

## Not Too Old for Forever: Adopting an Older Youth

Every child deserves to have a safe and loving family that they can call their own. Many people often picture babies and small children when they think about adoption. However, in truth, there are hundreds of teenagers and older youth who need families, too.

When an individual leaves foster care as a young adult, without a permanent family, it is known as “aging out.” Youth who age out of foster care face many challenges that they are not equipped to deal with on their own, without the love and support of a family. In fact, youth who age out of foster care are far more likely to become homeless, chronically unemployed, and have frequent interactions with the criminal justice system. Wisconsin needs more families to say “yes” to teens; Wisconsin needs *you!*

If you are just getting started in foster care and adoption, or even if you have had a little more experience with the process, you have probably heard social workers and agency representatives telling you about the critical need for homes for tweens and teens. Maybe you’ve even thought about the possibility of your home and family being the right fit for an older child. If so, you probably have some questions and concerns. This tip sheet will

answer some of the most common questions we hear from families considering adopting a tween or teen.

**Q: Do older children, such as teens, have more “problems” than younger children?**



**A:** All children, whether they are children who were born to you, children who are in foster care, or children who have been adopted, will present multiple parenting challenges throughout the various stages of development. Instead of saying older children are more problematic, it’s better to say that older children present different challenges than younger children, depending on their stage of development. Many foster and adoptive parents who are raising tweens and teens are grateful their world is not revolving around feeding schedules, potty training, diaper changes, or the

infamous terrible two’s. However, those same parents may be experiencing the rebellion, back talk, or general moodiness typical to all teenagers at times. In reality, there is no such thing as the completely ideal and challenge-free child. With the proper tools, support network, and, most of all, patience, there are very few challenges that parents can’t overcome.

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**Q: Won't I be missing out on all of the important developmental milestones if I adopt an older child?**

**A:** While you will have missed the joyous moments when a child begins walking and

talking, there are still many important milestones you can experience with a teen or tween. Take a moment to think back on your childhood. Do you remember speaking your first words, or taking your first steps?

**Angie's Story**

*After seven years of trying, Angie V. and her husband Peter were unable to conceive a baby naturally. However, they did not want to give up on their dream of starting a family. So, they began looking into adopting from the foster care system.*

"We were quickly licensed by Waukesha County and waited. I wanted to have a baby," Angie said. "So badly, that one of the rooms was set up in a *Winnie the Pooh* theme and had a crib in it!"

*However, despite their desire for a baby, that's not quite what happened. While reading ADOPT! Magazine, Angie came across the profile of an older child who she really felt connected with, and she began to realize that taking placement of an older child might be something she could do.*

"Finally, we received a placement of twins, age five. So the crib came down, and up went another twin bed. I accepted the placement of twins probably because my best friends from the first grade were twins and it's a soft spot of mine. The twins had an older sister, who was nine at the time. It wasn't long before we were able to change our license and reunite her with her siblings."

*Eventually, when the children were nine and 13 years old, Angie and Peter adopted them.*

"At first I teased the social worker that I needed an 'I'm crazy' button to wear at the adoption hearing, because adopting a teenager seemed a little nuts to me! It wasn't anything that I ever thought I would do. It

didn't help that I was only 33 at the time. In my head, 40- or 50-year-olds adopted teenagers . . . probably because I thought they had already went through most of the child raising thing."

*Angela and her husband have experienced a lot through their fostering-to-adopt experience and share this thought with anyone who is considering becoming an adoptive parent:*

"I think every kiddo just wants and deserves a place to call their own, a place where they are loved and feel safe, and a place to just be a kid. Watching my teenager grow into this wonderful young woman, I see that she needs a place to gracefully make mistakes and venture out and become her own person. But she still needs love, guidance, and support behind her.

"You think you are going to miss out on a lot of things when you adopt an older child, but there are so many firsts you will get to experience with the children, especially because, as children in foster care, they may not have had a chance to experience some things that other children take for granted. We got to experience things like swimming and going for a horseback ride for the first time with our children.

"I will never regret the experience and lessons learned. What I thought I wanted wasn't really what I wanted. No diaper changes here! I treasure the relationships and conversations. I hope more people can see past more of the pain and trauma to see the beauty within these young people."

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Probably not. But chances are you do remember who stood up and cheered at your high school graduation, who pinned on your corsage at prom, who taught you how to drive and buy your first car, who helped you move into your college dorm or first apartment—the person or people who stood by you as you found out what it means to be an adult and a fully independent person. If you become his adoptive parent, you can become that person for a teen. You can become the caring adult who helps him find out who he really is and the person who helps him to begin to realize his full potential.



**Q: Will older children become attached to me?**

**A:** Attachment is one of those buzz words you will often hear in the foster and adoption community. A common misconception among potential adoptive and foster parents is that young children will not have attachment issues and that teens and older children will not be fully capable of forming loving and trusting relationships with caregivers. However, even a child less than a year old may have experienced trauma that could affect his ability to form secure attachments as he develops. In reality, all children want to form attachments with caring adults and there are many approaches that parents can use to promote healthy attachment.

While expecting a child to love and bond with

you from day one is certainly unrealistic, having a good understanding of a child's trauma history and a consistent and thoughtful parenting approach will help a child build and strengthen attachments over time, even if they are approaching or into their teenage years.

**Q: Isn't birth order important? I have younger children at home and I am worried how adopting a teen will affect their development.**

**A:** The effect birth order plays in childhood

wellbeing and development has been a hotly contested issue for over a century, and terms like "Middle Child Syndrome" have been mainstays in pop psychology for decades. This extends into the adoption world. At one time, the thought was that families should adopt in birth order, meaning they should only take placements of children younger than the children they had at home. In reality, the birth order theory has been put to the test by numerous studies over the years and there has been little to no evidence to show that birth order plays a significant role in personality development or wellbeing of a child.

However, bringing a new child of any age into the family will likely be a disruption to your family's established routines and roles. If you are considering adopting a child, it will be important to prepare the children in your home for the addition of a new member of the family. With thoughtful transition

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planning and continued conversation as a family, you can anticipate many of the potential adjustment issues and work to solve them together.

### **Q: Do teens and older children actually want to be adopted?**

**A:** For teens in foster care who have experienced many placements, many homes, and many different families, the concept of a permanent family might seem foreign to them. After all, for a lot of these teens, adult caregivers were inconsistent and constantly changing. For any child of any age, there is always a period of adjustment when they are placed in a new home.

However, the vast majority of teens who become available for adoption are longing for a family to put down roots with. Each teen is different; some teens will adjust and adapt quickly, and other teens may require some time to transition and open up. While it may take a while for a teen to call you “Mom” or “Dad,” having a family to call their own as they take those first steps into adulthood likely means the world to them.

### **Being the person who says “yes”**

Everyone knows that, being a teenager is a tumultuous time in a person’s life. Most teens have a secure and loving base that begins with family, to shepherd them through those turbulent years. However, in nearly every Wisconsin community, there are teens and young adults who do not have that base. They don’t have that secure footing from which they can expand and reach their potential. Perhaps you could provide a tween or teen with a family and change that young person’s life in countless ways.

Just like in any adoption, choosing to adopt a tween or a teen is a life-changing decision and you will need support. The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families is here to give you and your whole family the support and

strength you’ll need to succeed. We invite you to check out the Resource section for links to further information.



## **Resources**

### *From the Lending Library*

- *Beneath The Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*, by Debbie Riley
- *Is Adoption for You?*, by Christine Adamec
- *Parenting at the Speed of Teens: Positive Tips on Everyday Issues*, by Peter Benson
- *Our Own: Adopting & Parenting the Older Child*, by Trish Maskew

### *Other Helpful Tip Sheets*

- [Helping Teens in Care Transition to Adulthood](#)
- [Preparing Kids in your Home for Fostering](#)
- [What to Do While You Wait](#)

### *Additional Resources*

- [Removed Part 1](#) (Short Film)
- [Removed Part 2](#) (Short Film)