



Go Out and Learn Life (GOALL) Peer-to-Peer Adoption Report

GOALL members were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding peer-to-peer adoption. The questions asked the youth to consider the benefits and challenges of adoption, to discuss important youth concerns of which potential adoptive parents should be aware, and to offer advice to a youth who might be reluctant to be adopted. Through this discussion, GOALL members hoped to provide a more accurate picture of the experience of adoption for youth in foster care.

Benefits of Adoption

"Everybody deserves a second chance to be loved."

Most GOALL members pointed out feelings of security and acceptance as the primary advantages of adoption. As one GOALL member wrote, "Adoption provides a sense of belonging that foster care often lacks; sharing someone's last name itself makes any setting appear more secure and comfortable. Basically, adoption is permanent; whereas foster care is temporary."

Other benefits of adoption that were mentioned included being able to go to the family directly for important services, such as tutoring, rather than having to fill out an application and wait for funding, and still being eligible for DSS Independent Living (IL) services and support if they are 16 years of age or older. Adoption also allows youth to establish long-term relationships, become a part of an additional family, restart their lives, have someone there for them to talk to and rely on, learn how to deal with different people, and develop the ability to build trust to earn more freedom and privileges.

Overall, youth felt that adoption offered all of the potential personal growth that comes from "feeling like you are wanted." The GOALL members agreed that adoption, even for older youth, is an option that deserves careful consideration.

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Challenges of Adoption

"I have been adopted, and I don't want to be hurt again."

Even though GOALL members freely acknowledged the benefits of adoption, they also discussed many of the challenges, especially when the youth involved is a teenager. Some GOALL members shared their stories of being adopted as older youth and the pain they experienced when the adoption did not work out. Although the youth said they had come to terms with the outcome and their lives as they are today, they also expressed regret and sorrow about what they had to go through.

GOALL members were also concerned about losing ties to their birth families, especially to their siblings. The youth wanted to be assured they would be allowed to continue to communicate and to visit with their brothers and sisters and not be discouraged from informing their siblings about their adoption. GOALL members also cited the identity issues that could come along with an older youth having to change his or her last name. For an older youth especially, adoption should be about gaining family without the cost of losing family—and, consequently, an important part of themselves.

Advice to Potential Adoptive Parents

"Make the youth feel like family."

In offering advice to potential adoptive parents, GOALL members were quick to assert the importance of considering the youth's feelings in the situation. Since the youth is new to their home and has most likely lived differently than the adoptive family does, adults should be as open as possible to the youth and all of the complexities of his or her experiences and identity. Adults should be careful to remember the youth's feelings, clearly communicate boundaries and expectations, and make sure the youth feels like a part of the family.

Youth also discussed the potential problems created by the speed of the adoption process. The "getting acquainted" period should not be rushed. Enough time

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should be granted so that both the adults and the youth feel confident about making this life-changing decision. To paraphrase the words of one GOALL member, most people would not feel comfortable marrying someone after only two weeks of dating. The youth and the family need an abundance of time to get to know each other before committing to a permanent relationship.

Advice to Youth Considering Adoption

"It's okay to be scared, but do not let that hold you back because it might be one of the best decisions of your life."

GOALL members were asked to provide advice they would give to a youth who was reluctant to consider adoption. As a part of their responses, GOALL members mentioned some of the reasons a youth might be hesitant to agree to an adoption and how these concerns might be addressed.

As one GOALL member wrote, "Just because you're getting adopted does not mean you are not going to see your siblings. Before you get adopted, ask the parent if you are allowed to and make sure your case manager is present." Most GOALL members stressed the importance of the youth and the adoptive family clearly communicating their expectations to one another before the adoption and maintaining these expectations after the adoption is official.

Regarding a youth who had a negative view of adoption, one GOALL member remarked:

"Getting adopted isn't always a bad thing. Getting adopted simply means that you are permanently staying with a family up until the age of 18, if not longer....Getting adopted could open unknown doors for you. Don't be too defensive but consider it before you throw it away."

A lot of youths' fears regarding adoption involved uncertainty: uncertainty about the situation, about what would change and what would stay the same, and about how

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much control youth would have over the direction of their lives. Most GOALL members talked about how openness, warmth, discussion, and understanding could ease these fears and establish fulfilling family connections.

Conclusion

Adoption can present a youth in foster care with many opportunities, but these opportunities might also inspire many questions and fears in the youth. As GOALL members demonstrated in their responses to the peer-to-peer adoption questions, taking the time to consider the perspectives of others and to constructively and compassionately address them can open the doors to positive, permanent connections that enrich the lives of everyone involved.



About GOALL

Go Out and Learn Life (GOALL), the South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS) state youth advisory board, was established in January of 2000 and is composed of youth who have experience with the foster care system and who advocate on behalf of youth in foster care throughout the state. GOALL works in partnership with the South Carolina Department of Social Services with the intention of making life better for youth in SCDSS foster care.

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