

*AdoptOHIO*

# **Focus Group Results on Ohio Adoption Photo Listing Marketing Products**

**Prepared for  
The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services  
Office for Children and Families  
Adoption and Kinship Section**

**By  
Steven R. Howe and Associates, LLC  
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This OAPL focus group report is being submitted to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) as a product of the evaluation of the *Adopt*Ohio program being conducted by Steven R. Howe and Associates, LLC. The primary author of this report was Erinn Green. For further information, please contact

Steven R. Howe and Associates, LLC  
1043 Stream Ridge Lane  
Cincinnati, OH 45255  
(513) 253-8718  
[howe@srhassociates.com](mailto:howe@srhassociates.com)  
[www.srhassociates.com](http://www.srhassociates.com)

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Adoption Information Sources</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>OAPL Children’s Book</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Initial Reactions</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Children’s Written Descriptions</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Children With Potential Matches</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Features Books</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Content</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Current Features Books Recommendations</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>New Publication Recommendations</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>OAPL Website</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Exposure</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Content</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Children With Potential Matches</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Review of Other State Adoption Websites</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Review of AdoptUS Kids Website</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Renaming of the OAPL Website</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Additional Recommendations</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Waiting Family Website</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Feedback From Adoption Professionals</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Discontinuation of Children’s and Family Books</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Features Books</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>OAPL Website</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>New Introduction Publication</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Overall Recommendations</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>23</b>

## **Executive Summary**

Six focus groups regarding the Ohio Adoption Photo Listing (OAPL) marketing materials were held with sixty-two adoptive parents, foster parents, and foster-to-adopt parents. The groups were conducted in February, March and April 2003 across the state of Ohio. The purpose of these focus groups was to collect information from current and prospective adoptive parents about the resources they have used and plan to use to search for children available for adoption. The groups focused on three current publications: The Children's Book, the Features Books and the OAPL Website. Upon completion of the focus groups with parents, a focus group and several depth interviews were conducted with adoption professionals in June of 2003. These were held in order to get the professionals' opinions about the ideas and suggestions raised in the parent focus groups.

Parents and professionals both felt that the Children's Book was not used enough to justify the cost and that the information in the book tended to be outdated. They found the size of the book to be unwieldy. The one thing that both parents and professionals thought would be lost by not publishing the Children's Book was the visual representation of how many older children are waiting to be adopted. Both parents and professionals supported the decision to discontinue the Children's Book.

Very few parents were familiar with the Features Books. They enjoyed the in-depth descriptions and flattering pictures. Parents thought this would be a great resource to review with their caseworkers. Professionals wanted evidence that the Feature Book publication was successfully finding families for the children listed in it before the decision was made to expand it. They thought that flyers that are created for individual children tend to be more effective in child-specific recruitment. Neither group felt the Features Book was appropriate to be expanded for wider distribution as a publication that introduces parents to the adoption process.

Parents wanted to see the addition of a smaller publication with more general information about adoption. They thought it could include information on how to get started with an adoption, and could spark initial interest in adoption. They wanted it to include success stories of families who have adopted. Parents also wanted the children featured in the publication to be representative children only, not children actually available for adoption. Professionals also supported the notion of this new publication.

Parents and professionals both praised the OAPL website as being the most useful resource for finding specific children. Both groups did, however, want to see more general information contained on the website. This would include things such as next steps, an overview of the adoption process and a glossary of commonly used terms. They wanted the website to be updated more frequently and for additional search options to be added. Parents wanted to register at the website in order to save their profile and home study information as well as information on children they were interested in adopting.

## **Introduction**

Six focus groups regarding the Ohio Adoption Photo Listing (OAPL) marketing materials were held with sixty-two adoptive parents, foster parents, and foster-to-adopt parents. The groups were conducted in February, March and April 2003 across the state of Ohio. The purpose of these focus groups was to collect information from current and prospective adoptive parents about the resources they have used and plan to use to search for children available for adoption. The focus groups presented parents with various resources currently in use (the OAPL Children's Books, Features Books and OAPL Website), asked for specific feedback on the materials, and generated ideas about how each could be improved.

Two groups were conducted in Columbus, with one each conducted in Dayton and Cincinnati. The parents in these groups were from the local area and were recruited via telephone. The other two groups were also held in Columbus during a statewide conference for treatment foster parents. The parents in these groups were from areas across the state and were recruited at the conference.

The largest group of participants (N= 24, 39%) were adoptive parents who also had foster children in their home. Twenty (32%) were foster parents interested in adopting one of their foster children. Thirteen parents (21%) were adoptive parents who had never been foster parents. Five parents (8%) reported that they were only interested in continuing to be foster parents, and were not considering adoption at that time.

Forty-six females (74%) participated in these focus groups, along with 16 males (26%). The majority of focus group participants (77%) were white, and the remaining 23% were African American.

This report is broken down into six main sections. The first section lists parents' answers to a general warm-up question about where they would or did go to find children to adopt. The second section is devoted to responses about the OAPL Children's Book, and the third section to the OAPL Features Book. The fourth section reports participant comments on the OAPL website, and the fifth section reviews parents' reactions to the possibility of incorporating waiting parents into a website rather than a printed book. The final section reports feedback gained from adoption professionals about the OAPL marketing tools.

## **Adoption Information Sources**

Participants were first asked to compile a list of resources they would use to get information about adoption and find children available for adoption. Many of the participants said that when people are new to the system, it is hard to know where to get started. Participants did

list many diverse information sources, some from personal experience and others that they had only heard about:

- Adoption or foster agencies
- Websites like AdoptUS Kids or OAPL
- AdoptOHIO books
- Relatives
- Adoption fairs
- Crisis or pregnancy centers
- TV shows or advertisements
- Community resources (i.e. libraries)
- Talking to foster parents
- Churches
- Attorneys
- OB-GYN offices
- Yellow pages
- Social service agencies (Jewish Federation, Catholic Social Services, etc.)
- Becoming a foster parent
- Schools
- Internet in general
- Radio programs
- Adoption events
- Children's Book
- Support Group Material

## **OAPL Children's Book**

In the focus groups that discussed the OAPL Children's Book, each parent was provided with an OAPL book for the next portion of the focus group. In none of the groups did even half of the participants report looking through the book before. Several questions were posed about the book after the participants had a short time to look through the book.

### **INITIAL REACTIONS**

The parents were asked to leaf through the book and state their initial reactions to the book in general. The most common comment was that parents were overwhelmed with the sheer size of the book. They stated that it was unwieldy and difficult to look through. Others mentioned that the size was a good statement about the number of children who need

homes in the state of Ohio, which could inspire more people to adopt. Parents liked that the sections were separated into ages and sibling groups because they thought it sheds light on how most of the children waiting to be adopted are older. Some participants also mentioned that it is immediately evident what a racial disparity there is in waiting children—most of the children pictured are African American.

Parents also had a lot to say about the pages that list the children in the book. They noticed that a lot of information about children was missing—many children had no picture and only a generic description. Parents also felt that many of the pictures were unbecoming of the children; often, the pictures resembled mug shots. Also, parents noticed that many of the pictures were several years outdated, and therefore unrepresentative of the child's actual age.

### **CHILDREN'S WRITTEN DESCRIPTIONS**

Parents paid close attention to the descriptions written about the children. Several parents actually found children in the book that they knew through fostering or adoption. These parents felt as if the descriptions were often inaccurate and unflattering. Parents felt the descriptions represented a clear disconnect in the system—whoever wrote the description obviously did not know the child well. The foster parents in the group felt they should be asked their input on the child's description since they often know the child the best.

Parents also felt the descriptions did not always accurately portray the child's challenges. They felt that there was some dishonesty and holding back of information in the descriptions. Instead of being all positive (or vague), parents wanted to know what the child's potential challenges may be so that they can decide if it is something they would be able to handle. Parents understood that sometimes this information is confidential and that it should not be on the Internet for everyone to see, but thought there could be a coding system of some sort where those serious about adopting could determine the severity of the child's special needs.

Several members of one group who had experience using the children's book mentioned how frustrating it was to get information about the children using the phone number listed at the bottom of each description. Often, the number would be wrong because of turnover or internal change. To solve this problem, parents suggested having a toll-free phone number for each county that would then transfer you to the correct extension based on the child that you are interested in. Parents often were not sure if they did not hear back about a particular child because the child was unavailable or because their message never reached the correct person.

Parents in one group felt the descriptions should be standardized and should always include certain crucial information. Parents wanted to see the following sections within each child's description:

- Overall health
- Behavior challenges (and severity)
- Strengths
- Likes and dislikes
- School information
- Financial assistance possibilities (adoption expenses, subsidies, etc.)

### **CHILDREN WITH POTENTIAL MATCHES**

Overall, parents liked the idea that children who were already matched were in a separate section of the book. They believed that this makes it easier for prospective parents to see the availability of the child without having to read the content of each description. Participants thought this would simplify the process of searching for a child and cut down on the time a parent would spend looking through the book. They also felt that not listing children who were likely to be adopted by another family would cut down on the discouragement families face when almost every child they are interested in turns out to be unavailable. One participant, who was also an adoption professional in a large county, said that separating these children would also help caseworkers who are often overwhelmed with calls for more sought after children who are already placed.

Several parents agreed with one parent who mentioned a potential drawback to this practice. This parent felt that, in many cases, a child's adoption could be disrupted. If the child were listed in the book, their caseworker would probably already have several other interested parents with approved home studies waiting to adopt the child. If the child had not been listed, the process of finding another family for the child would be delayed.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Parents had many ideas on how the children's book could be improved. First, they suggested several ways it could be better organized. Parents wanted to see each section organized chronologically by birth date rather than having all ages within a group mixed together. One participant also mentioned that it would be helpful to organize the book by county as well. Another parent suggested that each age group should have a different book, which would make each book smaller and easier to work with.

Parents also mentioned several improvements for the sibling section. They noted that the sibling description often only lists the age of one sibling. Parents reported wanting to see the ages of all siblings as well as separate descriptions of each sibling. This would enable them to learn more about the children as individuals.

Participants thought the pictures of the children could be more flattering. They suggested having color pictures instead of black and white. They felt this would make the pictures more attractive. They also suggested not just showing the child's head, but doing a 1/2 view shot of the child. Parents felt that the children's faces were often distorted because the camera was too close when just taking headshots.

Parents wanted to see more general resources for potential adoptive parents in the book (i.e. more than the pictures and descriptions of children). This could include steps in the adoption process, questions and answers, available resources, etc. Parents wanted this section to include an accurate portrayal of the challenges involved in being adoptive parents.

Parents also asked for the book to be more up-to-date. This includes not only updating each child's picture and description in a timely manner, but also their status. They perceived that agencies did not update submissions to the book regularly. Often, parents found that by the time children are published in the book, they have already been placed. Parents found this a very frustrating aspect of using the book.

Two focus groups focusing on the Children's Book were conducted after the decision to discontinue the Children's Book had been made. In these groups, participants were asked what they thought about the loss of this resource. The general reaction was positive, with most participants saying that it was a resource that was not used or useful enough to justify the cost. Participants felt that the OAPL website was a much more efficient and useful way to search for waiting children and they hoped that the resources, both money and time, that had been put into the Children's Book would instead be used to improve and update the website. Overall, parents did not see the ending of the Children's Book as a loss.

## **OAPL Features Books**

In the groups that discussed the OAPL Features Books, each participant was given several Features Books to look through. Of the 45 participants in focus groups that covered the OAPL Features Books, only five participants had ever seen one of the books before. Several questions were posed to the group about the features book.

### **CONTENT**

The parents were very interested in the features books. Participants spent a lot of time initially just looking through the book because most had never seen one before. The participants seemed to enjoy looking through the books. Parents especially liked how personal the descriptions and photos were. Participants thought that most prospective adoptive parents would be much more likely to adopt a child after reading about them in the Features Book than the Children's Book. They felt that the magazine-like format was eye-

catching and much easier to peruse. They found it much more interesting than the larger Children's Book. Participants felt that they really got to know more about the children listed in the Features Book through the detailed narratives, and that the children had the opportunity to make more of a statement about who they were and what they were looking for in an adoptive family. They also liked that the book was representative of the children who are waiting to be adopted and included mostly older children with special needs.

Participants also liked the more general information in the book. The question and answer section at the beginning of each book, as well as the information about the subsidies and adoption assistance that are available for adoption in general were praised as being right on the mark. Parents noticed the success story listed at the beginning of the book, and felt that it was a helpful and representative depiction.

Some parents questioned the benefits of the book given the cost required to produce it. Several participants expressed concern that it would get outdated quickly and there would be no way to ensure that everyone has a recent version. A few participants noted that there was no visible date to help with determining how recent the book was—they only found a date (which was printed very small on the back cover) after some searching. One participant held fast to his view that he disagreed with putting children's pictures where anyone can see them (books, web, etc.)

There were distinct schools of thought about how much background should be revealed in the children's profiles. Some praised the current positive spin and the fact that details about the child's current challenges were not put into the publication for everyone to see. They thought it was a good idea to focus on the child's good side and save the most difficult details for a later time, or the next step in the process. This group felt as if it was an invasion of the child's privacy and could be potentially damaging to have a more detailed description of the child's special needs floating around.

The other group called for more realistic portrayals of the children as a whole, both good and bad. They didn't like that the descriptions were "candy-coated" and felt as if they were purposefully being deceived. This group felt that by laying out the child's challenges from the very beginning, it would help to weed out unsuitable adoptive parents as well as alleviate any false expectations of the children. They feel that the potential adopters should know the child's challenging behaviors and family background from the first contact. One parent mentioned that including details of behavior issues (such as "anger problem" or "attitude") might actually pull on people's heartstrings and may encourage them to adopt.

When the final group was pressed harder on this seemingly irresolvable dichotomy of viewpoints, it began to sort itself out into a matter of where and when information disclosure is appropriate. No one disagreed that there should be full disclosure of the child's behavior and background when a family is serious about adopting a child. Parents felt it was wrong to hold back information and paint an unrealistically rosy picture of a child just to avoid scaring potential parents away. They also felt that full disclosure should take place through face-to-face discussions about the child as a whole, not just by reading a one-

dimensional description in a printed book. The description in the book should be designed to facilitate further conversation with someone who knows the child. The group's conclusion was expanding the Feature Book distribution so as to be the initial contact people have with the adoption system was not the best solution.

Both sides agreed on what one participant articulated as the difference between a marketing tool and a child recruitment tool. A marketing tool would be used to pique the interest of people and give them some information about the system as well as direct them where to go for more information. A child recruitment tool would be used to recruit families for specific children. Some felt that by expanding distribution of the Features Books, it would essentially be turning a recruitment tool into a marketing tool. Parents felt that this really doesn't fit the ultimate purpose. The groups thought what parents needed at their first contact with the system was very different than the information they needed when they began looking at specific children to join their families. A compromise was reached when the idea was raised of having a publication with a more general introduction to the system that only listed representative children. This would then entail moving the review of the Features Books, possibly with more well-balanced and realistic depictions of the children, to a more controlled location. Parents had many ideas for what would be helpful for this new informational marketing publication to contain. The details of that discussion can be found in the new publication recommendations section below.

### **CURRENT FEATURE BOOKS RECOMMENDATIONS**

Many parents felt the main negative about the book was that more children do not have the opportunity to be featured. To improve upon this, the parents called for it to include two to four more pages in each issue. Another possibility is to feature two children per page rather than just one.

Another suggestion was to increase the visibility and use of the book. The fact that so few parents had any experience with the book reveals that it is not being used as much as it could be to help waiting parents find children to adopt. Parents felt it could be a great resource to review with their caseworker once a month and could stimulate conversation about what kind of child they would like to have join their family. With better visibility and use within agencies, parents were confident that more waiting children in Ohio would find families.

The groups felt because this was a child specific recruitment tool, its distribution should be limited so as to protect the confidentiality of the children pictured. By using it as a tool to be used later in the process, it would only be reviewed with parents with a real interest in adoption. This would allow for the descriptions to be more detailed and honest. This would also ensure more control on updating the copies. One group came up with the suggestion that waiting parents could sign up on a list at their agency to be called when a new Features Book arrives. They could then make an appointment to review it with their caseworker. The group suggested that volunteers could be utilized to make these calls so as to not overwhelm caseworkers.

Parents called for even more general information to be included in the Features Books. One parent mentioned a clear outline of the steps to adoption for those who are unfamiliar with the process would be helpful to add.

When asked to brainstorm ideas for future themes of the features book, parents came up with several ideas:

- County
- Geographic area (regional)
- Age
- Sibling groups (separated by 2-3 siblings and 4 and more siblings)
- Gender
- Special needs
- Race

#### **NEW PUBLICATION RECOMMENDATIONS**

The new publication that was called for in the final focus group would be a widely distributed general brochure about the adoption process. Parents saw this as an overview document that would spark initial interest in adoption. Participants saw this as being smaller than the current features book, in an easy to read format. They thought of many things that could be included in this publication. They include:

- An overview of the adoption process
- An overview of the adoption system
- Questions and answers
- Adoption issues—legal and otherwise
- Step by step instructions on how to adopt
- Information on foster to adopt
- Stories about adoptive parents and families created through adoption
- Parent and child success stories
- Statistics about the children waiting for adoption without showing specific children
- Where to go for more information:
  - OAPL Website
  - County agency
  - Ohio Adoption Guide
  - Features Books
- Information on available resources
  - Financial
  - Counseling
  - Support Groups

Parents brainstormed places these introductory pamphlets could be placed. The ideas generated were:

- Adoption and foster care support groups
- Churches
- Libraries
- Schools
- Doctors Offices
- PTA Meetings
- Post Office
- Car Repair shop
- Hospitals
- Any place you wait

## **OAPL Website**

Two focus groups were convened at an electronic state training center in Columbus in order to get feedback on the state's current OAPL website of waiting children. Each participant had their own computer with which to browse the OAPL website. Sixteen parents participated in these two focus groups. Parents were invited to participate via phone, and were chosen by selecting a representative mix of races and adoption status from a list generated from FACSIS. Of the sixteen, ten were parents who had only adopted and never fostered. Two of these participants had adopted internationally, and the other eight adopted domestically. Five of the participants were both adoptive and foster parents. The final participant was only interested in continuing to be a foster parent, not in adoption. A few comments about the website from the groups that focused on the Children's and Features Books are included in this section, but the majority of the information comes from the two groups devoted to feedback about the website.

## **EXPOSURE**

The two groups contained participants with a wide range of experience in using the OAPL website. Most had at least some experience previously using the site. Some had used the site extensively and had actually adopted children they found on the web, while a few parents had very limited computer skills and had never viewed the site before.

## **CONTENT**

Parents were given time to look through the website. They were asked for their reactions, both positive and negative, to the website content. They were asked to think about what they would like to see the website contain and what features would make it easier to use.

Parents liked the convenience and usability of the website. They thought it was a good resource to search for waiting children, and liked that it could be accessed from anywhere.

There were several features of the website that parents especially liked. They appreciated the front page of the photo listing, where several choices about potential children could be made. The dropdown choices that parents found especially helpful were those for age range selection (youngest to oldest) and choices about how many siblings you would be able to adopt. One parent also mentioned it being helpful that the default was that all races were checked and thought it might encourage families to think about including children from other cultures in their search. Parents also liked the adoption events calendar and other general information found on the main AdoptOHIO menu page.

Parents also found several things in the content they thought could be improved. They called for there to be more information overall, including more details on adoption and demographics on waiting children. Parents also thought there could be a section with statistics on prospective adoptive parents (e.g. 65% of children are adopted by their foster parents). Participants wanted the website to be updated on a more regular basis. This would include updating the children's photographs and descriptions at least yearly as well as keeping the adoption events calendar and related information up-to-date. Parents who had used the website fairly extensively mentioned it was frustrating that the inquiry form information cannot be saved. In order to submit inquiries on several children, all information needs to be retyped each time. One final comment on the website was about the URL address itself. Some parents mentioned that it is too long and confusing, and therefore it takes a long time to actually find the site.

## **CHILDREN WITH POTENTIAL MATCHES**

For the most part, parents liked the idea that children for whom a family had already been identified could be left out of a search. In fact, several parents in the focus groups had been using the OAPL website for several years, and remembered the website before hearts were put by children for whom a potential match had been found. They cited this addition as being extremely helpful when looking for children to adopt. However, participants had several suggestions on how to make this aspect of the website even better. Several parents commented that the default choice for excluding children for whom a match has been identified should be "yes" so that they are not listed. Another made the suggestions that even if you do choose to view those children, they should be listed after children without a heart, or possibly even on another page. This, he believed, would help parents focus on the children who were actually available for adoption. Other parents felt that just making it

more difficult to see the children with potential placements wasn't enough, that the children should not be able to be viewed at all. Parents expressed frustration at being able to "see what you can't have," and said they often still sent inquiries on children with hearts "just in case." This led to added frustration when they would never hear back about a child.

## **REVIEW OF OTHER STATE ADOPTION WEBSITES**

For the next segment of the focus group, each participant was given an index card listing a state and their website address for a photo listing of the state's children waiting to be adopted. Parents reviewed thirteen websites from other states. Those included were: Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin. These sites were chosen to represent a range of styles and features. Parents were asked what they liked and disliked about the other state sites to help inform potential changes to the Ohio site. All website addresses are listed in the Appendix of this report.

Participants found many things that they liked and hoped Ohio could incorporate from other state websites:

- On the Wisconsin site, there was a page that had definitions of the different disorders that children had and included a hyperlink to the definition in the description of the child. Wisconsin also appeared to have an affiliation with a television station that had taken and posted videos of featured children.
- Maine and North Carolina were said to both have a good system of classifying the child's special needs. On the front search page, you are able to choose what level of various characteristics (i.e. physical disability, emotional disability) you could adopt. The choices range from none to severe. The descriptions of individual children then tell you more specifically about each child as well as how long they have been in the system.
- The New Jersey site was highly praised for having several helpful aspects. These include having thumbnail pictures of each of the children listed on the page immediately after the search page, rather than just names, that you can then click on to get more information. The website was said to be fast, responsive and detailed. It also had hyperlinks with definitions of the children's needs and disorders. Finally, it has a "new kids" section that parents thought would be extremely helpful for those who visit the website often looking for children.
- Participants praised the Illinois website for being colorful and having a comprehensive resource section for adoptive parents.

- On the Tennessee site, like New Jersey, you see the child's picture on the listing page rather than just the names.
- Parents liked the name of the Kentucky site, Special Needs Adoption Program (SNAP). They feel this is a good indication right away of the type of children available for adoption. The website also has a section that explains special needs adoption. Participants also liked that the write-ups about the children include the child's strengths and weaknesses, as well as quotes and input from the child's foster family. The Kentucky site also has a link for private adoption services so that parents know whom to contact if they are interested in working with a private agency.
- Both Indiana and Pennsylvania were commended for having good sections of frequently asked questions as well as lists of related sites. Participants liked that the Arkansas site features a "child of the month."
- The North Carolina page has a link to Adopt US Kids that parents found helpful.

Participants also found things on other state websites that they would not like to see incorporated into the Ohio site. The Illinois site has no search options in terms of age or gender, which parents found made it difficult to use. One participant found the Tennessee site to be too wordy and therefore somewhat overwhelming. Finally, the participant looking at the Indiana website found the first page to be rather generic and determined that the site did not contain as much information as was needed.

## **REVIEW OF ADOPT US KIDS WEBSITE**

Participants all reviewed the Adopt US Kids website and made comments about aspects of the website they would either like or not like to be incorporated into the OAPL website.

Parents found several novel features they thought the Ohio website could incorporate. The Adopt US Kids website has a "how to" section that explains how to use the website. You can also become a member of the website, which entails entering your information and setting up a user name and password. This registration then allows you to search for specific preferences, save preferences of children you are interested in, inquire about a specific child and record notes about inquiries you have made. This was touted as a great resource for families as well as a timesaver because you only have to input your information once. Parents liked the way that you could search on this website because you can search by state and by range of disability. Parents liked the pictures of the children on the first page and that the children's descriptions included hyperlinks for disorders and other useful definitions. Finally, parents liked that the descriptions noted if the child had been in multiple placements.

There were also features that parents did not endorse on the national website. One parent said he didn't like the detailed search "checklist" because it made him feel like he was selecting options for a car. Another participant commented that she thought all ethnicities should be checked as the default rather than being unchecked. Parents didn't like that the search criteria could not be altered when you go back. Finally, parents sensed that the descriptions were outdated and pictures often showed the child as being much younger than they actually were. Parents thought both the pictures and descriptions should be updated much more regularly.

### **RENAMING OF THE OAPL WEBSITE**

Parents were asked their ideas for a new name for the OAPL website. No specific suggestions were made, but parents thought it should be catchy and easy to remember. They also thought it should be short, with the web address itself the same as the name. Some participants reported having trouble accessing the current website because of its long and unintuitive URL address.

### **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

Parents had many ideas about how to improve the web photo listing. Many suggestions can be found in the sections above on other state websites and the Adopt US Kids website, and will not be duplicated in this section. This section contains additional recommendations made that were not tied to specific things parents saw on other websites.

Parents wanted to see a lot of information added to the descriptions of children and to have the types of information be consistent across children. By having specific categories to include, such as strengths and challenges, the potential parents could learn more about the child. Instead of listing the child's age, participants wanted to see the child's birthday so that even if the description was not updated, it was still possible to figure out the child's current age. Also, in the listings of sibling groups, parents wanted to see the birth dates and ages of all of the children, not just the youngest one. Parents called for the written descriptions to be much more detailed. They wanted the health history of the child included. Parents suggested this information could possibly be coded in a way so as not to harm the child's privacy. Parents wanted more information on the child's behavior and emotional well being as well. They wanted access to additional background on the child's placements (number and kind) as well as to know about any failed adoptions. Parents also wanted to know how long the child had been listed on the website. Finally, participants thought it would be helpful for the descriptions to include feedback from the child's foster parents.

Several participants made the suggestion that in order to include additional information while protecting the child's privacy, there could be two sides to the website. One would

include general information about the child available to the general public and those in the beginning stages of the adoption process. Parents felt as if there could also be a hidden side that was password protected and would include more in-depth information that parents who were serious about adopting would be able to access. This detailed side could be made available only to caseworkers and serious potential adoptive families—maybe only those who have an approved home study. Parents thought this system would help the website be optimally useful to those parents genuinely searching for children while still protecting the child's need for privacy. Parents would like to see more detailed history and information on the child's behavior, medical history, placement history and special needs on this password protected side of the website.

Parents also called for the child's page to include a link to the caseworker's email along with their phone number. Another participant came up with the idea of having a map of Ohio on each child's page with the custodial county highlighted. He believed this would help to facilitate regional adoptions. Often parents reported not knowing where some of the smaller counties were located, even if they were only two or three counties away.

Parents also wanted to see additional sections added to the website. They thought it would be helpful to add a legal question and answer section for both new and experienced adoptive parents. Participants wanted to see a map of Ohio with all of the counties listed. Parents wanted the ability to register at the site and receive a username and password. They would like this option to allow them to save their personal search preferences, home study information and inquiry forms so that they could keep better track of their searches. Parents asked for there to be a "new kids" section for children who have recently been added to the site. Participants suggested that it would be helpful to have a page of links to other adoption photo listing websites such as the individual county sites and the Adopt US Kids site. The parents suggested adding thumbnail pictures along with the children's names on the search result page for easier and more personalized searches.

Parents wanted more detailed search options. They wanted to be able to then search for children from specific counties. Participants also wanted to be able to search by special needs categories such as medical needs, emotional needs, learning needs, etc. and have a range of the disabilities to choose from (from none to high).

Two other general suggestions were made. The first was for the children that are listed with hearts—identifying that a match has already been identified. One parent thought it would be nice to know how far along in the process the match was. She suggested having an "adoption timeline" at the bottom of the page that could be filled in when each stage was completed. Another general suggestion was made several times. Participants wanted the option to format the printout of a child's page so that it looks like a flyer or a page from the Children's Book rather than having so much computer information on it.

## **Waiting Family Website**

Parents were asked how they would feel about being listed on the website in a waiting families section. This website listing would replace the printed Family Book that is currently being published. Parents had mixed reactions to this idea.

One point of view was that a family website could be a great resource if it was used to match parent preferences with characteristics of the waiting children. These participants thought it could aid collaboration across counties and help to place children in more appropriate homes faster. Using the family website to let parents pick preferences would help some of the initial matching to be done via computer programming, leaving it out of the caseworkers' hands. Parents envisioned having a "mailbox" of waiting children that matched their preferences for them to follow up on. These parents felt comfortable having a picture, first names and a brief biography listed as long as identifying information such as last names, phone numbers and addresses were omitted.

The opposing viewpoint saw the website as a waste of state money. These participants did not feel it would actually be used to make matches. They felt that counties did not interact with each other to make matches, and thought this resource would probably not help to move them in that direction. Other parents felt strongly that they would not want to be identified and listed where everyone could see them. The participants in this group thought the money used to develop this should instead be used to make the children's site more usable.

## **Feedback From Adoption Professionals**

Upon completion of the focus groups with parents, a focus group and several depth interviews were conducted with adoption professionals in June of 2003 in order to get the professionals' opinions about the ideas and suggestions raised in the parent focus groups. The focus group was held at a regularly scheduled meeting of the Ohio Adoption Professionals Group. The discussion lasted approximately ninety minutes and involved 28 public and private adoption professionals from across the state. In addition, several in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with additional adoption professionals.

### **DISCONTINUATION OF CHILDREN'S AND FAMILY BOOKS**

Overall, professionals were pleased with the state's decision to discontinue publishing the Children's and Family Books. Many professionals said that the Children's Book should have been discontinued several years ago because the cost of publishing it outweighs the actual use that it gets. Professionals were frustrated with how unwieldy and outdated the books were. The group said parents seldom used the books to find children to adopt because of the vague descriptions and poor follow-up. They also said they spent a lot of unnecessary time updating the book when the update packets would arrive. Not one professional in the

focus group or interviews was disappointed with this decision, especially if the resources used to support the publication will instead be redirected to improving the website.

The decision to discontinue the Family Book was also praised. Professionals reported that they seldom, if ever, looked for families in the book because they felt that families who were seeking to adopt more severely challenged children would be utilized right away and not put in the book. Several professionals also said that their experience was that the descriptions of what the parents were looking for often were not realistic and therefore unhelpful.

The participants were asked what, if anything, will be lost by not continuing to publish these two books. Professionals, like the parents in the earlier focus groups, thought that the book is a strong visual representation of how many older children there are that need to be adopted as well as the short supply of younger children. They felt, however, that by retaining an old book, this point could still be made. One participant who worked in the system and also had adopted children said that her children tend to look through the book to see other children who are in the same situation as them and that seeing so many other children helps them feel more normal.

## **FEATURES BOOKS**

The professionals involved in the face-to-face group interview had varying experience with the Features Books. They had all seen and read a Features Book before, but only about half of the participants from public agencies (six people total) had actually listed a child in a Features Book. Those who had wanted to find out how many children in each book actually end up being adopted, and where the interest in adopting the child came from (i.e. did the adoption happen because the parent first saw the child listed in the Features Book?) Professionals, like parents, liked how much more personal the write-ups and pictures were, but wanted evidence that the publication was successfully finding families for the children listed in it before the decision was made to expand it. Overall, professionals did not endorse the expansion of the Features Books without first determining its effectiveness.

Professionals were asked how they utilize the current Features Books. Participants said they leave them out in their reception areas, take them to trainings, and try to distribute them to the community via support groups. When asked if mailing the books directly to waiting parents seemed like a good idea, professionals said no. They thought they were too expensive to be used in this way; parents who were interested could access the books through the agency they are working with, or that their individual caseworkers could be responsible for alerting them to any featured children who fit their preferences.

Many professionals said that the reason they do not use the Features Books more extensively is because the children listed are often far away or have such severe special needs that they are not appropriate for their waiting families. Most of the professionals said that individual flyers they make up on their waiting children are much more effective in finding families for children. They thought that providing money to individual counties to subsidize the cost of printing these flyers would be more useful than expanding the Feature Book publications.

They also thought the funding would be better used to improve the search capacity of the OAPL website.

## **OAPL WEBSITE**

The professionals who participated in both the focus group and the individual interviews praised the current OAPL website, saying that it is the most efficient way for parents and the professionals in the system to search for waiting children. However, they also had many ideas of how the website could be improved to make it even more helpful.

Professionals had many ideas about what the descriptions of the individual children should contain. Participants wanted to see the date of submission or revision date on each child's description so they could determine if it was a new listing. They also thought it would be helpful for parents if a disclaimer was put on each child's page that the information contained in the description is not always behavior specific and that the child's caseworker should be contacted for additional information. Professionals mentioned that the pictures on the website are not always representative of the children's actual ages and that there needs to be a system to remind workers to update the pictures every year or so. Finally, workers thought that older children should have a role in determining what their listing says.

The caseworkers also expressed some apprehension about the requirement that all children be listed on the OAPL website. They mentioned that often children are found on the website by their classmates and are often upset about the details listed about them in their descriptions. The participants felt that exemptions should be made to not list children who have a good reason for not being pictured (i.e. documented psychological damage from being pictured). They felt strongly that written descriptions of these children should still be included, just not a picture from which the child can be identified.

Participants also wanted more general information on the website. For instance, one caseworker suggested that there be more information on the overall adoption process for parents (i.e. what happens when an inquiry is made, how long it will be before they hear back, etc.) This would keep parents better informed on when to appropriately follow up on an inquiry. They also felt that there should be clear instructions on how to submit an inquiry, including the fact that their caseworker can call for more information as well. Some agencies expressed a preference for talking to other caseworkers over the parents themselves. They believe that they are more able to "cut to the chase" with another worker and decide more quickly if the child is right for the family. Professionals also wanted to see a demographics section on waiting children included on the website so that people realize the scarcity of young children in the system.

Professionals thought of several ideas to improve communication via the website. They thought that the listings should have the direct phone numbers of the caseworkers, not numbers to the general adoption operator. They also thought it would be helpful to email the caseworker directly rather than having to call or submit an inquiry. Finally, the

professionals thought that it would be helpful if any inquiries that a parent does make via the web were sent both to the child's caseworker as well as the parent's caseworker. By doing this, the parent's caseworker can be more aware of the types of children the family is looking for and also help to follow up on leads if necessary. The group made it clear that caseworkers with large caseloads would not be able to provide this kind of service, but wanted it to be automated so that those who were able could.

Professionals had strong opinions about the children listed on the website who already had potential matches. Adoption professionals felt that parents either should not be able to view children with hearts, or at least should not be able to make inquiries on children with hearts. Caseworkers reported getting upwards of 200 phone calls or inquiries on highly sought after children. This causes them to take inordinate amounts of time to respond to the parents, which is a waste of time and slows down the process of adoption for the child. If there are legal reasons for listing every child, workers thought that parents should not be able to make inquiries on those children who have a potential match, or that the inquiries should go into a holding database for use if the match does not go through. This, professionals thought, would alleviate much of the unnecessary work created by highly sought after children who already have a family ready to adopt them.

Professionals did not agree with parents that having a password protected side to the website was a good addition. Professionals thought that keeping up with passwords and letting parents have unrestricted access to information was not the best plan. What they did think would be helpful is for parents to have a more detailed checklist of preferences available on the front search page. This would include not only the current preferences of race, age and sibling group, but also preferences for emotional and physical challenges and learning disabilities. These preferences would then be filtered through a smaller version of the child checklist for all children that would be entered in their profiles, but could not be seen on the screen. The children who met the parent's criteria would be listed, and there would be no way to know why a specific child was not included, thus protecting the child's privacy. Professionals thought that this type of system would give parents a more realistic expectation of the number of children that fit in their preference constraints, and possibly encourage them to think about stretching what types of children they are interested in adopting. In order for this to be successful, parents would need the ability to update and change their preferences if they decided to look for children with different characteristics.

Professionals agreed with the parents' idea of creating a user profile on the website and being able to save their profile and home study information as well as keep a listing of information on children that they sent inquiries. The participants thought that this would make agencies more accountable for responding to parents. They also believed that it would make searches and matches much easier. If implementing the more advanced preference search outlined above, the parents' preferences could be remembered as well.

Professionals also wanted to be able to search by the child's OAPL number or name. Often, they reported having to spend a lot of time scrolling through long lists of children to find the

child they were looking for. This could be made easier by the addition of those two fields to the search page.

The interviewed participants came up with a few additional features they would like to see the website incorporate. The first is that it could have an automated response to be sent to the parents when they make an inquiry on an individual child. This could contain a tailored message about how and when home studies would be collected for that child, or any other pertinent information. This would save the caseworkers time in responding to individual messages. Professionals also thought that, by saving parents profiles, newly listed children that match parent's preferences could be sent to their "mailbox" or an alert could be displayed the next time they logged in. This would help them find children sooner that met their preferences. Finally, professionals wanted the ability to print out the pages into flyers rather than having all kinds of computer info on them. Then, they can print them out directly from the website and take them to recruitment events.

As in the parents' groups, there was not a consensus on the waiting family website. Some professionals thought it was a good idea to move the family listings to the web because they didn't want to lose the information about and pictures of potential families. Other professionals were not sure that listing waiting families would be useful. They felt that rather than listing parents on their own website, it would be more effective to put the resources into giving them more preference options on the website to search for children on their own.

## **NEW INTRODUCTION PUBLICATION**

Professionals liked the idea of having a more general publication on adoption they could distribute to parents when they were first thinking about adoption. They, like the parents, felt that this was a better strategy to increase interest in adoption than expanding the Features Books. They had several ideas for what would be helpful to include in this publication. The first was to include in-depth step-by-step instructions and information on adoption. This would go beyond the basic information (you can own or rent, have to be 21, etc.) and include information such as: what a home study is, what training hours are required, how matching works, etc. They felt strongly about having a big emphasis on success stories by profiling families that are making adoption work. They thought this would help potential families identify with current adoptive families. They felt strongly that only representative children should be listed in this brochure, as to protect children's privacy as well as keep the publication from becoming dated when a specific child finds a family.

## Overall Recommendations

Immediate, low cost recommendations:

- Discontinue the publication of the Children's and Family Books
- Determine effectiveness of the Features Books in getting children adopted
- OAPL Website:
  - Add Ohio county map
  - Add options to search by OAPL number or county
  - Include a submission and/or revision date on children's descriptions
  - Include caseworker email address
  - Add a "How-to" section
  - Do not allow inquiries to be made on children with an identified potential match

Intermediate term recommendations:

- Develop new Introduction Publication
- OAPL Website:
  - Allow parents to register at website and save submitted information
  - Format pages to print out like flyers
  - Add more general information to website (next steps, overview of process, glossary of terms)
  - Standardize written descriptions (provide workers with checklist of information to include in each description)
  - Update the descriptions and pictures more regularly
  - Add "new children" or "featured children" section to website
  - Have inquiries sent to both child's caseworker and parent's caseworker

Long-term recommendations:

- OAPL Website:
  - Develop advanced preference search options and filtering system
  - Develop automated response system to respond to inquiries
  - Develop waiting family website (if needed)

## Appendix

### OTHER WEBSITE ADDRESSES:

AdoptUS Kids:

[http://www.adoptuskids.org/servlet/page?\\_pageid=186&\\_dad=portal30&\\_schema=PORTAL30](http://www.adoptuskids.org/servlet/page?_pageid=186&_dad=portal30&_schema=PORTAL30)

Arkansas: <http://www.state.ar.us/dhs/adoption/adoption.html>

Florida:

[http://www.myflorida.com/cf\\_web/myflorida2/healthhuman/adoption/search/index.html](http://www.myflorida.com/cf_web/myflorida2/healthhuman/adoption/search/index.html)

Illinois: [http://www.state.il.us/dcfs/a\\_adoption\\_waiting.shtml](http://www.state.il.us/dcfs/a_adoption_waiting.shtml)

Indiana: <http://www.ai.org/fssa/adoption/>

Kentucky: <http://cfc.state.ky.us/cbs-snap/>

Maine: <http://www.adoptuskids.org/states/me/>

Nebraska: <http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/adp/adpxchan.htm>

New Jersey: <http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/adoption/adopt.html>

North Carolina: <http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/adopt/>

Pennsylvania: <http://www.adoptpakids.org/photoalbum.asp>

Tennessee: <http://www.state.tn.us/youth/adoption/index.htm>

Texas:

<http://www.tdprs.state.tx.us/Adoption and Foster Care/Children Waiting for Adoption/default.asp>

Wisconsin: <http://www.wiadopt.com/WisconsinKids.htm>