

Partners in Permanency: Strategies for Locating and Engaging Connections Together



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Dave Thomas
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Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

Presenters



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Learning Objectives

- Review the importance of legal permanency for all youth in care
- Discuss the importance of engaging biological family and others known to the youth
- Provide powerful strategies in working together to reach our common goal of locating and engaging those known to the youth for the purpose of achieving permanency

Our Mission:

Dramatically increase the number of adoptions of children waiting in North America's foster care systems.

Our Vision:

Every child will have a permanent home and a loving family.

We Believe: *ADOPTABLE.*



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IN NORTH AMERICA:

450,000+
children
are in
foster care

140,000+
children
are waiting to
be adopted

20,000+
children
age out of care
every year
without a family



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Wendy's
Wonderful Kids®



WWK Impact in Ohio

(as of July 2023)



3,526
children waiting

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, AFCARS Reports (FY 2021)



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82
adoption recruiters

4,095
children served

1,099
children currently on caseloads

1,577
children finalized

136
children waiting for court finalizations

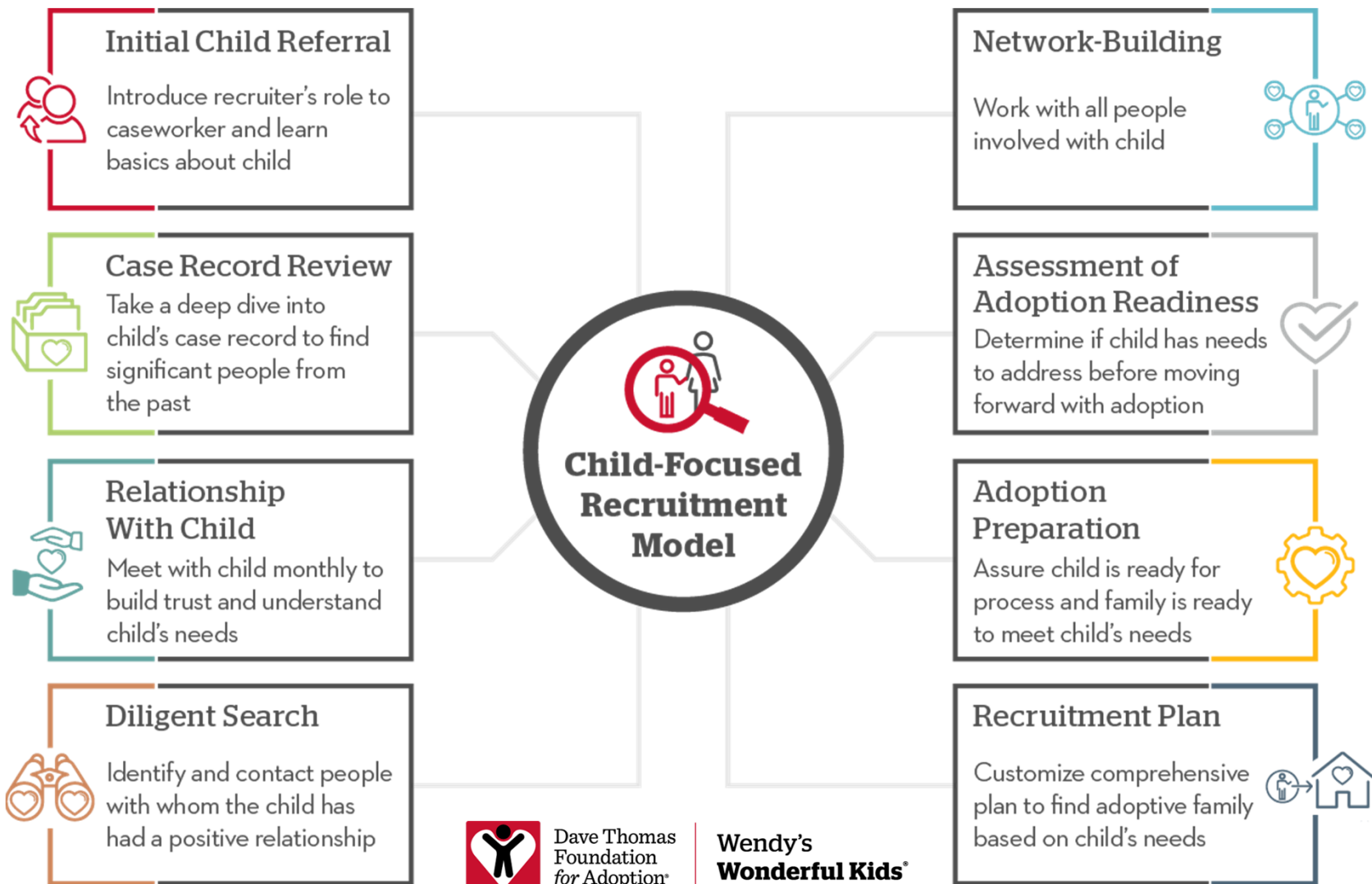
Counties Served by WWK in Ohio

- 82 recruiters
- 16 partner agencies
- 75 of 88 counties are being served by a recruiter



Recruitment Tactics

- **General:** Public — “You should adopt a child from foster care.”
- **Child-Specific:** Public — “Look at these pictures and descriptions of youth available for adoption.”
- **Targeted:** Latino festival attendees — “Look at pictures and a description of Latino children in foster care.”
- **Child Focused Recruitment:** Youth’s voice & connections – Emphasized the child’s input in their permanency and pre-existing relationships



Child-Focused Recruitment

- **Emphasizes a child's voice** and focuses on identifying **pre-existing relationships** who may be potential adoptive families
- That network may include relatives, neighbors, teachers, a best friend's parents, previous foster placements or others in the child's life





Focus Population

- Youth ages 9 and older (or younger and one of the below)
- Sibling groups
- Youth with special needs
- Youth opposed to adoption
- Youth in long-term foster care
- Youth without an identified adoptive resource



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Youth Served

- In agency custody or extended care
- Primary goal or concurrent plan of adoption
- Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (PPLA) — similar to long-term foster care
- **No identified family**



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Types of Permanency

- Adoption finalization
- Legal guardianship
- Tribal customary adoptions
- Reunification

Wendy's Wonderful Kids: Family Reunification Jocelyn and Jamya's Story



Family Reunification

Rigorous National Evaluation

“Wendy’s Wonderful Kids substantially and significantly increases adoptions from foster care.” — *Child Trends**

- Children served by WWK are 1.7x more likely to be adopted.
- Older children are up to 3x more likely to get adopted.
- Children with specific mental health needs are more than 3x more likely to get adopted.
- Older youth opposed to adoption were more likely to consider adoption when working with a WWK recruiter.



***A National Evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids**
The Impact of Child-Focused Recruitment on Foster Care Adoption: A Five-Year Evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids. Malm, K., et. al; October 2011

Evaluation: Youth Voices

- Nearly half of children reported that no one else tried to help find a permanent home for them prior to WWK.
- Most children reported feeling that their voice was not heard in the recruitment process prior to WWK.
- Of children opposed to adoption, half reported feeling open to it after working with their WWK recruiter.
- Nearly all children reported that they have a different type of relationship with their WWK recruiter than their child welfare worker, with this relationship being more informal, open and honest.



Impact of Aging Out of Foster Care

Without the support and safety net of a permanent family*:

- **1 in 5** youth will be homeless after age 18
- Only **50%** will be employed at age 24
- Less than **3%** will earn a college degree
- **70%** of former female foster youth will be pregnant by age 21
- **1 in 4** youth will experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), equal to or higher than U.S. military veterans

**Source: Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Cost Avoidance: The Business Case for Investing In Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, 2013*



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For every young person who ages out of care, taxpayers pay **\$300,000** in social costs (public assistance, lost wages, systems involvement)

Wendy's Wonderful Kids: The Importance of Permanency



The Importance of Permanency



What Did Your Reliable Adult Give You?

Older Youth in Foster Care Will Have ...

- Photo ID and copy of birth certificate
- Medical insurance
- Some financial benefits
- Possible paid work experience
- Computer
- Housing options
- Reliable adult



Youth Served

“

I don't want
to be adopted.

”



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Adoption Fears

Most children are worried that ***no one will want them***



Activity

Brainstorm ways to resolve and help unpack the “no” for:

- **Fear of the unknown**
- **Changing schools and leaving friends and community**
- **Changing their last name**
- **Wondering if they will be safe and happy in their new family**
- **Rejecting birth family**
- **Wondering what the new rules will be**
- **Fear that no one will want them**



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Partnering for Permanency

CASA/GAL Best-Interest Advocacy





Outcomes for Youth

Children who have a CASA are:

- More likely to achieve permanency
- More likely to succeed in school
- Half as likely to re-enter the foster care system

Source: National CASA/GAL Association for Children: nationalcasagal.org

For many youth, their CASA is often the only unpaid professional working with them.



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CASA's Role

- Appear in court to speak for best interests of the youth
- Critical member of youth's team
- Stay involved on the case from time of appointment until the youth achieves permanency
- Visit with youth regularly
- Has prior knowledge of child, family and history
- Has had extensive conversations with family and those in the youth's network
- Thoroughly explore safe and permanent placement options and recommend what is best for the youth

WWK Recruiter's Role

- Focuses on legal permanency
- Collaborates with custodial caseworker and youth's team until permanency is achieved
- Completes extensive case record review
- Builds relationship with the youth
- Completes exhaustive diligent search efforts
- Builds youth's network
- Assesses youth's readiness for adoption
- Prepares youth and family for adoption
- Creates a comprehensive recruitment plan

Youth Voices: Importance of Kinship Connections

When we don't support and cultivate family relationships, youth report experiencing the following:

- Lost connections with siblings and no support to maintain sibling relationships
- No assistance to maintain relationships with relatives who could not provide placement
- No support for relationships with relatives who were important to youth because the agency did not think they were a good influence
- Urge to run away and go to their biological parents or families' homes
- Loss of relationships if youth or siblings were adopted
- Feelings of anger, grief and loss from family separation and struggling to adjust, even in supportive placements



Planning for Permanency

- Start identifying permanent, supportive adults as soon as you begin working with youth
- Involve youth in every step of permanency planning
- Search case files and help youth think about their history so they can identify caring adults
- Follow up and follow through
- Do not give up!

“Believe we deserve a family and tell us that we deserve a family — even if we act like we do not believe you!”

Source: Juvenile Law Center, 2018 Youth Fostering Change Toolkit for Child Welfare Professionals to Achieve Permanency and Stability for Youth in Foster Care



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Explore Sources

- Child, child's family and kin
- Internet search and social media (Facebook, etc.)
 - Connect Our Kids
- Private search providers (LexisNexis, Seneca)
- www.findagrave.com

Engage Connections

- Be intentional
- Verify what information can or should be shared
- Meet connections where they are
- Validate their feelings
- Find their “yes”
- Aggressive follow up

Case Scenario

- Review Handout

- In your group, review the scenario provided and answer the questions that follow.
- Be prepared to have someone from your group share with the class.

Collaboration: Partner with the WWK Recruiter

- Provide history about youth, family and others in their network
- Be open to exploring connections who may not have worked out in the past
- Understand that people can change and grow
- Help connect WWK recruiter with potential resources and family
- Ensure that the WWK recruiter is included as part of the ongoing service team by including them in meetings, emails and all communication regarding the youth to ensure everyone is working together toward permanency
- Keep permanency a priority over emancipation or independent living services

AND EACH YEAR MORE THAN **20,000**
CHILDREN AGE OUT OF THE SYSTEM



Unadoptable is Unacceptable



QUESTIONS?



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THANK YOU!



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