



## Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

### WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Participants in adoptions and the foster care system: children of any age (those in foster care, those who age out, adoptees); families of origin\*; resource families\* (foster parents, adoptive families, kinship care\*); and professionals (social workers, lawyers). Note: The laws, language, and terms around what is considered foster care and the methods of adoption (from foster care, fostering to adopt, infant adoption, independent) can differ state to state.

### HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Hollywood frequently depicts experiences of foster care/adoption as inherently traumatic and negative, perpetuating stereotypes of problematic youth and “bad” birth parents. These portrayals dissuade audiences from fostering/adopting, especially older children, and often ignore poverty as the most common reason children are placed in the child welfare system and/or put up for adoption. By examining this false conflation of poverty with bad parenting onscreen, Hollywood can help drive policy change, like providing assistance to struggling families rather than separating them. It's also important that onscreen adoption stories don't overlook the primary goal of foster care – reunification with the family of origin. With countless children and families served by the U.S. foster care and adoption systems, it's imperative to tell their stories accurately and mindfully.

**NOTE ON LANGUAGE:** Use “child in foster care” instead of “foster child,” which can be stigmatizing. “Foster” doesn't describe who they are; it describes how they're helped.

## FOSTER CARE & ADOPTION

### OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Bad Birth Parent:** Birth parents stereotyped as uncaring or abusive toward the child and/or dangerous toward the resource family. The truth is, a majority of child maltreatment\* cases are classified as “neglect” but do not involve abuse. These depictions ignore the more common reasons parents are forced to give up their children: trauma (e.g., intimate partner violence), lack of resources (e.g., familial support, mental healthcare, education, childcare), and poverty.
- **A “Better” Life:** Depicting poor, BIPOC children placed with affluent, white families as lucky or grateful for new opportunities (e.g., elite school, “safe” neighborhood). This overlooks dangers BIPOC youth face in majority-white spaces, the toll of racial/cultural isolation, and white parents' inexperience with pernicious forms of racism (e.g., microaggressions, fetishization).
- **Villain Origin Story:** Portraying children in or adults who have aged out of the foster care system as outcasts, criminals, and/or dangerous *because* of time spent in the system. These depictions not only demonize, but also ignore the fact that “acting out” is often a response to trauma (e.g., changing schools, neglect, witnessing or experiencing abuse).
- **Heartless Helpers:** Social workers depicted as dismissive and foster parents as “only in it for the money.” This places blame on often dedicated individuals for an overburdened system and ignores the moral and emotional difficulties they experience while attempting to provide support.
- **Prioritizing Adoption:** Stories that center an adult's desire to adopt. These portrayals miss the primary goal of foster care (i.e., reunification with the family of origin) and ignore valid reasons youth might not want to be adopted (e.g., sibling separation, losing access to health records).
- **Birth Parent Return:** Birth parents who have placed their child for adoption reappearing later in a child's life, causing conflict and emotional turmoil for the resource family. This can perpetuate misconceptions about adoption and the reunification processes.

### THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Child-Centered:** Stories from the youth's POV that present foster care/adoption as a way to help children in crisis, rather than a means to build a family. Show youth in community with other adoptees/kids in foster care, with aspirations and interests (e.g., hobbies, jobs, applying to college).
- **Reunification:** Parents of origin regaining custody and navigating reunification with their kids (e.g., adjustment periods, therapy).
- **Staying Connected:** Show resource families facilitating relationships with families of origin. Explore the many benefits of open adoptions\*, kinship care, and placement of Native American children within their tribes (e.g., tribal structure vs. nuclear family, learning traditions).
- **Examine Race:** Without exploiting for trauma, explore the ways BIPOC families are disproportionately impacted by child welfare (e.g., history of forced separation of Native children from tribes, increased scrutiny of Black parents). Show nuanced portrayals of transracial adoptions\* (e.g., BIPOC adoptees finding community, white parents educating themselves on racism).
- **Hidden Hurdles:** Show adoptees/youth in foster care/adults who age out overcoming challenges (e.g., separation from loved ones, trouble accessing family medical history, losing credits when switching schools).
- **Redefine Family:** Portray a variety of adults (e.g., single, LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, disabled, older, adoptees) fostering/adopting, exploring how kids benefit from adults with similar experiences (e.g., disabled parent/disabled child). Show young adults in foster families/getting adopted after they turn 18.
- **Perseverance:** Show adults who were in foster care/adoptees thriving and fighting to improve fostering/adoption systems (e.g., lobbying for rights to personal records, increased support for youth who age out).
- **For-Profit Perils:** Explore the dangers of for-profit foster care/adoption (e.g., treating kids as products, lower standards for resource parents). Depict non-profit agencies that are child-centered and trauma-informed.

\*Denotes a term in the glossary

## QUICK FACTS

- ~2.5% of children in the U.S. are adopted. In 2022, 407,000 kids were in foster care.
- In 2021, 19,130 youth aged out of the foster care system. By age 21, 29% of youth transitioning out of foster care become unhoused.
- While ~1 in 3 youth in foster care are LGBTQIA+, private and religious foster organizations can legally discriminate against LGBTQIA+ foster parents in 26 states.
- In the U.S., 50% of all Black and Native American children experience a Child Protective Services investigation in the first 18 years of their lives, compared to less than a quarter of white children.
- In the U.S., 30% of domestic adoptions are transracial. This does not include international adoptions, which are frequently transracial. White resource families who adopt children of another race or ethnicity make up nearly 90% of these transracial adoptions.

## ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- Adoption Center: [Types of Adoption](#)
- American Academy of Pediatrics: [Physical Health Needs of Children in Foster Care](#)
- Better Help: [Impact Of Growing Up In The Foster Care System On Mental Health](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway: Kinship Care](#)
- Foster Focus: [Privatized Foster Care: Profit Over Humanity?](#)
- GLAAD: [Talking About Adoption & Gay Parents](#)
- Human Rights Campaign: [LBGTQ Youth in the Foster Care System](#)
- *The Imprint*: [It's Time to Stop Confusing Poverty With Neglect](#)  
[White Privilege in Child Welfare: What Racism Looks Like](#)
- Knock LA: [Hollywood Evolution: Healing Trauma By Transforming Foster Representation](#)
- National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities: [The Rights of People with Disabilities Who Want to Adopt or Be Foster Parents](#)
- ProPublica: [Here's What Can Happen When Kids Age Out of Foster Care](#)
- Teen Vogue: [Adoption TikTok: Building Community and Critiquing the U.S. Adoption System](#)
- Time: [The Baby Brokers: Inside America's Murky Private-Adoption Industry](#)
- Vox: [How the US stole thousands of Native American children](#)
- The Washington Post: [Opinion: As a Black woman raised by White parents, I have some advice for potential adopters](#)

## GLOSSARY

### Child Maltreatment:

Defined by federal law as neglect or physical, sexual, or emotional abuse of children caused by parents or caregivers. A majority of child maltreatment cases don't involve abuse, but instead are a direct result of poverty (e.g., missing school, not keeping up with medical care). Child welfare investigations are also often impacted by racial or other forms of bias (e.g., Black mothers more likely reported for drug-positive newborns than white mothers).

### Family of Origin:

Biological parents, siblings, extended family, and caregivers. (Note: Biological parents are sometimes called "birth parents" or "first parents" but should never be referred to as "real parents," a term that is offensive and invalidating.)

### Kinship Care:

The care of children by approved adult relatives, members of their tribe, or close family friends. When children are removed from their homes, kinship care minimizes the trauma of separation and increases stability by maintaining connections to family and community.

### Open Adoption:

The modern standard for adoption in which adoptive parents hold all rights but exchange some identifying information (e.g., names, medical history) with families of origin and have the option of contact (e.g., visitation, phone calls).

### Resource Families:

Those who provide homes and nurture children removed from their living situations. Whether they are fostering, adopting, or kin providing care, they must undergo training and background checks to become licensed.

Please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#) for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: **Adoption and Safe Families Act, aging out, child welfare system, domestic adoption, foster care adoption, group home, guardianship, Indian Child Welfare Act, international adoption, intimate partner violence, mandated reporter, neglect, parental rights, permanency, private adoption, relative adoption, reunification, termination of parental rights, and transracial adoption.**

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A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website: [WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](#)

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