



Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption
A national evaluation of *Wendy's Wonderful Kids*
Prepared by Child Trends

Fact sheet

The case for adoption

- For the 107,000ⁱ children who are available for adoption in the U.S. foster care system, there are two very different paths — be adopted by a permanent family or age out (leave the foster care system by age 21 or younger) without the care and support of a permanent, loving family.
- Thousands of children enter foster care through no fault of their own — as victims of abuse, neglect or abandonment — and are subsequently permanently removed from their homes because their birth families are unable or unwilling to provide safe environments for them.
- Despite policy advancements for children in the child welfare system, the number of older youth aging out of foster care continues to rise. In 1998, approximately 17,300 youth emancipated from care; and last year, nearly 28,000 youth in foster care aged out, leaving them without families of their own. These youth experience staggeringly higher rates of incarceration, homelessness, unintended pregnancy and truncated educations.ⁱⁱ
- In addition to giving a child a permanent, supportive and loving family, we know investments in foster care adoption save money. Multiple research studies have found that adoption represents a cost savings to taxpayers, with one indicating that each dollar spent on the adoption of a child from U.S. foster care yields three dollars in benefits to society.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA), through its signature *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* (WWK) program, has worked to increase the number of adoptions from foster care by implementing child-focused recruitment, resulting in more than 2,500 children finding permanent homes since 2004.
- This philanthropic commitment between Wendy's, its customers, and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption funds adoption recruiters in 122 sites in all 50* states, the District of Columbia and four provinces in Canada.

*At time of evaluation.

Study finds Wendy's Wonderful Kids has positive impact on adoption from foster care

- Given the number of youth aging out of care, rigorous evaluation of adoption recruitment programs should be standard practice — yet until now, none have been evaluated using methods that yield rigorous evidence that they work differently than the status quo. As a result, the Foundation commissioned a five-year evaluation of *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* to identify whether the program's model increases adoptions and to what extent. The **research showed that children in foster care served by *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* are 1.7 times more likely to be adopted than those not served by WWK.**
- The impact of WWK's child-focused recruitment model is greatest among children who are older or those who have mental health disorders.
 - For older children, the impact of the WWK model increases with age:
 - For children referred to WWK at age 8, the likelihood of adoption was **one-and-one-half times higher**;
 - For children referred at age 11, the likelihood was **two times higher**; and
 - For children referred at age 15, the likelihood of adoption was **three times higher**.
- Children with mental health disorders who are served by WWK are **three times more likely to be adopted than those not served by WWK.**
- This finding is critically important for the nearly 28,000 children who age out of foster care each year. If implemented more broadly, *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* could substantially increase the number of children adopted among those most at risk for aging out of foster care. For example, if every child lacking a permanency goal was currently served by WWK, up to 18,000 youth might be prevented from aging out of foster care.
- This finding upends the belief that some children are “unadoptable.” In fact, with more focus on evidence-based innovative strategies like WWK, rather than a reliance on traditional services, there is hope for every child in foster care.

Magnitude/Scope of research

The *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* evaluation is an unprecedented five-year study conducted by Child Trends on child-focused recruitment efforts in the U.S. foster care system.

- This experimental evaluation represents the most rigorous empirical study of child-focused adoption recruitment practices to date, providing much-needed information about practices and policies that improve the likelihood of permanent adoption for children in foster care — especially children who traditionally have had the least success.
- Because of this research, the adoption and foster care community now knows more than ever before about what works, and can use this knowledge to increase the number of adoptions, finding more children safe, loving, permanent families.
- Overall, 26 WWK grantee agencies in 23 states enrolled children in the random assignment evaluation. Between August 2006 and January 2010, 1,393 children were randomly assigned

either to the treatment or control group. Ultimately, 21 grantee agencies, based in geographically diverse locations, with programs from 18 states were represented.

How and why it works

The WWK program model is unique in its child-focused recruitment efforts, particularly in terms of two of its key components — relationship building with the child and diligent search for the right adoptive family.

- The WWK structure is unique: DTFA, with money raised through Wendy’s restaurants and other sources, issues grants to local adoption organizations who hire adoption professionals who dedicate 100 percent of their time to finding adoptive families for children in their communities waiting to be adopted — through developing an individualized plan to find a permanent family for a particular child based on the child’s background and specific needs. This includes building close one-on-one relationships with the child to determine the child’s strengths, challenges, desires and preparedness for adoption.
- Because WWK recruiters carry a small caseload — actively serving 12-15 children at a time — they can focus exclusively on aggressive recruitment of the right family for each child they serve.
- In the absence of WWK, services as usual frequently meant that child welfare professionals were only given a summary of the child’s history upon initial referral, may have contacted the child solely for recruitment activities, used records and history to get a picture of the child’s case record and did not engage in assessment and adoption preparation activities.

For more information on the research, please visit davethomasfoundation.org/research. For more information on the Foundation, visit davethomasfoundation.org, or call 1-800-ASK-DTFA.

ⁱU.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report18.htm
Preliminary Estimates for FY 2010 as of June 2011 (18).

ⁱⁱ Hall, Chapin. “*Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth.*” University of Chicago, 2010.

Wertheimer, Richard. (2002). Youth who age out of foster care: Troubled lives, troubling prospects. *Child Trends Research Brief* #2002-59. Retrieved from http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2002_12_01_RB_FosterCare.pdf September 15, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Eschelbach Hansen, “*The Value of Adoption,*” *American University Department of Economics Working Paper Series No. 2006-15*; Hansen, Mary, and Bradley A. Hansen. (2006).

Barth, Richard P. Kwon Lee Chung, Judith Wildfire, and Shenyang Guo. (2006). A comparison of the governmental costs of long-term foster care and adoption. *Social Service Review*, 80(1):127-158; The economics of adoption of children from foster care. *Child Welfare: Journal of Policy, Practice, and Program*, 85(3): 559-583; Zill, Nicholas. (2011).

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