

Not Too Old for Forever: Adopting an Older Youth

Every child deserves a safe and loving family they can call their own. Many people often picture babies and small children when they think about adoption. However, hundreds of teenagers and older youth 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. They are far more likely to become homeless or 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 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 twos. However, those same parents may be experiencing the rebellion, back talk, or general moodiness typical to all teenagers at times. There is no such thing as a wholly 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.

Q: If I adopt an older child, will I miss out on all of the important developmental milestones?

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

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talking, you can still experience many important milestones 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? 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 an adoptive parent, you can become that person

for a teen. You can become the caring adult who helps a young person find out who they really are and the person who helps them realize their full potential.

Q: Will older children become attached to me?

A: Attachment is a word often used when caring for a child in out-of-home care. 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

Raina's Story

Life throws you curveballs, sometimes in the form of a lanky seventeen-year-old with a backpack bigger than himself. We, blissfully naive during the fostering process, envisioned a house filled with giggling pre-teens, not a young man on the precipice of adulthood, burdened by a quiet intensity. Sam arrived the week before his senior year, a puzzle box of emotions we desperately wanted to unlock.

At first, he was a ghost in our home, a silent shadow moving between school, his room, and the screen of his video games. Family dinners felt strained, punctuated by the clinking of silverware and the nervous flutter in our hearts. We started small, with goofy Skip-Bo games after dinner, an attempt to bridge the chasm between us. Gradually, routines became rituals, coaxing Sam out of his shell and building trust in tiny increments. A hesitant smile here, a quiet question there—each a victory in our quest to connect.

The judge's words hung in the air: adoption was a possibility. A flicker of something crossed Sam's face, a mixture of emotions we couldn't fully decipher. We knew this wasn't just a happy occasion; he felt complex and conflicting emotions. In the quiet weeks leading up to the adoption, we empowered him with choices. His last name, our titles, the very date—we placed the control in his hands—this

monumental decision, a lifetime commitment for us, needed to feel like his too.

Sam needed time, unlike a younger child who might find stability earlier in life. College applications and dorm life felt like too great a step at this time. Pre-college classes and a part-time job became our launchpad, stepping stones toward a future he was starting to dream about. He'd never held a steady job, and the constant churn of impermanence was a thief of opportunity. We navigated with him the uncharted waters of his work ethic and saved for a future that once was hard to see clearly.

Launching at 18 wasn't in Sam's cards. We were seeing clearly that adopting him at 17 would still give us plenty of time to build the trust and permanence of a family. He craved the steady rhythm of a loving home, the unwavering support that allowed him to blossom.

Today, at twenty-four, he stands tall—a son, a brother, an employee, all a testament to his resilience. We, his proudest cheerleaders, were privileged witnesses to his growth, with hearts overflowing with love and fierce pride in the man he became and the future that he is designing for himself. It wasn't the path we envisioned, but it is beautifully, uniquely ours.

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relationships with caregivers. However, even a child less than a year old may have experienced trauma that could affect their ability to form secure attachments as they develop. 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 undoubtedly 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 about how adopting a teen will affect their development.

A: Bringing a new child of any age into the family will likely disrupt 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 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 may have experienced many homes and many different families, the concept of a permanent family might seem foreign to them. After all, adult caregivers may have been inconsistent and constantly changing for many of these teens. For any child of any age, there is always a period of adjustment when placed in a new home.

However, the vast majority of teens in out-of-

home care are longing for a family that can provide a warm home base. Each teen is different; some teens will adjust and adapt quickly, and others may require time to transition and open up. While a teen may not choose 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. Many teens have a secure and loving base that begins with family to provide guidance 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 a secure footing from which they can expand and reach their potential. Perhaps you could provide a tween or teen with that sense of security and a steady place to launch into adulthood.

Just like in any adoption, choosing to adopt a tween or a teen is a life-changing decision, and you will need support. The Wisconsin Family Connections Center 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.



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Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Beneath The Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*, by Debbie Riley
- *Parenting at the Speed of Teens: Positive Tips on Everyday Issues*, by Peter Benson
- *Our Own: Adopting & Parenting the Older Child*, by Trish Maskew
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [Encouraging and Supporting Tweens and Teens in Care](#)
- Partners Newsletter: [Parenting Strategies for Teens and Tweens that Enhance Development](#)

Tip Sheets

- [Helping Teens in Care Transition to Adulthood](#)
- [Preparing Kids in Your Home for Fostering](#)
- [Fact or Fiction: Dispelling Some of the Common Myths About Adoption](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Strategies for Building Stronger Relationships With Your Teen](#)
- [Understanding Tweens and Teens in Adoption](#)

Additional Resources

- [Removed Part 1](#) (Short Film)
- [Removed Part 2](#) (Short Film)
- [Removed Part 3](#) (Short Film)
- [Adopting a Teenager](#)
- [Teens Need Families](#)
- [What should I know about adopting teens?](#)