

CPS Workers Help Turn Strangers Into Families

By Margaret Nicklas

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There are more than 4,000 children in foster care in Texas who will not be going back to their birth parents, and whose foster families will not adopt them.

Child Protective Services employees like Jillian Bonacquisti know what it takes to help these kids be adopted by safe and loving families they have not met.

That means matching the needs of the kids in care with the preferences and abilities of families willing to adopt.

"We're generally recruiting families for school-aged children and large sibling groups," Bonacquisti said.

Infants and very young children are often adopted by relatives or their foster families.

Bonacquisti is an adoption program specialist. In her eight plus years with the agency, she has been an investigator, an adoption preparation worker and a foster/adoption home development supervisor and has seen the process from many angles.

The first step for anyone who is interested in adoption is to attend one of the [informational meetings](#) CPS provides in your area, Bonacquisti said.

Understanding what is involved, as well as one's own motivation for wanting to adopt, are key first steps. And it's important to learn more about the specific challenges some children may present.

"A lot of our kids do things that other kids do. You know, it's like they don't want to do their homework...but there are certain differences, too, only because they've experienced trauma at such an early stage in their life," Bonacquisti said. It's also not unusual for children who have been abused, neglected or abandoned to have developmental delays, she added.

Prospective adoptive parents receive training to help them decide if adoption is right for them, and to know what to expect. Training typically covers a range of topics, including first aid, how to deal with a child's loss and grief, discipline and behavior difficulties, and the effects of neglect and abuse.

Training also covers what to expect in working with CPS throughout the adoption process. The entire process is not quick, typically taking 12-18 months and sometimes much longer, Bonacquisti said. But families do not have to have prior parenting experience to adopt and case managers provide support throughout the process.

During the training period, a case manager will come out to see your home, just to make sure that your home looks safe for a child "to the naked eye," Bonacquisti said. They will make sure the home is clean, and check for things like smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, and pool covers or gates, she said.

"You will know everything you would probably ever want to know about a family from a home study," Bonacquisti said.

While the process might seem daunting, Bonacquisti stressed that no one expects the family to be “perfect.”

“The majority of people can be good parents,” she said, and, in fact, a family that appears “too perfect” might throw up a red flag.

“We like to see adoptive parents who have been through things and have been able to come to terms with them and cope with them and move past them,” Bonacquisti said.

Families also don’t have to be wealthy to adopt. As long as the family can show that it is financially stable enough to bring an additional child into their home and care for that child, they won’t be disqualified on the basis of income, Bonacquisti said. And financial [help](#) with certain costs of caring for that child is available to most families.

Interested families can see profiles of children who are waiting to be adopted at the [Texas Adoption Resource Exchange](#). Bonacquisti encourages those considering adoption to use the exchange to become familiar with the children who are available. In addition to being older or part of a sibling group, many available children have special needs, such as medical or developmental disabilities. Many are African-American or Latino. Interracial or cross cultural adoptions are definitely an option, Bonacquisti said, and families who go this route receive additional training and support in helping adopted children maintain their racial or ethnic identity.