

Matching Adoption vs. Foster Care:

Which one is right for me?



FOSTER *care.*
& ADOPTION

Approximately 2,000 children are adopted from the Pennsylvania child welfare system each year. There are several different ways that children end up in adoptive families. These include:



Children who are adopted by their foster parents after spending months or even years in their care while trying to be reunified with their families



Children who are matched with adoptive parents at the end of their foster care journey, after it has already been determined that they are unable to be reunified with their birth families, and placed in their home with the goal of being adopted by them

For parents hoping to adopt, it can be challenging to decide which of these pathways to pursue. The goal of this e-book is to help you understand both paths so that you can make the best decision for your family.



Read on for help making your decision!



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Two Pathways to Adoption

First, let's break down the two different pathways to adoption. While all foster care placements start the same way, the outcome of every case is different and unique.



Removal

The journey always starts with a child being removed from their family and placed into foster care. All children in foster care have experienced the trauma of separation. Even if their family situation was not ideal, it is still a loss.

Foster Care



Children are placed in foster care so that they can be safe and cared for while their parents work toward reunification. The court oversees their progress and makes decisions related to the case plan. Many children have visits with their families regularly during this time.



Permanency Plan

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) mandates that after children have been in care for 15 out of the most recent 22 months, a permanency plan should be made for them. This could include reunification with their biological family, going to live with another relative or close family connection (kin), or adoption.



Adopted by Foster Parents

If the child's foster parents are willing and able to adopt them (and there are no kin options), this is considered the best option for the child because it minimizes disruptions and allows them to stay in a place and with people who are familiar. They have often been in this foster home for many months or even years and already feel like part of their family.

SWAN Matching Adoption



If the child's foster parents are not willing or able to adopt them, or if the child is living in a congregate care setting like a group home and not with a foster family, then the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) begins to search for a permanent family for them. We call this Matching Adoption because families and children are matched with each other for the purpose of adoption.

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Data on this page is from 2021-2024.

A Surprising Statistic

Many people might be surprised to find that out of all the adoptions that The Salvation Army Children's Services helps to finalize, about two thirds, or 66%, begin as foster care placements. Only 1/3, or 33%, begin as SWAN Matching Adoption placements.



66%

Foster Care
Placements

33%

Matching Adoption
Placements

Adoption Demographics

839

Average number of days
with a child before
adoption

6.3

Average age of a child at
adoption

44%

Percentage of children
who were adopted as part
of a sibling group

1-13

Age range of children
adopted through foster care

6-18

Age range of children
adopted through SWAN

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SWAN Criteria

In order to qualify as a SWAN Matching Adoption family, resource parents must meet at least one of the following criteria:



Searching for sibling groups of 3 or more



Searching for kids 10 or older



Searching for kids with significant special needs

The reason these criteria exist is that these are the kinds of children who are available through SWAN Matching Adoption. The SWAN program exists to find loving, permanent homes for these vulnerable children who are sadly at risk of aging out of the system without finding a forever family.

Another way to think about SWAN adoption is that as a matching adoption family, you are looking to provide a forever home for a child who might otherwise not get one because of their age, special needs, or number of siblings. The matching adoption process is about finding amazing families for these precious and deserving children.

But what if I want to adopt a baby?



If you are looking to be matched with an infant for adoption, that is called Private Domestic Adoption. The Salvation Army Children's Services does not provide this type of adoption service, as we work with adoption through the child welfare system (foster care).

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A Foster Care Adoption Journey*

The Rodriguez family + Heaven



The Rodriguez family are a foster family who accept placement of Heaven, a 3 day old infant who is in the NICU withdrawing from opioids. When they bring Heaven home, they love and care for her as much as if she was their own child, while also remembering that her goal is reunification with her biological parents. Heaven has weekly visits with her parents, during which the family is able to share updates and photos with them, as well as involve them in decisions about Heaven's care.

After Heaven has been in care for 3 months, the county lets the Rodriguez family know that a family member has presented as a resource for her. The family member, her mother's aunt, lives about an hour away. The family feels many emotions when they hear this news: devastated at the thought of saying good-bye to Heaven, nervous about how she will react to this change, worried about her safety, but also hopeful that being with family will be the best outcome for her.

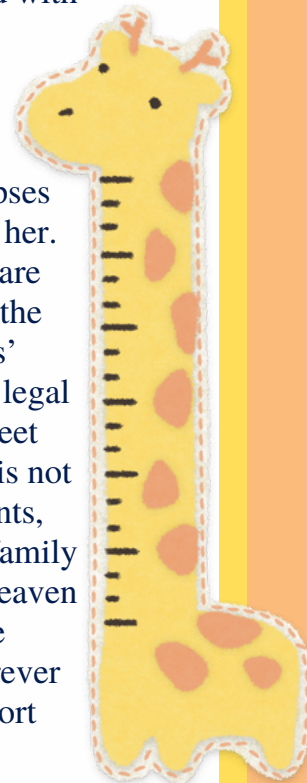
However, after some time goes by, they are told that unfortunately Heaven's great-aunt's home study was disapproved and Heaven will not be able to be placed with her after all.

Meanwhile, Heaven continues to visit with her parents until the case takes another surprising

turn when one day, they don't show up to their visit. They later find out that the parents have moved out of state. The county is unable to contact them for a period of several months. During this time, they ask the Rodriguez family if they would be open to being an adoptive resource for Heaven if that is needed. The family quickly says yes!

But the roller coaster of foster care continues to serve up more twists and turns. Shortly before Heaven's first birthday, the county receives a call from her mother. She is back in the area and says that she is sober and would like to complete her case plan to be reunified with her daughter. Once again, the Rodriguez family is overwhelmed with conflicting emotions.

Although things seem to be going well for a little while, Heaven's mother once again relapses and the county loses contact with her. After Heaven has been in foster care for 18 months, the county begins the process of terminating her parents' rights. This lengthy and involved legal process finally leads to a bittersweet ending for Heaven: although she is not able to be reunified with her parents, she is adopted by the Rodriguez family soon after her second birthday. Heaven will not grow up in the foster care system because she now has a forever family who will cherish and support her every step of the way.



* Both stories shared in this e-book are fictional, but are representatives of the kinds of real children and families we work with.

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A SWAN Matching Adoption Journey*



The Jackson family + Hunter

The Jacksons are approved as a SWAN Matching Adoption family who are hoping to match with a child between the ages of 8-14, and are open to caring for children with special needs.

The family meets regularly with their matching worker to review children who are seeking their forever families. During one of their meetings, she tells them about a 10 year old boy named Hunter. Hunter has been in foster care for nearly 4 years. During that time, he has lived with 3 different foster families and also spent a few months in a residential treatment facility. His current foster family does not feel like they are his forever family and so an adoptive match is being searched for through SWAN.

When they see a picture of Hunter, they immediately comment on how adorable he is. He has long blond hair that hangs below his ears, bright blue eyes, and a gap-toothed smile. In his picture, Hunter is holding a toy dinosaur. As they read his profile together, they learn that dinosaurs are Hunter's favorite thing in the whole world! He also loves mac and cheese, pepperoni pizza, and sour candy.

Hunter has experienced a lot of trauma in his life. He needs a family who can be patient with him and provide him with structure and unconditional love. The Jacksons have completed TBRI Caregiver Training and learned helpful strategies for supporting

children from hard places. As they begin to learn more about Hunter's unique needs, they feel strongly that they could be the kind of family where he could thrive.

The Jacksons have an interview with Hunter's recruiter and his county worker. It goes very well, and Jackson's team feel enthusiastic about the potential for the Jacksons to be Hunter's forever family. They arrange a meeting for the family to take Hunter out for pizza and ice cream. When that goes well, they schedule another meeting and then another. Soon, Hunter begins to spend weekends at their home as they work on a transition plan. He officially moves in right before Christmas, to give him time to adjust to his new home before starting at his new school.

While it's never easy to add a new child to your family (or to be a kid joining a new family!), their adjustment period goes well overall. Hunter receives Child Prep services to help him process and understand all of the changes happening in his life. The Prep worker also provides guidance to the family about how to best support him.

After 6 months of living together, they finally get their adoption date and are ready to become a forever family. On adoption day, Hunter has a smile from ear to ear, as he knows he will finally not have to move again - and will always have the love and support of his parents. The Jacksons know that Hunter's journey to healing is far from over, but they will be on it together - supporting their precious son every step of the way.



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Same Destination, Different Paths



Adopting through Foster Care

- Placements start with a goal of reunification. It is impossible to know at the time of placement whether a child will become free for adoption.
- Placements typically happen on an emergency basis. There is often not enough time to gather additional information about a child - they need a place to sleep tonight.
- Children in foster care range from 0-21 years old. Many are part of sibling groups. Some have special needs. All have experienced trauma.
- Children are typically placed as close to their home as possible. The only time they are moved further away is if a more local home cannot be found.

Adopting through SWAN Matching

- Placements start with a goal of permanency. While it is never a 100% certainty, children typically have a goal of adoption or permanent legal custodianship.
- Placements typically happen slowly. Families have the opportunity to gather additional information to plan for a child's arrival.
- Children available for adoption are 10 or older, part of larger sibling groups (3+), and/or have more significant special needs. All have experienced trauma. Many have experienced many moves, or even disrupted/dissolved adoptions (see next page for more info about this).
- Children can be matched state-wide, but many prefer to maintain local connections.

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A Sad Reality: Disruption and Dissolution



“I could never foster. I would get too attached.”

Many parents express the very legitimate fear of having their hearts broken by getting attached to a child that they later have to say good-bye to. While we would never want to minimize this heartbreak, it is important for parents to understand a sad reality of foster care that is not spoken about nearly as much.

While many potentially amazing foster parents are turned away by the fear of losing children, children (who do not get to choose whether or not to be involved with the child welfare system) have their hearts broken by losing their parents all the time. This is not just about their biological parents - it is sadly far too common for children in foster care to experience being removed from foster or adoptive parents they have grown attached to through disruption or dissolution.



What is disruption?

Disruption is when a foster parent asks for a child in their home to be removed. This can be for personal reasons of the foster parent (such as an illness, separation or divorce, or out of state move) or because of the child's behaviors or special needs. Many children in foster care have experienced at least one disruption, and some have experienced many. The more disruptions a child has, the more difficult it will be for them to feel safe and settled in a new placement. Sometimes children purposely act out to test whether their foster parents will give up on them.

What is dissolution?

Dissolution is similar to disruption, but happens after an adoption is finalized. While adoption is designed to be permanent, there are sadly times when adoptive parents change their mind or feel like they have made a mistake in adopting the child and are no longer willing to continue parenting them. This often results in abandonment, placing the child back into foster care, and/or going through the legal process of terminating their parental rights to the child. After experiencing a dissolved adoption, it can be even harder for a child to feel hopeful about being adopted again.

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Foster Care vs. Matching Adoption

A Quick Comparison

Characteristics	Foster Care	Matching Adoption
Licensing process takes approximately 6 months and is basically free		
Children placed range from newborn - 21 years old.		
Children who will be placed will always meet at least one of these criteria: be over age 10 years, be part of a sibling group of 3 or more who need to be placed together, and/or have significant special needs		
Children placed have special needs and are impacted by trauma.		
Primary goal is to reunify children with their biological families.		
Children are placed with the intention that they will be adopted by the resource family. The outcome of the placement is not guaranteed.		
The children placed will miss and love their biological family.		
Connection between the children and their biological family should be nurtured.		
Children will have visits with their biological family unless there are unusual circumstances.		

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A Quick Comparison

Characteristics	Foster Care	Matching Adoption
Children might have visits with their biological family		
The resource family will work to build a healthy, connected relationship with the children placed in their home. They recognize that it will take time and effort for themselves and the child to truly feel connected.		
The resource family will receive lots of information about children before they are placed in their home.		
When a family accepts a referral for children who need placement, the placement often occurs that same day.		
The resource family is committed to providing trauma-informed care and nurturing to the children placed in their home.		
The resource family is committed to not giving up on the children placed in their home.		
Families are required to be able to support reunification.		
Families are required to be willing to be placed with children who are older, larger sibling groups, and/or have significant special needs.		



Some things to consider...

Foster care and adoption are very complex. Before beginning the process, it is important to consider some of these things. If you would like suggestions for more resources, please speak to a member of our staff and we would be happy to help you learn more.

There is no quicker or easier path.

Many people assume that matching with children who are already legally free will be quicker, easier, or less emotional than fostering children. The truth is that both paths have their own different challenges. Matching adoption may provide less risk that a child will go home to their family, but it is not “easier” in the sense that the children seeking their forever home through SWAN have typically been through many layers of additional trauma within the foster care system - including multiple different placements. Therefore, once a match is made, the adjustment period can be especially challenging as the child is unsure whether you will be any different than the previous families who have given up on them.

The matching process itself is often described by parents as an emotional roller coaster. Most families do not match with the first child they are interested in; rather, they will experience the ups and downs of inquiring about many different children before finally finding their match.

Many adoptive parents who have experienced the pain of infertility or child loss are looking for a way to be assured that they will avoid heartbreak. Unfortunately this can never be guaranteed - whether becoming a parent through biology or adoption. But if you are willing to open your heart to accept risk, there is amazing potential to provide loving care to children!

Adoptive parenting is different.

Before beginning the adoption journey (whether through foster care or matching adoption), it is important to remember that adoption can only exist because of a separation between children and their parents. This is tragic. Because all adopted individuals have experienced this trauma, they must be parented differently. Many potential adoptive parents feel that “love is enough” to erase a child’s past. This is not true. But love, coupled with trauma-informed parenting, can help to heal the trauma and provide the child with a happy and connected life.

The kids come first.

Can we humbly ask you to consider this? Adoption is not about “building your family,” or even about finding the right child to bring into your home. Our job as a foster care and adoption agency is not to help you find the perfect child to complete your family. Instead, adoption is about finding amazing families for precious kids. The child welfare system is NOT an adoption pipeline, but there ARE many kids within this system who need families. If you can start to think about what your family can offer to a child instead of what kind of child we can find for you, you just might discover that this journey won’t look anything like you wanted or imagined it to be - but it is still totally worth it!



Frequently Asked Questions

What about "foster to adopt?"

The term foster to adopt is misleading, because it implies that you are fostering with the goal of adoption. However, the goal of foster care is reunification. We prefer to use the term "legal risk foster care." Legal risk means that the foster family is open to considering adoption should the case goal eventually change. It is not a guarantee that adoption will be the end result, but it helps the county to know that the child will not have to be moved to a different home if reunification and kinship are not possible.

Can I adopt without fostering first?

There is no way to adopt through the child welfare system without fostering first. Families who are matched with children through the SWAN Matching Adoption program must foster the child for a minimum of 6 months before the adoption can be finalized. This ensures that you have all of the support you need throughout the adjustment period, are able to get all of the child's needed services and care established, and make sure that things are going well and the match is successful. Both foster families and matching adoption families are certified as foster parents.

I want to adopt, but don't meet the SWAN criteria - what can I do?

Families in this situation have two options: you can become a foster family, or you can pursue a private adoption (domestic or intercountry). The Salvation Army does not provide private adoption services, but we do offer fee-based home studies for families who are working with other adoption agencies.

How come there are kids listed on adoptpakids.org who don't meet the SWAN criteria?

This is a common question that many people wonder, but the answer is simple: there aren't. Really - trust us! If you see a child under 10 who is not part of a large sibling group, then they will meet the third criteria of having significant special needs. Because the photolisting website is public and strengths-based, those special needs cannot be listed. However, remember that not all disabilities are visible. Examples of invisible disabilities could include autism (including children who are nonverbal or not toilet trained), Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, developmental or intellectual disabilities, or significant mental health/behavioral disorders. Families who are open to providing specialized care to these precious and very special kids will have the opportunity, once approved as licensed families, to learn more about each child's needs and how they can best care for them.

Can I adopt an older child if I've never parented before?

Many parents are concerned about this, but the answer is yes! We will provide support and training to help you succeed. We have seen many beautiful families formed with first-time parents and kids of all ages!

How come some children on adoptpakids.org have not had their parental rights terminated yet?

In many cases, the court does not wish to move forward with terminating parental rights until an adoptive home is found. In other cases, reunification may still be on the table but the county is proactively searching for a permanent home in case it can't happen.

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Making Your Decision

Foster Care may be for you if...

You are flexible, open-hearted, and willing to welcome children quickly without knowing everything about them.

You are able to whole-heartedly support reunification if and when it is best for the child.

You are willing to support ongoing connection between a child and their birth family, and create a safe environment for your adopted child to ask questions about their story.

You would like to be there for your child from the very beginning of their journey, helping them to navigate the scary moments and walking alongside them through the uncertainties of their case.

You are passionate about helping to keep families together, while also believing in the importance of children being safe and nurtured.

You are willing to learn more about trauma-informed parenting and how to support children with a variety of special needs. You don't need to have prior experience or skills to make a great parent! Everyone starts somewhere.

Matching Adoption may be for you if...

You are patient, committed, and willing to go through an extended information-gathering process before bringing a child into your home.

You are more comfortable with children who no longer have a goal of reunification.

You would like to provide a safe and loving home for children who have experienced significant trauma including a long time in foster care, and may or may not feel hope that they will ever belong to anyone.

You are passionate about helping children to avoid aging out of the system, and feel that everyone deserves a chance to be loved in a forever family.



But what if neither of these options applies to me?

Many people don't feel comfortable with supporting reunification, but also don't meet the SWAN criteria for matching adoption. If this is you, you may wish to explore options outside of the child welfare system such as private domestic adoption.

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In Conclusion...

There is no one right answer to this question. If you need further help discussing which path is best for your family, our staff is always happy to set up an individual consultation to talk it through with you. Here are a few final reminders:

✓ Foster families meet children much earlier on in the process, but are more likely to have children go home or to a kinship resource.

✓ Foster families must be willing to support reunification.

✓ Foster families may have time to ask a few questions, but are often asked to take children on an emergency basis with little to no information known about them.

Matching adoption families meet kids when they are already moving toward adoption, but these children are older and have more significant needs.

Matching adoption families must be looking for children who are 10+, sibling groups of 3+, or children with special needs.

Matching adoption families will be able to review child profiles, ask questions, meet the child's team, and have pre-placement visits before a child moves into their home.

Ready to get started? Contact us!
610-821-7706 | www.care4kids.net



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