

A Family For Every Child Matching Assistance



*"We should not be asking who this child belongs to,
but who belongs to this child."*

Older Child Adoption

A majority of the children in foster care waiting for their forever families are considered to be "older". Per the [most recent AFCARS report](#), the average age of a child waiting to be adopted is nearly 8 years old. Many families seek to adopt younger children, for reasons including maintaining birth order and being first-time parents. But if you can consider older children, I encourage you to do so. There are some challenges that come with adopting older children, but there are also many rewards. Read on to learn more about how you can help your older child heal and reach their full potential.



Understanding Development

One of the keys to a successful adoption of an older child is understanding the stages of development. It is also important to remember that your child's chronological age may not match his/her developmental age. For example, you may have adopted a 12 year old child who functions at the developmental age of an 8 year old. If you can determine what developmental stage your child is at you will be able to keep your expectations in line with the appropriate stage, making life at home much easier for you and your child. Finally, regardless of your child's age, keep your expectations of them similar to those of a newborn when they are first placed in your home. In a sense, adopting a child is like having a newborn. You are both getting to know each other and are learning how to interact. Keeping this perspective during the first year of placement will help keep your frustration levels in check when it comes to attachment and bonding. Just like with a baby, trust, love and attachment come over time and through actions.

The following are the stages of development as posited by Erik Erikson, a psychologist known for his work on psychosocial development and identity:

Stage 1: 0 - 18 months

During this stage, a child develops attachment. They learn to trust their caregivers will take care of them and meet their needs (emotional and physical).

A child in foster care may have missed out on developing meaningful attachments with a caregiver. They may have developed superficial attachments to survive. A child coming into

your home may still be at this developmental stage. If they are, adjust your expectations of them to this level. Gently correct a child's behavior, while explaining why the behavior was not appropriate. No matter how frustrated you may feel, it's important to try and remain calm. Your child's behavior will not change until they've attached with you and developed a trusting relationship.

Stage 2: 18 months - 3 years

During this stage, child develop self-control, willpower, and explore autonomy. This stage is commonly referred to as "the terrible twos".

Once a child completes stage 1 (attachment), they will enter this stage. Stage 2 may seem like it's full of defiance, tantrums, angry outbursts, and the word "no". You may be concerned and feel as though you are doing something wrong. However, by entering this stage it shows your child is slowly developing. If you adopted an older child, you may be wondering why your 12 year old is throwing the tantrums of a 3 year old. But remember, your child's developmental age may not match their chronological age. During this stage, active listening is key. A child in this stage wants to be heard and having their feelings validated. When your child is in the midst of a tantrum it is best to let them calm down before you try and reason with them. Raising your voice or trying to explain yourself will only make the situation worse. Once your child has calmed down, listen to what they have to say. Repeat their feelings back to them, or help them put a label on them. In doing so, your child will feel like they are being heard and are having their thoughts and feelings validated. They will be much more receptive to what you have to say if they feel like you listened to them.

Stage 3: 3 -5 years

During this stage, children learn how to play, cooperate with others, they develop an imagination, and build social skills.

An older child who is just arriving at this developmental stage may feel awkward around their peers, who completed this stage at a much younger age. It is very important though for your child to explore and complete this stage. Finding ways for your child to exercise their creativity is key. If possible, seek out activities where your child will be interacting with younger and older children. This will allow them to be creative and imaginative with a younger group while also building leadership skills, in addition to building relationships with children his/her age while learning how to follow. It may be tempting to have your child complete this stage as soon as possible so he/she will not lag behind their peers, but in doing so you are not letting them develop at their own pace. If your child is not able to complete this stage of development, they may have issues making friends and may become reliant on others for everything.

Stage 4: 6 - 12 years

During this stage, children develop various skills, build knowledge, explore talents, and continue to develop their social skills.

An older child who is finally arriving at this stage will need your help in developing confidence. Encourage your child to explore various activities in your community and at school. Suggest your child stick with an activity for at least one season or term before they decide it's not right for them, and then help them find another activity they may be more interested in. Nurture your child's interests. During this stage a child will begin to develop self-esteem and confidence, something he/she may have never experienced before.

Parenting an older child requires a lot of patience and realistic expectations. When you are able to keep your child's developmental stages in mind as you are raising your child you may find parenting becomes easier and your child is more receptive. Other things to keep in mind when raising an older child:

- *Seek out therapy.* Children of all ages and developmental stages who have experienced significant trauma and loss benefit from therapy. Even if you don't think your child needs it, have your child attend a few therapy sessions once they are placed in your home. It is better to seek out services right from the start, rather than waiting until things have escalated out of control. Also, there is no shame in a parent seeking out therapy as well! Don't feel bad about asking for help. There are many wonderful resources in your community and online who are ready and willing to help your family.
- *Understand that love is not a "fix-all".* While love is a key component in helping your child heal, it is not enough on its own. This is especially true if your child is dealing with attachment issues. Showing and telling your child you love them coupled with other treatments will help heal your child's trauma and fears, and will allow them to attach.
- *Recognize bonding and attachment may take years.* Your child may not develop an attachment during the first 6 months, year, or even year and a half. You may not even feel an attachment to your child during the first year. Understand that this is completely normal. Bonding and attachment is a long process, developed over many interactions with each other. Don't feel like a failure because you haven't fallen in love with your child after 3 months. Your child is working through some deep issues and years of trauma. It's unrealistic to expect all of that to be undone over the course of a few months. There will be many bumps in the road to bonding, but if you work hard and keep your expectations realistic it will all be worth it in the end.



Questions to Ask Before Adopting an Older Child

The following are some questions you may want to ask a child's social worker or other members of their team before agreeing to adopting them:

1. How long has the child been in care? How many placements have they had? What types of placements? Have any disrupted, and if so, why? - *This will give you some insight into the child's emotional needs.*

2. Why are the current foster parents not adopting? - *It could be as simple as they are foster-only, but you want to make sure there are no significant emotional, mental or behavioral issues that are making the foster parents hesitant to adopt.*

3. How does the child feel about adoption? - *After spending years in the foster care system and enduring countless placements, older children may become jaded toward the idea of a "forever" family. Knowing how the child feels about being adopted allows you to address those issues from the start and create a transition plan that will help your child become more comfortable with the idea of a forever family.*

4. What type of contact does the child have with their biological parents or family? How should contact be handled going forward? - *Older children especially may be experiencing an "identity crisis", and may be more drawn to their biological family than ever before. Knowing what type of contact, if any, the child has with their biological family is important when considering placement. You need to decide if you are comfortable with the contact they have and if you can support it. If you are not comfortable with biological family contact or if the child doesn't have contact with their biological family, you need to think about how you are going to help them through their identity issues.*

5. What types of medications is the child taking, and what for? - *The longer a child spends in foster care, the more likely they are to be on a few different medications. Many of the medications may be related to diagnosed mental health or behavioral issues. Understanding why the child is on the medicine, what it does, and what the side effects are is critical.*

6. What is known about the biological family's medical history? - *This includes any mental health diagnoses. While this information may not be known, it's important to gather all the answers you can. This will give you clues to the child's current and future health needs.*

7. Is the child in therapy? What type(s) of therapy(ies) have proven helpful? - *There is a very good chance your child will be in therapy. Understanding what type of therapy they are in and how it has improved their level of functioning will allow you to seek out similar resources in your area.*

8. How do they get along with siblings/peers? - *How a child gets along with other children that are his/her age or younger is a good indicator of what types of behaviors you may see in the home. If you have other children, you will want to know how your child will get along and fit in with your other children.*

9. What are their interests and strengths? - *All children have them! Discovering common interests can help foster attachment and bonding. Playing up a child's strengths gives them confidence, which in turn can help your placement be more successful.*

And finally, a question to ask yourself:

Can I be a parent to this child if their behaviors never change? If this child's behaviors don't change even after they are placed in my home, will I be able to handle it? You may also want to ask yourself if your biological child displayed these types of needs, how would you react?

Remember, adoption is forever. This person is going to become YOUR child. You need to be certain you can make that committment.



Additional Information & Resources

Adoption Advocate #76 - [Preparation & Support For Older Child Adoptions](#)

Adoption Advocate #77 - [The Joys & Challenges of Parenting Older Adopted Children](#)

C.A.S.E. - [Dear Ellen: Transracial Adoptive Parents' Concerns About Their Teen's Relationships](#)

C.A.S.E. - [The Adopted Child's Changing View](#)

Child Welfare Information Gateway - [Older Children](#)

College Scholarships.com - [Scholarships for Foster Kids](#)

Forever Parents - [Five Things To Remember When You Adopt An Older Child](#)

NACAC - [How to Cover College Expenses for Your Adopted Child](#)

NACAC - [Retrace Developmental Stages to Help Older Children Heal](#)

One Thankful Mom blog - [Joining a New Family at 16 \(and Realistic Expectations\)](#)

Scholarship Experts.com - [Financial Aid Resources for Foster and Adopted Children](#)

