



**SUPPORTING  
EFFORTS  
TO RECRUIT  
PERMANENT  
FAMILIES FOR  
WAITING  
CHILDREN**

**WAITING CHILD DESCRIPTIONS**

**JUNE  
2000**

# Tip Sheet

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## *Families Respond to Well-Written Waiting Child Descriptions*

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Even brief child descriptions can catch the attention of prospective parents, especially if they include potential “hooks” about a child—unique hobbies, accomplishments, or even challenges. Help recruit prospective adopters by making the most of child biographies.

### WHAT TO INCLUDE

When developing the text to accompany child-specific publicity, the golden rule is, “Can the child view herself and feel proud of the portrayal?” Embarrassing descriptions that reveal extremely personal details violate the child’s privacy. Accuracy, personalization, and respect are crucial.

Below are guidelines for writing descriptions—illustrated with quotes from descriptions by Maggie Cotton, a former foster child who now composes profiles for the Northwest Adoption Exchange.

- **Start with an attention-getting phrase.** Draw readers in with a fun introduction such as: “With her sunny disposition and easy-going nature, Laura is able to get along with just about everyone.”
- **Include colorful details on the child’s unique character.** Active or intense children are more enticing when described like this: “Rough-and-tumble Cherise is a tomboy for whom sports are very important,” or “Heliaz, who has an engaging personality, plays cards and checkers with a vengeance!”
- **Highlight progress and ways to manage challenges.** Praise children for improvements and paint a picture of the parents’ responsibilities through a description such as: “Good news! Olivah is beginning to demonstrate attachment to her foster mom, seeking her out for love and acceptance. Since she began taking medication, she has improved self-control and reduced aggressive behaviors.”
- **Define clinical diagnoses and provide examples.** Letters like ADD, ADHD, ODD, and PTSD mean little to families. More clear is an explanation like: “Jacob has challenging special needs associated with static encephalopathy—an abnormal condition of the function and structure of the brain tissue. The most challenging aspect of the condition is that Jacob cannot grasp cause and effect or learn from experience.”

- **Focus on milestones when describing a disabled child.** To illustrate a child’s functioning in understandable terms, say: “Jeremiah, age one, is about six months delayed developmentally. His movements do not yet appear to be purposeful.”
- **Emphasize the rewards the child could bring a family.** Let prospective adopters know what they can gain by saying: “Martin presents many challenges and needs total care, but because of his sweet disposition, caring for him will surely be a labor of love.”
- **Describe how the child relates to adults and peers.** For instance say: “Semaj and SirRell get along well with other children, but prefer to interact with adults. Due to their fear of strangers, they must be introduced to new people slowly.”
- **Highlight the ways the child is similar to other children.** Children with special needs are first and foremost children, so it’s fair to say: “At times Corina, like many preteens, has difficulty accepting authority and occasionally breaks house rules.”
- **Include the caretaker’s impressions about the child.** Prospective parents can identify with the foster family through descriptions like: “Mark, according to his foster mother, is a sweet, soft-spoken boy. ‘He rarely needs discipline,’ she says, ‘and is motivated to try his best.’”
- **Mention the positive observations of important adults.** Add perspective and credibility to descriptions by saying: “Head Start staff report that Courtney is very social. She blends in with the other children and handles the routines, limits, and schedules of the program well.”
- **Quote the child.** A family might be interested to read Billy’s comment: “I’ve always wanted a dog, and a nice family that would take me camping in the woods.”
- **Discuss how a family could help a child.** Provide parents a sense of purpose by saying, “Everyone who cares about Robert feels that having a permanent family will be a significant key in helping him turn his behavior around.”
- **Mention any financial support if it is available.** Help families realize that they can afford to adopt a child with special needs by mentioning that subsidies are available. Publicize funding for purchase-of-service agreements too.

### WHAT TO EXCLUDE

Out of respect for the child, descriptions should not divulge private details about his birth parents’ history or the abuse he suffered. On the other hand, misrepresentation is also not the goal—every family is not right for every child.

The audience will dictate the amount of detail to include. A televised waiting child feature reaches few prospective adopters and need not include many details about children's diagnoses or history. An exchange book listing reaches families more committed to adoption and can reveal slightly more. However, descriptions *never* merit full disclosure. A description is not a condensed case history and is never intended to replace an in-depth presentation about a child to an adoptive family. Descriptions should never include:

- **The name of the child's biological family.** Out of respect to the child, do not use his last name or the names of any members of his family of origin.
- **Traceable information about the child's location.** No one who was previously unaware of a child's school or residence (including unhappy relatives or child predators) should be able to find her as a result of public exposure.
- **Belittling comments about physical appearance.** Mentioning that a child is overweight or physically immature for his age is not appropriate. Children are already self-conscious without negative comments from trusted adults captured in writing.
- **Details about sexual abuse, incest, or physical abuse.** It may be appropriate to explain that a child entered care because of abuse, but revealing details about the abuse or the abuser can re-traumatize a child. In addition, never humiliate a child who acts out the sexual abuse she has suffered; simply mention that she needs close supervision or must be the youngest child in the home.

- **Details about failed past placements.** A history of why previous placements ended often unfairly places blame on the child. Simply say that the child has moved around frequently and presently needs stability.
- **Information about the child's criminal history.** Juvenile criminal records are not public information. When the child makes a clean start as an adult, she may not appreciate an old flyer that documents crimes from her youth.
- **Unsubstantiated diagnoses.** Only professional diagnoses should be included. Unconfirmed clinical terms amount to no more than inappropriate labeling.
- **Gloomy predictions.** While prospective parents need a realistic sense of what to expect, no one can accurately predict what a child may achieve in the future. Mention reasons to be hopeful, or simply stick with known facts.
- **Unnecessary limits on the type of family who can adopt.** Unless a very good reason exists to believe that the right single parent could not care for a child or that the child cannot be in a home with siblings, leave it up to families to decide which children will fit in their household.
- **Sexist and racist stereotypes.** Not all girls like dolls, and not all black children play basketball. Learn about each child instead of writing from stereotyped expectations.
- **Negative adoption language.** "Natural" or "real" are incorrect terms for birth parents. To learn more about positive adoption terms, visit [www.perspectivespress.com](http://www.perspectivespress.com) and read the fact sheet "Speaking Positively: Respectful Adoption Language."

## AVERAGE

Andrew, 11, and Melissa, 15, are fun-loving siblings. At their foster home, they enjoy music, video games, and spending time with friends.

Andrew is an active boy who likes basketball and Boy Scouts. He was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and shows signs of oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). He struggles to concentrate at school and takes medication to help.

Melissa is a typical teen. She talks on the phone and goes to the mall, and is excited to get her driver's license soon. Melissa has a learning disability and cannot read well—but she likes to sing and act in school plays.

The pair needs to be placed together in a two-parent family that will allow them to be involved in school activities. They are likely to have difficulties bonding with their new family and will need ongoing therapy to help them overcome issues from their past. ✖

## IMPROVED

Spend just a few minutes with 15-year-old Melissa and her brother Andrew, 11, and you will find out that they are a spirited, captivating pair. Their foster mom of two years says, "These two are incredible, fun-loving kids! They bring a lot of energy, music, and laughter into our home."

Andrew spends free time shooting free-throws at the basketball hoop, and he was proud to win a certificate as the most improved player on his basketball team last summer. His recent interest in camping with his Boy Scout troop has provided an excellent channel for his boundless energy as well. Though Andrew is diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD), his teachers report that medication has greatly improved his classroom behavior and enhanced his ability to concentrate.

Melissa passed her written driver's exam on the first try, and is eagerly awaiting her next birthday so she can earn her regular license and take her friends to the mall. An artistic young woman, she sings in the school swing choir and has a role in the school play *Porgy and Bess*. Melissa also earns good grades in science—especially for hands-on lab work—but needs help with reading due to a learning disability.

This brother and sister have relied on each other through years of neglect, and want to be adopted together. As Andrew explains, "We've lived with a lot of different families, but no matter what, I can count on Melissa." The feeling goes both ways, agrees Melissa, "Even if we argue sometimes, he's a pretty cool brother."

Because Melissa and Andrew have been given little reason to trust adults, the one- or two-parent family who adopts them will need to be persistent and patient. The family should also be able to participate in therapy and make a lifetime commitment of love. Adoption assistance is available to support special services for the children, and with the security of a family, this dynamic duo will go far. ✖

*These fictional accounts illustrate the difference between an average description and one that really makes readers take notice.*