

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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October 2014

NO.
76

Preparation and Support for Older Child Adoptions: NCFA Survey and Conference Feedback

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Families that adopt older children domestically or internationally face a unique set of challenges, and require support that is geared towards their particular needs. To identify and analyze the pre- and post-adoption resources these families often require, Melissa Blauvelt and Rhonda Jarema conducted a small-scale survey prior to NCFA's 2013 National Adoption Conference. Presenting the results to adoption professionals at the conference, Blauvelt and Jarema highlighted some of the successful strategies and techniques agency professionals employed to prepare families for the adoption of older children.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

The 27 parents who completed the survey had adopted children from 26 countries. Russia, Ethiopia, China, and Ukraine were the most heavily represented nations, as 75% of the responding families adopted from these countries of origin. Sixteen agencies participated in the survey. The survey results—particularly the responses related to the importance of post-adoption support—mirror what NCFA is hearing from other adoption professionals, birth parents, adoptive families, and media reports. While the sample size for the survey was small, there was sufficient data to derive some suggested best practices for agencies placing older children.



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Agencies' definition of an "older child" varied: 27% of responding agencies defined "older child" as a youth who is two/three years old or older; 24% of responding agencies defined "older child" as a youth who is four years old or older; 25% of responding agencies defined "older child" as a youth who is five years old or older; and 24% of responding agencies defined "older child" as a youth who is six years old or older. For the purposes of the survey, "older child" was defined as any child four years of age or older.

Upon examination of the age demographics of the children whose adoptive families were included in the survey, 42% were between the ages of four and eight, 24% were between the ages of nine and twelve, and 24% were over twelve years of age.

There are a number of variables that must be taken into account when reviewing the survey results. Some of the percentages listed are from a smaller pool of data because, in a few instances, respondents skipped questions. Parents were not asked to enter the date they finalized their child's adoption, which could have an impact on the type of resources they required (for example, a parent who adopted from Agency Z five years ago would not receive the same training/education as a parent who adopted five months ago, as agencies are constantly expanding and updating their training resources).

This article will summarize and analyze the data collected, suggest best practices for future implementation by adoption professionals, and provide additional resources and information to families interesting in pursuing the adoption of an older child.

SURVEY RESULTS

Adoptive Family Fears Regarding the Adoption of Older Children

All of the parents participating in the survey voiced the concern that members of their family—either the parent, adopted child, or preexisting children—would struggle to bond. Likewise, 76% of parents feared that the adopted child would not adjust to being a part of a new family. As one parent shared: "All the worries and concerns...can I love this child, will she love me...especially with a biological child at home... It can and does happen, but worrying about it was extraordinarily stressful. Especially, I would add, during the first few months, [when] my heart and mind were not in sync. My heart wanted to love my new daughter equally, but my mind knew it was not yet the case. Knowing that was a very difficult and guilty time for me as a new parent. It all resolved...I think if I had been more confident in that, it would have been easier to just enjoy her and not feel so badly."

Anxiety about bonding and attachment is a natural and common element in many older child adoptions. There are resources both pre- and post-adoption to help families promote and develop strong bonds between the adopted child and all family members.

Ninety-six percent of responding parents were also worried that they would be ill-equipped to help their child deal with past trauma. Their concern about this issue is understandable; children who have experienced trauma or abuse can develop various behavioral problems.¹ Agencies should offer comprehensive pre- and post-adoption training—including information about bonding and trauma-healing techniques—as well as long-term support for adoptive families.

Many adoption agencies offer a plethora of pre-adoption resources, including in-person agency training, in-person support groups, and recommended reading. Sixty-four percent of participating parents were required to complete an older child adoption training course, indicating agency awareness that the emotional and developmental needs of older adopted children often differ from those of infants or toddlers, and that parents must be prepared for the long-term effects of those differences. Many agencies use online older child training courses or local foster care educational material to assist families in these areas.

Preparing for Adoption: Utilizing Adoptive Families as a Resource

In addition to in-person training, prospective adoptive parents were strongly encouraged to speak to parents that had previously adopted older children. Specifically, 44.4% of agencies required the use of other parents as an informative resource, whereas 55.6% of agencies made it optional. Regardless of whether it was mandatory, 68% of responding families reported utilizing other adoptive parents as a resource.

When using other families as references or resources, agencies should ensure the prospective adoptive family can process what they hear from these families with a social worker or coordinator. Speaking with other adoptive parents is often helpful, but it is important to remember that each family will have its own unique experiences.

Training Materials and Familial Needs

The large volume of books and online material available to families can be overwhelming. Some may feel pressured to read everything and anything they can get their hands on. Families should be selective about what

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¹ Child Abuse: The Hidden Bruises. March 2011. Retrieved from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry website: www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Child_Abuse_The_Hidden_Bruises_05.aspx
www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Child_Abuse_The_Hidden_Bruises_05.aspx

materials they rely heavily on when proceeding through the adoption process and parenting their older child. When asked which books they recommend to parents, agencies listed educational guides such as *Adopting the Older Child* by Claudia L. Jewett, which outlines the adoption process, and the highly recommended text by Dr. Karyn Purvis titled *The Connected Child*, which helps parents build bonds of affection and trust.

An examination of data revealed the growing use of the Internet as a research and training tool. Half of the responding agencies required online training. Additionally, 36% of parents used online support groups, often in conjunction with in-person support groups.

Families evaluated and addressed the needs of their children upon arriving in the home. Parents realized their older adopted children often had a hard time transitioning into a new home and communicating with their adoptive family members. Some required medical treatment, or had experienced past trauma that necessitated extensive therapy.

While sibling bonding was reported as one of the greatest concerns families had regarding the adoption of older children, it was listed as the lowest “need” upon placement. Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that bonding was still an issue. In fact, all of the responding families said there were complications with bonding between the adopted child and children already present in the home—and for some, these problems arose well after the initial placement. For example, 88% of parents reported bonding issues six to twelve months after placement. The difficulties sometimes persisted, as 55% of responding families reported bonding issues three years after placement. These findings highlight the need for agencies and families alike to continue to dialogue about specific resources, training, and support that can help with sibling adjustment and attachment.

Despite the prevalence of bonding challenges, other issues—transitional needs, language needs, health needs, and coping with past trauma—took precedence in the lives of many families.

Post-Adoption Support

Whatever their needs, families often rely heavily on the post-adoption support, resources, and referrals offered by their agencies. Responding agencies listed post-adoption visits by a caseworker, which can lead to referrals for counseling if deemed necessary, and the provision of support groups as their primary offerings of post-adoption support.

Based on the data, a majority of families receive counseling services over the phone, through email, or in person. Given the popularity of support

groups prior to adoption, it is surprising that so many parents steered away from support groups post-adoption. Specifically, usage of support groups decreased from 65% (pre-adoption) to 35% (post-adoption). A plausible explanation for this substantial drop could be that the needs of the parents changed. Prior to the adoption, support groups were likely helpful to learn more about the adoption process and increase awareness of what to expect upon the arrival of an older child into the home. After the adoption, as parents discovered the specific behavioral and developmental challenges facing their children, they often required the help of a licensed therapist or specialist. Nonetheless, parents who did utilize support groups stated that it was one of the best and most helpful services offered by their agency.

SUGGESTED BEST PRACTICES FOR ADOPTION AGENCIES

Although responding adoptive parents noted general satisfaction with their agencies, many believed there was room for improvement. Some parents reported that their agency offered very little post-adoption support and felt that the support workers themselves were inadequately trained.

Surveyed parents provided a number of recommendations which, coupled with agency feedback, were used to devise the suggested best practices outlined below. Hopefully, application of these recommendations can help better equip families with the support, techniques, and resources they need to thrive.

- 1. Moderate parental expectations.** All of the adoption agencies that participated in the survey reported problems with parental expectations, and noted that improvements in pre-placement training could remedy a number of issues. Dr. Arthur Becker Weldman, an attachment therapist, believes that there are two characteristics common in successful adoptive families: commitment and empathy. Training that focuses on reinforcing parental commitment to the adoption and empathy towards the child could help parents moderate their expectations and lead to a successful, happy adoption. Additionally, families that have the opportunity to practice role-play in challenging situations often have more skills and possible interventions to utilize after bringing their child home.
- 2. Require language training for families.** Many parents reported that they realized the need for adequate language training after bringing their children home. None of the adoption agencies required language training for parenting adopting abroad,

although 35% of families reported completing some sort of language training. Mandatory lessons that teach simple phrases and basic vocabulary are necessary to promote communication between parents and child. Without it, parents will have even greater difficulty ascertaining the physical and emotional needs of their child. With good instruction, families will be able to communicate with each other and encourage a smoother transition for the child.

3. Develop an action plan for dealing with post-adoption issues.

Older adopted children may suffer from after-effects of past trauma, which negatively affect their ability to bond and attach to their adoptive parents. According to a majority of responding adoption agencies, difficulties with attachment were a common theme reported by their families. To combat this, adopting parents should collaborate with their agency to devise an action plan for post-adoption support before the adoption takes place. Parents and adoption professionals can identify the probable needs of their matched child based on the information provided, set attainable and realistic goals, and develop a strategy to accomplish those goals. By drafting this plan, families can constructively utilize the knowledge and skills discussed in their pre-adoption training. These plans can be consulted after placement and revised as needed based on the specific needs of the child. Any post-adoption plan made should specifically address counseling because, in many instances, early therapeutic intervention is the best solution for behavioral problems and developmental delays. Parents can vet therapists before placement and contact the therapist as soon as problems present themselves, thereby preventing the waste of valuable time that would otherwise be spent on reaching out to a support worker and waiting for a referral. As one parent pointed out: “The best support we found (after a year home) was connecting with a therapist who specialized in RAD [Reactive Attachment Disorder]. I wish I had known to do that early on. Even for a child who doesn’t have RAD, older kids have so many trauma issues that I wish we could have started therapy earlier.”

4. Increase the scope of trainings offered. Fifty-five percent of participating adoption agencies stated that their families believed they lacked proper professional support when adopting older children. Specifically, responding parents stated that they needed improved pre- and post-adoption training in the following areas:

- **Parenting strategies and disciplinary techniques:** Corporal punishment, tirades, bribery, and shaming are not conducive

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to the well-being of children, particularly those that have experienced past trauma.² Agencies should provide adoptive parents with training that helps them identify their parenting/discipline style and come up with a list of appropriate and effective parenting strategies. After placement, adoption professionals should follow up with families on a regular basis to ensure they are on the right path and reinforce usage of the skills learned during training.

- **Addressing the needs of transracial adoptees:** Some transracial adoptive parents persist in a “colorblind” attitude, believing that “love is enough.” This does not allow them to address the confusion, isolation, and low self-esteem their child may experience as a result of discrimination and the continuation of racism and prejudice in broader society.³ Adoption professionals should develop and require training that educates parents on the prejudice their child may face and equip them with knowledge and skills to help them support their child through these tumultuous experiences. Some relevant programs adoption agencies can investigate further include Adoption Learning Partners’ *Conspicuous Families and Adoption Training Online’s Multicultural and Transracial Adoption*.

5. **Create support groups for adopted youth.** Older adopted children often experience grief and loss when they leave the orphanage or foster family where they had formed attachments with their caregivers. Teenagers may believe adoption is one more thing that makes them different from their peers during a time when they want nothing more than to fit in. Like their adoptive parents, older adopted children need a support system of their peers. Groups for older adopted youth, especially teenagers, can be a useful outlet for them to express their feelings and come to terms with their loss. In-person support groups for face-to-face interaction would be preferable, but online support groups or the usage of Skype for video chats would also be acceptable mechanisms for older adoptees to receive the ongoing support they need. Adopted for Good (adoptedforgood.org) is one example of an online coalition that tries to connect adoptees and give them opportunities to provide support to one another.

² Purvis, Karyn B., David R. Cross, and Wendy Lyons Sunshine. *The Connected Child*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2007.

³ For more, see *Adoption Advocate* No. 38, “Race and Identity in Transracial Adoption: Recommendations for Adoptive Parents,” National Council For Adoption, August 2011. Available online at: www.adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2011/08/adoption-advocate-no-38

ADVICE FOR FAMILIES OF OLDER ADOPTED CHILDREN

- 1. Access therapy and ongoing support.** Despite numerous offerings of post-adoption support services via agencies, some adoptive families do not take advantage of these programs. Some parents refuse to seek help, assuming that asking for assistance is either a sign of weakness or an admission of their failure to parent their child. Adoptive parents should be able to depend on the support and guidance of their agency before the adoption, and this need does not lessen after the child arrives home. Debbie Riley, CEO of C.A.S.E., who has worked with youths for 25 years, encourages therapy and support regardless of the child's age.
- 2. Recognize that love is not enough.** Some parents believe that love alone will heal the emotional trauma and pain that their older adopted child experienced prior to placement. One mother, for example, thought that if she and her husband loved their son enough, he would be fine. But their child had sensory issues and seemingly rejected his new parents. Once he received treatment, touch was more comfortable for him, and the parents learned new strategies that helped improve their relationship and bonding.
- 3. Know that adjustment, attachment, and bonding might take years.** Parents must work hard to build a trusting, loving relationship. Rhonda Jarema often tells her clients, "Do not expect to love your child in a year." It may be an arduous journey, with unexpected highs and lows, but if parents work hard, love will come.

CONCLUSION

It is the job of the adoption agency to prepare and guide their adoptive families through the successful adoption of older children. Agencies should regularly evaluate the efficacy of their existing training materials and update their resources accordingly.

Because of one agency's efforts, an adoptive parent noted that she was "better prepared [for parenting] than non-adoptive parents." Use of the best practices listed above will strengthen the foundation already provided to adoptive families and help guide them through many of the obstacles that can arise post-adoption. In the end, effective resources and training for families will ultimately help more older children find the loving, permanent families they justly deserve.

PARTICIPATING ADOPTION AGENCIES

The following is a sampling of NCFAs Member Agencies that participated in this survey and also help prepare and/or support families adopting older children. A full list of NCFAs Member Agencies can be found at www.adoptioncouncil.org/who-we-are/member-agencies.

- America World Adoption
- Bethany Christian Services
- Catholic Charities, Arlington VA
- Faith International Adoptions
- Generations Adoptions
- Great Wall China Adoption/Children of All Nations
- Holt International Children's Services
- Hopscotch Adoptions Inc.
- International Child Foundation
- JAFCA
- Nightlight Christian Adoptions
- World Links

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