

Annual Report 2020



Stronger Together

Adopt4Life

**Ontario's Association for Kin, Customary Care,
Adoptive Parents and Caregivers**



Mission

Adopt4Life—Ontario’s Association for kin, customary care, and adoptive parents and caregivers, is a community of people with lived experience that strengthens and empowers parents and caregivers to achieve permanency for children so that they reach their full potential.

Vision

We believe that all adoptive parents and kin and customary caregivers have a right to advocacy, support and guidance.

Our Goals

Adopt4Life’s priorities and initiatives fall under three main areas:



Support

Our model is based on peer support, with individualized professional support, as the need arises.



Advocacy

We represent adoptive, kin, and customary care families’ voices, including outreach and awareness work with key stakeholders and decision makers.

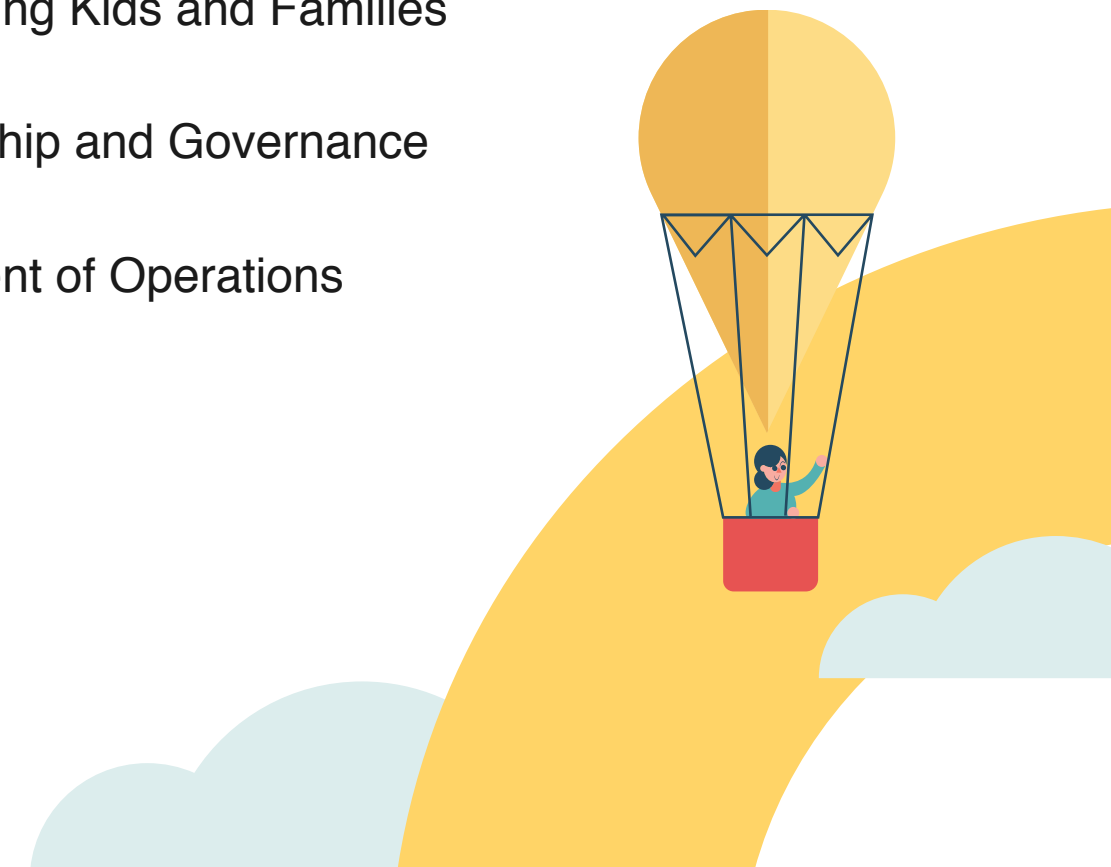


Guidance

Partnering with local, provincial, and national organizations and agencies, we share knowledge in order to link families with the best possible resources and services. We are stronger together!

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Where We Started

I remember sitting in the parking lot of a grocery store 6 years ago answering a call from a woman I'd never met before. It was Julie Despaties, now Executive Director and Founder of Adopt4Life. She told me she wanted to start an organization that would help parents who had adopted children with the struggles that often come with adoption. The Adoption Council of Ontario had given her my name, recommending to a number of us that we start such an organization.

The thought of creating Ontario's Adoptive Parents' Association was daunting to me—but not to Julie, despite her having recently adopted a trio of siblings. Her conversation with me that day, and subsequently with many other folks, got the ball rolling and now we have a wonderful source of support for adoptive, kin, and customary care families in Ontario.

I was Adopt4Life's first Chairperson and it was a privilege for me to serve in this role. Our efforts in the early years focused on getting the building blocks of the organization in place: a scalable program for providing peer-to-peer support for parents or caregivers, recruiting highly skilled employees—who are all personally touched by adoption—to run this program, and a hands-on, working Board of Directors that would oversee it and offer support for Adopt4Life families in many ways. In securing funding from what is now the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, we were able to move quickly in establishing a provincial Parent2Parent network that

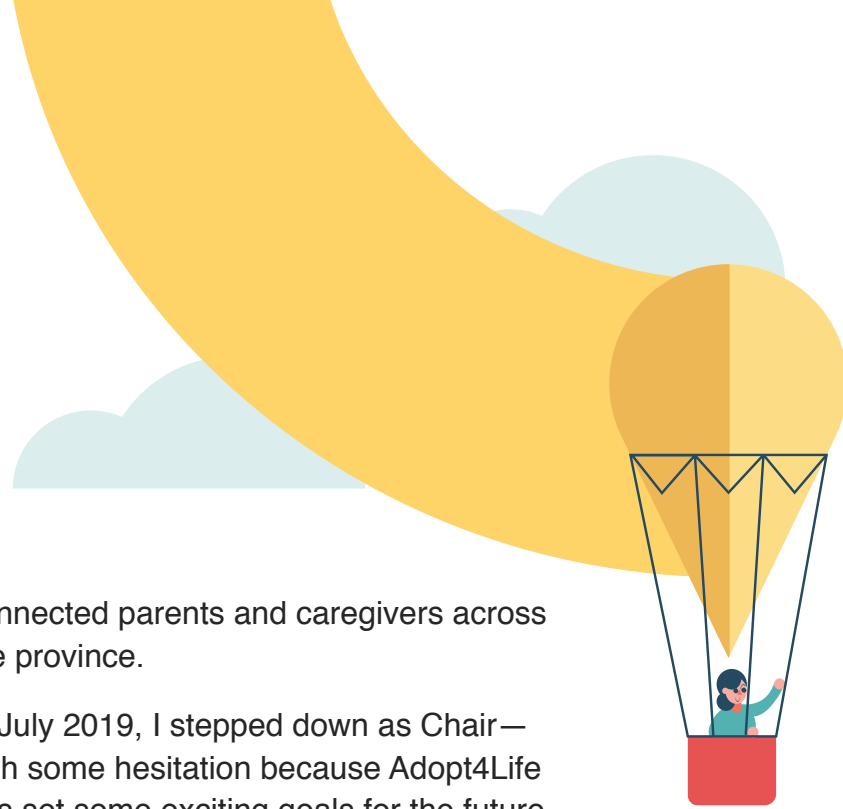
connected parents and caregivers across the province.

In July 2019, I stepped down as Chair—with some hesitation because Adopt4Life has set some exciting goals for the future. Among these are to raise funds to further enhance programming for parents and caregivers, to be more inclusive of all families that provide permanency for children, and to drive action and change that demonstrate anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and anti-ableist values. Adopt4Life is full of strong leaders and passionate people who will unquestionably get these jobs done.

I would wish them well, but that would mean I would be leaving them entirely, which I'm certainly not. Adopt4Life is too important for any of us to ignore—especially those concerned about child welfare and permanency in Ontario.

Carolyn McLeod,

Former Chair,
Board of Directors, Adopt4Life
Professor and Chair, Department
of Philosophy, Western University



And Looking Ahead

I am very excited to take over as Chair of Adopt4Life's Board of Directors. Carolyn's early work has done a tremendous job in establishing a solid foundation for how the Board leads in supporting Adopt4Life's strategic goals.

I first connected with Adopt4Life in its early days, as a parent struggling with challenges during adoption probation. I have been honored to serve as a Board member for the past few years, and as I have taken on the Chairperson's role, I remain passionate in ensuring our continued success and growth. More than ever before, we are using the experiences of the past 5 years to grow and support many more parents, families, and communities.

Over the past year, Adopt4Life took its next step in becoming a national charitable organization. This important step allows us to increase our fundraising programs, deepen financial sustainability, and expand our reach in providing front-line peer support for families at every stage in their parenting/caregiver journeys. These are all enabled by the implementation of a robust governance framework designed to ensure stability and lasting organizational success.

A key priority ahead is enabling Adopt4Life to provide greater, more equitable support to racialized and marginalized communities who too often experience discrimination when interacting with our child welfare system(s). Within our community, and those we seek to serve and support, are families who have experienced first-hand

the racism that exists within those systems. We aim to partner with BIPOC communities and leaders in learning, being meaningful allies, and designing culturally appropriate services and supports. We further recognize that the multi-generational injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, particularly with respect to child welfare, dictate a completely different approach to how we support Indigenous families. Adopt4Life's Board includes members with direct, first-person, lived experience as part of the Black, African Canadian, and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, who are bringing a deeper focus on ensuring we deliver equitable programs and services to our entire provincial community.

We have an exciting path ahead, and with the support of our parent and caregiver communities, volunteers, donors, staff, Board, and community leaders—we can ensure that all adoptive, customary care, and kinship families in Ontario are empowered to help their children realize the best possible outcomes.

Tedd Konya,
Chair, Board of Directors,
Adopt4Life

Supporting Parents To Improve Outcomes for Kids

When I saw my children’s adoption profile 8 years ago, I instantly felt a connection surpassing anything I had ever felt. The day they joined our family was one of the most beautiful of my life. However, the trauma that my children had experienced left them unable to trust securely in my love for them. My attempts to nurture and care were met with hostility and rejection. I didn’t know how we would heal together; I doubted my ability as a parent and my worthiness to be their mom. As I sought help, I heard from so many parents also feeling lost, alone, and struggling. Those struggles were the genesis of Adopt4Life.

This year, Adopt4Life proudly celebrated our 6th anniversary. As I consider all that we’ve achieved so far, I remain certain we are #StrongerTogether.

Our Parent2Parent Support Network connects thousands of parents/caregivers in a community with shared lived experiences, under the belief that no one should ever walk their journey alone.

Every day across our peer communities, parents/caregivers share their struggles, challenges, and celebrations. Navigating their children’s needs arising from developmental trauma, disrupted attachments, mental health, medical/neurodevelopmental

conditions, and everyday parenting, we see parents/caregivers building resilience and robust capabilities that result in stronger families.

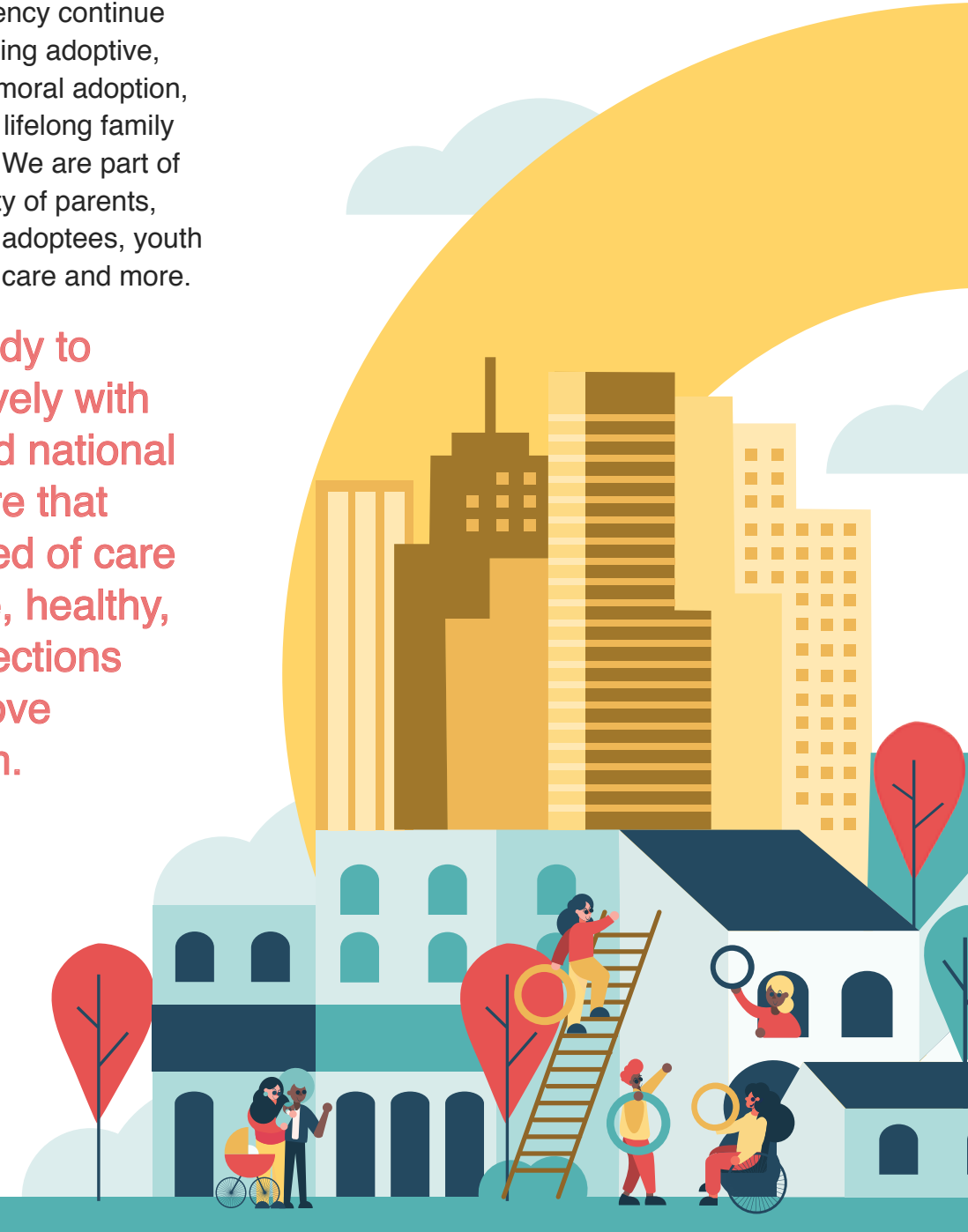
A special thank you to Ontario’s Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) for their unwavering support of the Parent2Parent Support Network. We recognize MCCSS’ support and through their ongoing investment, Adopt4Life delivers peer support and community engagement at no cost to families. With their support, we have stopped many youth from returning to care by preventing placement disruptions or adoption breakdowns.

Our opportunity to help create improved outcomes for vulnerable youth is a privilege. Our #TimeToAttach campaign has sought new parental leave employment insurance benefits for parents, that give adoptees time to develop healthy attachments. The work we’ve begun on Child to Parent Violence and Aggression (#CPVA) aims to connect families and professionals in creating a deeper understanding of how to help children heal and families increase safety, so they can thrive.

Families are formed in many ways, and the definitions of permanency continue to evolve—already spanning adoptive, kinship, customary care, moral adoption, and expanding to include lifelong family connections for all youth. We are part of a much greater community of parents, caregivers, birth families, adoptees, youth who have left/are leaving care and more.

Adopt4Life is ready to work collaboratively with our provincial and national partners to ensure that every child in need of care experiences safe, healthy, permanent connections with those who love and support them.

Julie Despaties,
Executive Director
and Founder, Adopt4Life





Helping Find Permanency

An Adopt4Life Community Parent

I joined Adopt4Life when I was starting my home study and PRIDE training classes to become approved as a prospective adoptive parent. I'm a single mother, and I knew I'd need support from other people going through the process. I didn't get the support I'd hoped for from some family members and friends, because they didn't understand adoption, particular older-child adoption. I didn't want to have to justify my decision to parent a child with a trauma history and complex needs.

Thankfully, I found that the Adopt4Life community parents were simply supportive, not judgemental. As an awaiting parent, I used the Facebook discussion group to ask for advice on everything from getting

ready for my first social worker home visit to following up about expressions of interest at my first Adoption Resource Exchange (ARE). It felt like we were all in it together. And when I was finally matched with my daughter and able to share the news, it felt amazing to be congratulated and wished well by so many people. Growing your family is a joyful thing, however you go about it, and the positive vibes I received made me feel confident and supported.

After I began visits with my child, I was moved into the Adopt4Life parents' group. I also got to know my Regional Parent Liaison and she was warm and interested in really getting to know my family and our

unique needs. A few months later, after my teen moved in and was struggling with the transition, I attended an in-person support group. I was feeling pretty shell-shocked by that point and overwhelmed by my kid's intense emotions, mood swings and behaviours. We had no honeymoon period, just a rollercoaster of big highs and lows. I developed a tremor in my hand and a feeling of dread when I woke up each morning and wondered what the day would look like. I felt like my whole life had turned upside down. I was grieving the loss of peace in my home, and I was wondering if and when I'd start to feel love for this teenager who rapidly alternated between fun times and full-blown meltdowns and running away. I was afraid.

At the Adopt4Life in-person support group, my parent liaison and the other parents reassured me it was all normal. They did a better job of this than I felt my therapist did because they knew exactly what they were talking about, from real life. The day after that first in-person meet-up, my parent liaison shared several Adopt4Life resources and let me know about things such as the *Pathways 2 Permanency* course offered by the Adoption Council of Ontario. She also recommended I see my family doctor to talk about post-adoption depression, then she followed up about a week later, to see how that went. Feeling supported and understood helped me move through that panicked phase faster and go on to develop a loving bond with my child within a few months.

As the first year passed, I learned a lot about my child that I hadn't anticipated before placement. There was frequently suicidal ideation after huge blow-ups over seemingly tiny things. My teen would zone out frequently and was struggling with unprocessed trauma and grief. Of course, it was hard!

At 15 years old, this child was expected to attach to yet another mother figure, even though our home was the tenth home, between living with birth parents, grandparents, foster families and in institutions.

My child had lost many loved ones, experienced devastating abuse and abandonment and been threatened repeatedly with being moved in the last foster placement, if her behaviour wasn't compliant.

As a result, this young person was terrified of trusting and loving me. Any time my child started to relax and get closer, there would be some blow-up out of nowhere. My child would demand to call our social worker and be moved. "I just ruin people's lives," she told me, over and over. It took a lot of reassurance for that to eventually stop. During a month-long hospitalization at the end of the first year, my daughter was diagnosed with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD). With the support of the Adopt4Life community, I was able to wrap my head around this new diagnosis, create a safety plan, implement new parenting strategies and find the strength to hang on in there and be a loving and supportive mother.

Even though so much was bleak, there were also plenty of moments of joy to hold on to. As we entered our second year together, more and more we saw the joyful moments multiply and the meltdowns drop away. I was shocked by my strength in handling

situations I'd never imagined would be part of my reality as a mom. Knowing a whole community of adoptive parents had my back gave me great comfort and strength. Three years in, it feels like a lifetime ago that my child couldn't trust that this was forever.

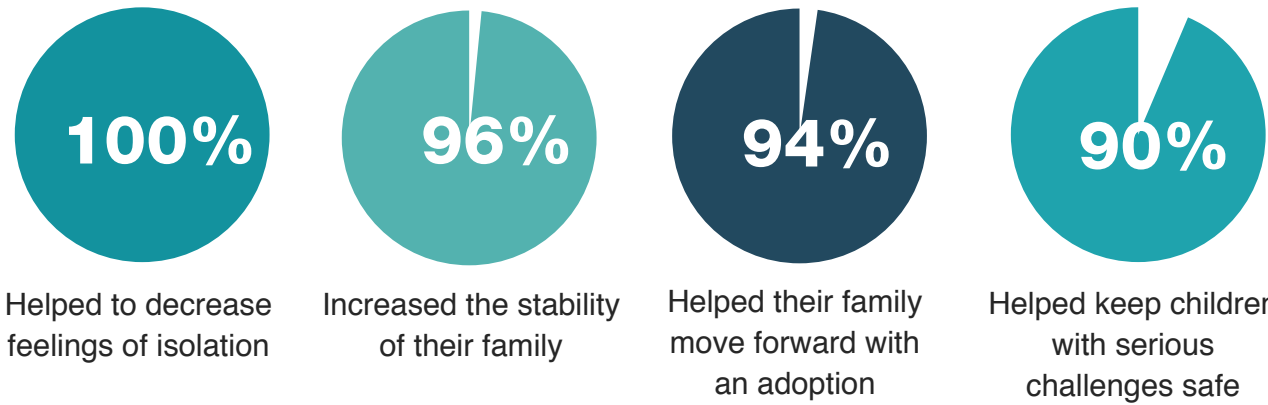
A fierce and heartfelt love developed between us, and I believe that the Adopt4Life community helped make this possible.

Adoption is beautiful, but it's also really hard at times. Every family needs a community that understands what they're going through to thrive.



How Parent2Parent Support Helps Families

Adoption is a wonderful, complex journey—parents and caregivers should never have to walk it alone. Community parents have told us that Adopt4Life’s Parent Liaisons have:



Source: 2017 Adopt4Life’s Parent2Parent Support Network Program: A Comprehensive Evaluation

Reach of the Parent2Parent community in Ontario

Since the launch of the Parent2Parent Support Network, Adopt4Life has connected parents and caregivers through an ever-growing provincial network:

1900+
Parents and caregivers have received peer support and integrated systems navigation

330+
Received intensive advocacy support

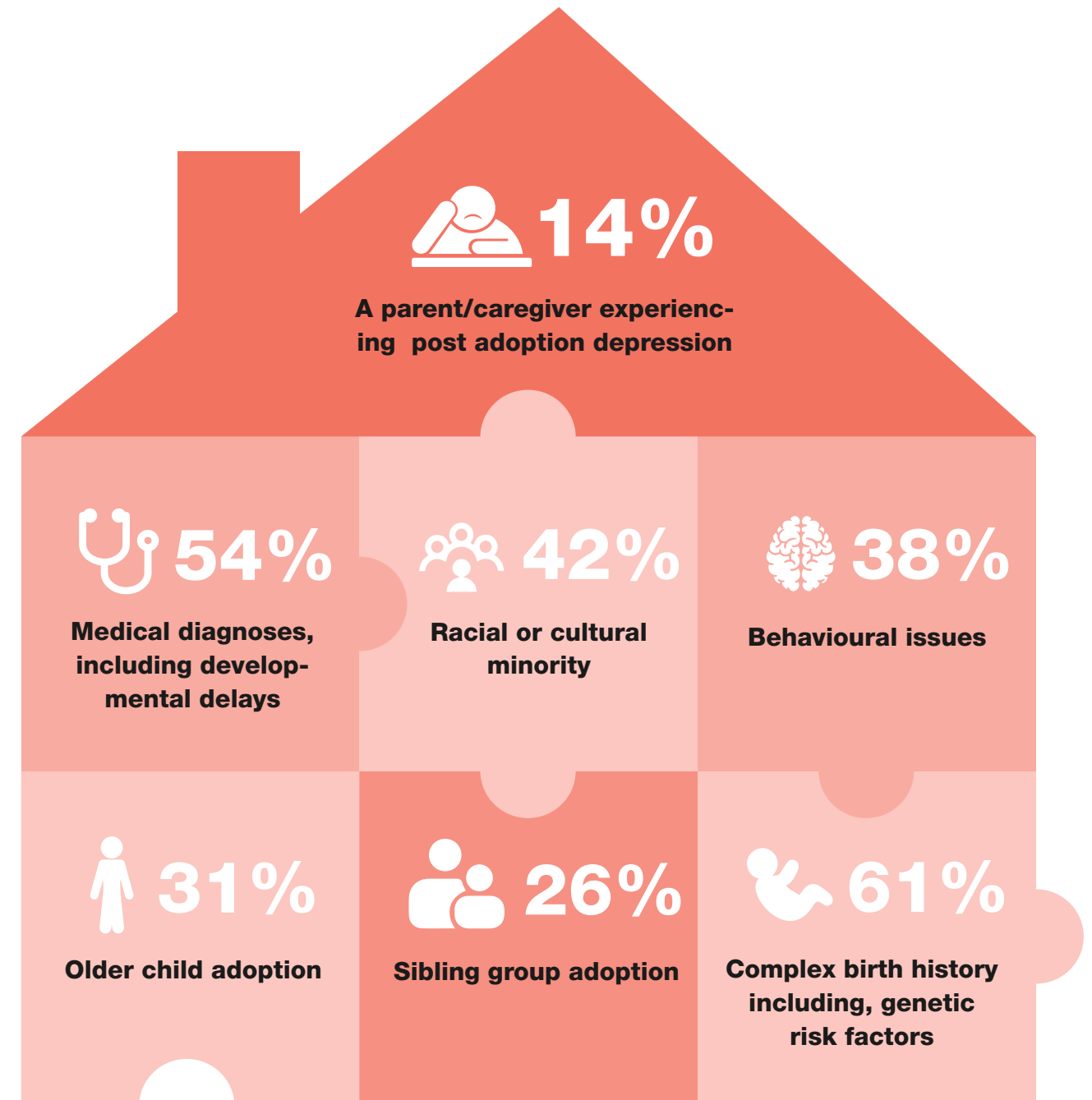
7400+

Engagements by parents and caregivers in live (face to face or online/virtual) peer supports—support groups, community events, live webinars, etc.

Source: 2019-2020 Q4 Adopt4Life Service Data and Expenditure Report to MCCSS. Parents and caregivers includes awaiting parents, adoptive parents, kin, and customary caregivers.

Responding to complex family needs

Families formed by adoption, kinship, and customary care often experience unique challenges, requiring specialized parenting approaches and capabilities in order to maintain healthy, safe attachment. The Parent2Parent Support Network is made up of families who identify as/with:

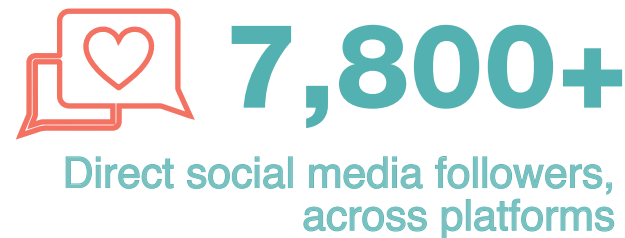
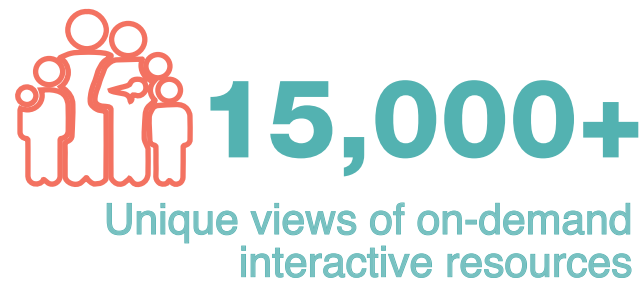


Source: 2019-2020 Q4 Parent2Parent Support Network family demographics, as self-reported by registered parents/caregivers. Multiple identifiers may relate to the same child/children.

Connecting families, community service providers, and child permanency professionals across Canada

Adopt4Life has built a thriving, connected online community that stretches across the country, building parenting capacity and resiliency that supports families in helping children reach their greatest potential:

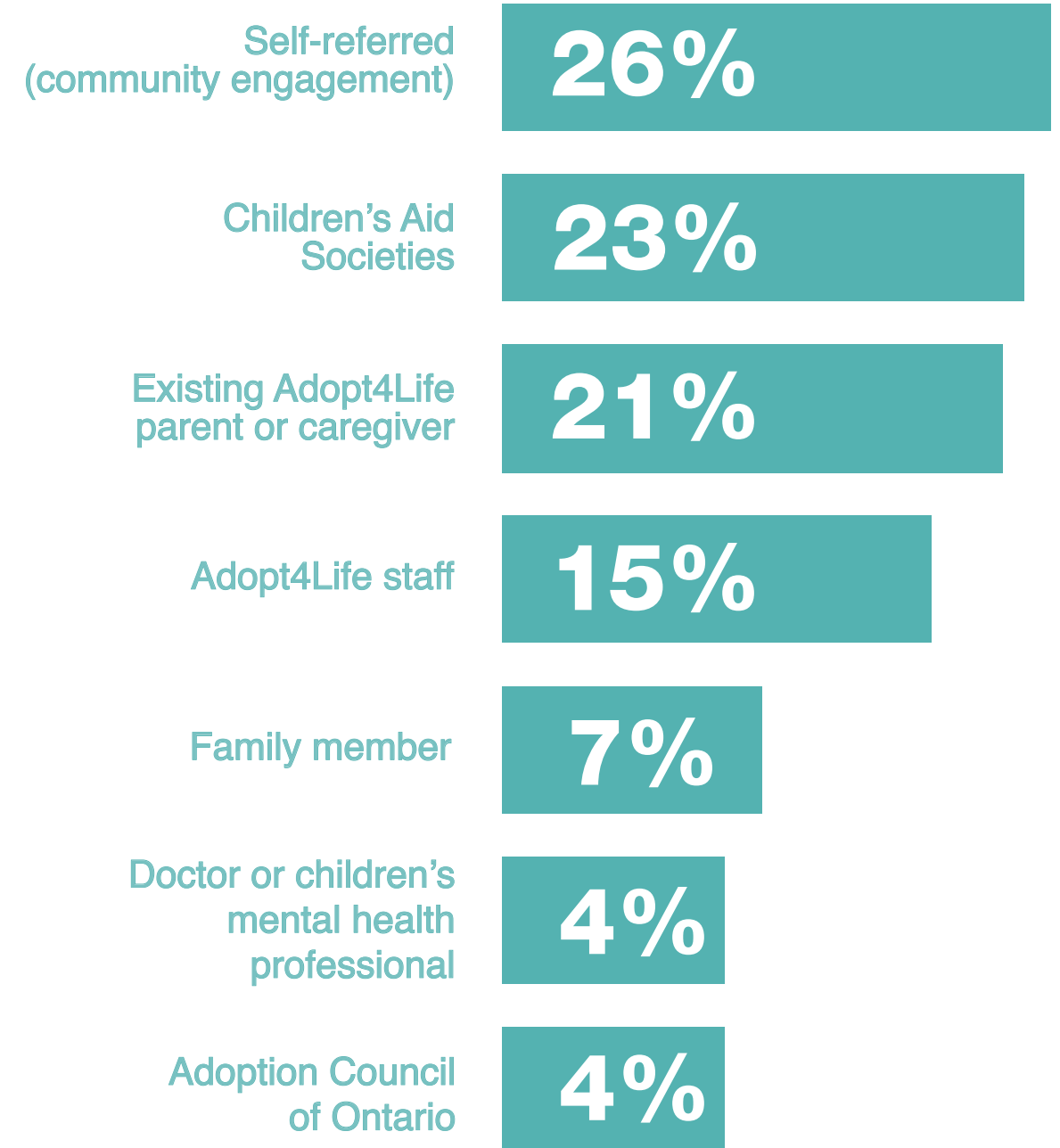
Annual social media engagements, featuring parenting resources, tools, strategies, and connecting with peers.



Source: 2019-2020 YTD social media analysis, including Adopt4Life-owned Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. Direct social media followers includes both registered community parents and followers in public community channels.

How families get connected to the Parent2Parent Support Network

Parents and caregivers find Adopt4Life at different places along their permanency journey, including referrals from:



Source: 2019-2020 Q4 Adopt4Life Service Data and Expenditure Report to MCCSS; YTD ending March 31, 2020.

Giving Back to My Community

Over the past ten years that I have lived in Ottawa, I've volunteered for various non-profit organizations and all of them have brought joy to my heart.

However, being a volunteer for Adopt4Life brings me a different kind of happiness, because this is a community that my family now belongs to—and always will. It has only been two and a half years since my family was formed through adoption. In that short time, Adopt4Life, a community that consists of families who uplift and support each other, has become part of our foundation.

I'm a volunteer event planner for Adopt4Life and there are several reasons why I offer my time and services to this organization. First and foremost, the best way I can express my gratitude for all that Adopt4Life does is through giving back. Secondly, the remarkable leaders in this community have created a sacred and safe space for parents to share their experiences and seek support. This is invaluable. By belonging to this community and planning events I have formed solid and irreplaceable friendships with women and men who ultimately understand the world of adoption and our unique parenthood journey. For this, I am beyond grateful.

Another important factor (if not the most important one) is the pure joy it gives me to watch all the beautiful children, including my daughter, grow up together and form their bonds. I hope that these relationships

among our children develop into lifelong friendships. This quote sums up what it means to be part of the Adopt4Life community:

“

Friendship isn't about who you've known the longest, it's about who walked into your life, said, 'I'm here for you,' and proved it.

—Unknown

”

In service and gratitude,

Tina Venturella,
Adopt4Life Volunteer

Our Volunteers

We're grateful for the hundreds of volunteers who share their time and their passion with us and the Adopt4Life community. Volunteers with Adopt4Life contribute as:

- Peer support group leads and facilitators
- Resource parents at the Adoption Resource Exchange
- Parent buddies and mentors
- Community event organizers
- Board committee members and working groups
- Bloggers and story contributors
- Expert guests for webinars and learning programs

Thank you!

“We owe so much to our incredible volunteers! Each of you make our community proud in the generosity of how you give so freely of your time. Your contributions make it easier to support the thousands of parents and caregivers in our Parent2Parent Support Network. Your tireless commitment has helped to inspire awareness and action in order to influence decisions and policies that will improve the lives of vulnerable children and youth. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you!”

Julie Despaties,
Executive Director



Supporting Kids and Families

Adopt4Life has been an integral part of our journey to become parents through adoption. They were supporting us in our waiting, answering our questions during the entire process, and provided advice, community and confidence during post-placement.

Finding this organization at the start of our journey was a breath of fresh air. They are a charity that wants nothing from us, but that only wants the best for us. They are constantly offering of themselves and working relentlessly for the best outcome for the families and the children of Ontario. Hopefully one day, Adopt4Life will grow to reach even more regions, but for now what they've been able to achieve and in such a short amount of time has been incredibly exciting and encouraging to watch. They're always seeking new ways to create more opportunities for families and individuals to learn and feel heard. Growing a family is stressful, whether you are going through adoption or not. Adopt4Life does a very good job at making people feel informed and as a part of a community where they will not be judged for their circumstances, struggles or thoughts.

We have so much love and respect for this community of parents, formed by parents that we wanted to support them in a small way by donating to them to help them grow.

It's a small gesture, but we hope it will help them keep going in the direction they want to go. We're not rich, not by any means, but we know how one person's actions can make a difference, even a small gesture, such as this. When all those small gestures add up, it can make a powerful impact, especially in the lives of our children. We like to support organizations that go above and beyond and that are always seeking to make a difference.

Adopt4Life is family, they are our community. They help others because they've been in our situation before. They make a point of sharing their resources because they know it will help others who are going through the same thing. They get it. That to us, means everything.

Michelle Young,
Donor and Volunteer

Donors

Adopt4Life gratefully recognizes and celebrates the generosity of the individuals and organizations who contributed to supporting our vision and strategic programs over the past year.

When adoptive parents and caregivers are struggling; when they are working on forming secure attachments; when they are helping their child heal through grief, loss and trauma; when they're feeling isolated and alone; and when they need help accessing critical supports and services for their children, Adopt4Life is there.

Your gifts make a powerful and immediate impact in helping children and youth thrive in families. We are indeed **#StrongerTogether.**

Charitable Registration Number
847401106 RR 0001

To give, visit
www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/adopt4life.



Leadership and Governance

Adopt4Life's Board of Directors is comprised of professionals, child welfare experts, advocates, and mental health experts, and they all share one unique characteristic: each has been touched by adoption, kinship, or customary care. As adoptive, kin, customary care, and foster parents/caregivers themselves, they understand deeply the importance of peer supports for families navigating permanency journeys with their children.

Board of Directors Executive Members

Tedd Konya, Chair

Melissa Pierre-Sossoyan, Vice-Chair

Michelle Young, Secretary

Lisa Cameron, Treasurer

Directors/Committee Chairs

Alice Audrain, Chair, African-Canadian Committee

Avi Magidsohn, Chair, 2SLGBTQIA Committee

Mary-Jo Land, Chair, Mental Health Committee

Martha Chamberlain, Chair, Openness Committee

Rachael Manion, Chair, Advocacy and Strategic Policy Committee

Tina Venturella, Chair, Social Committee

The following Director chairs are currently open pending Adopt4Life's next Annual General Meeting:

First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Committee Chair

Fundraising Committee Chair

Marketing & Communications Committee Chair

The Board of Directors provides strategic guidance and leadership, professional expertise and insights, and performs the oversight and due diligence responsibilities defined in Adopt4Life's organizational governance. To learn more about our Board members and the expertise they bring to Adopt4Life, visit: www.adopt4life.com/board.

Spotlight: Child to Parent Violence and Aggression

Advocacy and Strategic Policy, Mental Health Committees

Child to Parent Violence and Aggression (#CPVA) is a serious issue believed to impact about one third of adoptive, kinship, and customary care families. CPVA is recognized where members of the family are/feel threatened, intimidated, or controlled by a child or youth's behaviour, and where they believe that they have to adjust their own behaviour to accommodate threats or anticipation of violence.

Adopt4Life wants families, adoption support and child welfare agencies, and child and family therapists to gain a better understanding of CPVA. Through collaborating with partners across the UK and Canada, the program intends to reduce stigma and ensure that parents/caregivers and professionals are better equipped to support each member of the family unit.

Since starting the CPVA program, Adopt4Life has made available two on-demand learning webinars that have

been viewed more than 1500 times, hosted multiple live/virtual education sessions for parents and caregivers, held informal roundtable conversations with professionals, and introduced a private virtual support group for families across Ontario. In the next phase, the CPVA Working Group is working with a leading Ontario university to undertake the first Canadian-led study of CPVA and its effects on families.



Spotlight: Time To Attach

Advocacy and Strategic Policy Committee

We're leading a national campaign to add 15 weeks of Attachment Leave Employment Insurance Benefits for adoptive parents, kinship and customary caregivers.

In our ongoing advocacy for expanded parental leave benefits for adoptive parents, kinship and customary caregivers, Adopt4Life continues to work with families, community partners, and policy-makers across Canada to influence the creation of a new category of EI benefits called "attachment benefits". We have worked collaboratively to create this much needed change alongside our partners from the Adoption Council of Canada, a dedicated team of researchers from Western University, and many cross-Canada stakeholders in child welfare and permanency.

Attachment leave is about giving vulnerable children more #TimeToAttach, in order to improve the long-term outcomes for them and their families. We believe these benefits will be a significant step forward in supporting new parents' successful return to the workforce, while also building strong, healthy attachment in families—no matter how they are formed.

#TimeToAttach has received extensive bi-partisan support at the federal and provincial levels and been endorsed by more than 100+ professionals across Canada in child welfare and protection, adoption and permanency, mental health, children's healthcare, social services, and other sectors.



Statement of Operations

	2020	2019
Revenue by Source		
Government of Ontario (MCCSS)	520,000	520,000
Donations and Grants	17,215	999
Total Revenue	537,715	520,999
Expenses		
Salaries and Benefits	394,697	390,624
General and Administration	36,207	37,543
Professional Services and Training	53,715	51,436
Marketing and Communications	32,568	35,944
Regional Community Events	10,694	3,579
Total Expenses	527,881	519,126
Summary of Operations		
Revenue	537,715	520,199
Expenses	527,881	519,126
Excess of revenue over expenses	9,834	1,873

As Adopt4Life continues to grow, we are actively working to diversify our funding sources—enabling us to provide expanded supports for families to support permanency for their children and youth, while maintaining the excellent outcomes delivered from the Parent2Parent Support Network.

Adopt4Life's full audited financial statements are available at: adopt4life.com/annual-reporting



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