background and Placement

Mathew is an eleven-year-old boy who was placed in foster care at age five, in October 1997. He was placed in his adoptive home in April 2003. At the time of this case study, his adoption had not yet been finalized. During his five years in foster care he lived in seven placements. In his first four placements, his foster parents requested his removal because of alleged sexually acting out with other children in the home. In two subsequent placements, Mathew was placed in therapeutic foster homes, both of which requested his removal, due to enuresis and behavioral issues. His final placement was in a Pre-Adoptive Treatment Home (PATH) in March 2001.

Mathew's strengths as described in the Child Summary were: "attractive and humorous with a very contagious laugh. Bright, enjoys a variety of activities. Lead player of chess team. Friendly, likable, able to play independently. Performs average to above range in all classes. Made significant progress in all aspects of his life – happier, self-esteem has improved significantly. Despite significant problems and inability to cope with his life circumstances, he desires a loving stable, secure relationship with a caregiver." His needs were described as: "extensive history of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. As a result, Mathew initially took a highly defensive approach to life and has difficulty controlling his emotions. Due to fear of attachment, he has had few and superficial interpersonal relationships. In order for him to make an appropriate attachment and reach full potential, it will require an unconditional commitment as well as nurturing, stable and structured environment."

Mathew was placed with a two-parent adoptive family. The caseworker said he was matched with this family because they were not intimidated by his sexually acting-out behavior. They were also committed to adoption, open to therapy and able to provide supervision. Since Matthew was placed in his adoptive home in April 2003, his adjustment is described by his caseworker as "Surprising - Matt fit right in, just clicked with them. At first I thought this was too good to be true. I see Mathew now and what he was before. He wasn't connected, seemed detached, wouldn't let himself care about anyone. Now he is much more outgoing and verbal than in the past, much more confident, and openly expresses his affection toward both his adoptive parents."

II. Factors in the Success of the Adoption

A. Caseworker Support

The caseworker knew the importance of letting the family know that she was there and that the adoptive parents were not alone. The adoptive family saw this as crucial to the success of the placement. The parents felt this support and were secure in the fact that their caseworker would advocate for their needs.

B. Select Home Child/Family Matching Model

The selection staffing process was lauded by the homefinder and caseworker as a critical tool in successful matching. "It forces you to justify why you feel this family is good for this child." There were three potential families to choose for Mathew. This family was chosen because they had no children, "so there wasn't the fear that the child's history of sexually acting out would affect other children in the home. They were not embarrassed to parent a child who was sexually abused and genuinely wanted to parent – willing to make the sacrifices that were needed."

The adoptive parent credits the success of the match to the Division's thoroughness in understanding the kind of child they wanted to adopt and to not "pushing" her. She said they had an "unbelievable" list of things they wanted in a child, everything from eye color to personality. The DYFS homefinder made it very clear that she wanted them to feel comfortable with telling her exactly the kind of child they wanted and did give them exactly what they wanted. "The Child Summary described him perfectly – you knew what you were getting into. She wanted to match us with the perfect child for us."

C. Post-Adoption Services

The caseworker emphasized the importance of adoptive families to be connected to services after placement and post-adoption. Knowing they had the support, that they were not alone, helped the placement. Many different resources were in put in place. The adoptive parents had all the names and numbers for referrals so they didn't have to wait until a crisis for a referral. The caseworker connected them with the school, an individual therapist and a PAC counselor who would continue to work with them after adoption. The adoptive parents felt particularly supported by the PAC therapist – "she gives us a voice."

D. Smaller Caseload Size

The worker credits the select home model's lower caseload standard as allowing for the worker to get to really know the child. "The more involved the worker is -- knowing the kids -- the more you can let prospective parents know what they are getting in for can really make a difference." Because Mathew was in a PATH home there were a lot of reports and staff that provided a lot of information. The prospective adoptive parents had a lot of contact with the PATH staff – they were able to talk to them on a regular basis to get the true picture of this child.

"This child had a history of sexually acting out, but there were many reports and input from staff that indicated he was not exhibiting this kind of behavior in recent months. Without this information, the prospective adoptive parent may have been scared off," noted the caseworker. The caseworker passed this kind of information to the adoptive parent on a timely basis. Also, through volunteering in the PATH program, the prospective adoptive parents observed him on several occasions and got to see the real child. "This helped her see the little boy that he is and that he could function among other children."