

Adoption-Specific Family Challenges of Special-Needs Adoptive Placements

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Introduction

Special-needs adoption placements are vital to society in providing permanent homes for children in the state foster care system. Adoption-specific family challenges are important to explore to prevent placement dissatisfaction and disruption for prospective/current adoption parents. Barth and Berry (1988) estimated 15% of adoptive placements disrupt, and Groze (1996) found 2% of legal placements dissolve. Furthermore, Rosenthal and Groze (1992) identified 22-25% of intact placements in their initial year struggled to adapt to special-needs adoption placement demands. This general mortality rate of adoption placements is often linked to adoption-specific family challenges. Rosenthal (1993) noted that unrealistic parent expectations are a significant predictor of adoption placement disruption. Specifically, Miall (1996) explained that adoptive parents' unrealistic expectations result from a myth of sameness whereby adoptive parents perceive that the unique demands of adoptive parenting are no different than typical parenting demands associated with non-special-needs birth children. To combat this *myth of sameness*, it is necessary to describe and differentiate the adoption-specific parenting challenges from the typical parenting demands of birth children.

The two groups that would benefit primarily from descriptions of adoption-specific family challenges are prospective/current

adoption parents and state adoptive caseworkers and therapists. Prospective and current adoptive parents would benefit from understanding the common adoption-specific family challenges in both preplacement and postplacement in two primary ways. Adoption-specific family challenges would help prospective and current adoptive parents set realistic expectations about their adoption placement, and knowing these challenges are common would assist in normalizing the adjustment for adoptive families under stress. As for state adoption caseworkers and therapists, knowledge of adoption-specific family challenges would help these professionals focus their assessments and interventions with prospective adoptive parents in preplacement and current adoptive families in postplacement to facilitate any necessary adjustments to placement.

The Body

Participants. Participants included 10 adoptive couples with special-needs adoption placements. Adoptive fathers averaged 39.8 years of age (range 30–55 years), worked an average of 49.0 hrs/wk (range 40–60 hrs/wk), and reported an average income of \$43,140 (range \$24,000–70,000/yr). Adoptive mothers averaged 36.7 years of age (range 28–54 years), worked an average of 36.0 hrs/wk (range 12–45 hrs/wk), and reported an average income of \$33,025 (range \$6,500–63,750). Average adoption placement length was 10 months (range 4–18 months). Adoptive child's average age was 4 years (range 6 months–13 years old).

Data Collection Methods. The principal investigator (PI) mailed recruitment letters to potential adoptive couples and encouraged them to contact the PI if interested in participation. This strategy yielded no participant couples. The PI changed the recruitment strategy and phoned each adoptive couple within the inclusion criteria and invited their participation. This strategy yielded 10 adoptive couples. The recruitment criteria included couple received adoption placement, married couple, both parents worked at least 20 hrs/wk, conjoint interview agreement. The PI collected data by interviewing ten adoptive couples for 2 hours each.

Data Analysis Methods. Each interview transcript (10) was thoroughly read for content. The PI wrote summary statements of meaning for each participant response (in pencil). A second researcher read the interview transcripts and the PI's summary statements of meaning and either agreed or wrote a second statement of meaning beside the original (in black ink). The member check involved the PI hand delivering the transcripts, complete with statements of meaning, and instructing participants to read their original statement and check which meaning they agreed with or add their own meaning if both were insufficient (in blue ink). The transcript was cut into strips and sorted into categories and themes.

Results

Adoption-specific family challenges identified across interviews included trauma-related challenges, adoption placement suddenness, uncertainty of receiving adoption placement, development of secure attachment, impact of adoption on birth/other children, adoptive couples' interaction with foster/birth family.

Half of the adoptive couples (5 of 10) discussed trauma-related challenges with their adoption placements. Trauma-related challenges include any parenting difficulties resulting from maltreatment experienced by the adoptive child from either his/her foster placements and/or birth parents. One adoptive father highlighted the difficulty of caring for his adoptive daughter with a severe abuse history from male caregivers.

But in that first six months if she was in the middle of a nightmare and I walked in, it was ten times worse. (Adoptive Father)

Half of the adoptive couples (5 of 10) discussed the challenge of developing a secure attachment with their adoptive child. Some adoptive parents indicated struggling with their adoptive child's lack of normal "stranger anxiety." One adoptive parent explained that it is understandable for these children to trust strangers more than their primary caregivers given their abuse/neglect histories.

And she still does that but we are starting to see some changes there, where she is starting to get more shy around strangers. If you were here...it would take her ten minutes and she might stare at you. (Adoptive Father)

A slight majority of the adoptive couples (6 of 10) indicated that adoption placement suddenness presented an adjustment challenge. These adoptive parents emphasized the lack of preparation time between notification to receive an adoption placement and the adoptive child's arrival at their home shortly thereafter.

We had nothing in this house for a newborn and that was a Tuesday, and we picked her up Wednesday. It was very, very fast. (Adoptive Mother)

The majority of the adoptive couples (7 of 10) identified that their most difficult adoption-related challenge was dealing with the uncertainty of receiving an adoption placement.

Yeah, because it was a nerve-racking situation anyway with the foster-care situation and not knowing if we were going to be able to keep her. It was very hard. I don't know that I would go through it again. (Adoptive Mother)

The majority of the adoptive couples with other children (5 of 7) talked about the impact of adoption on their birth/other children. The impact of adoption on birth/other children in the adopting family can be primarily positive or negative depending on the extent that the birth/other children were included in the family's decision to adopt.

Another thing that has really been affected is the amount of time that we spent with our first child, our birth daughter. And we did not realize how much time has been taken away from her until she said, *hey, you don't see me anymore!* And now I make specific time each week that her and I go out. (Adoptive Mother)

The majority of the adoptive couples (9 of 10) emphasized the challenges involved in interacting with their adoptive child's birth/foster families. This interaction usually was a very anxiety-ridden experience for the adoptive parents because of the fear of intense conflict.

I have had phone conversations with his (birth) mom on a weekly basis before the termination (of parental rights) occurred. Since then the hardest part has been that she (birth mother) has made threats to come and get him. So that would be the hardest thing about our adopted son, to just be alert to that. (Adoptive Mother)

Discussion

Although typical parenting adjustments can be somewhat expected because of previous parenting experience with birth children and/or vicarious experience through other parent friends, adoption-specific adjustments are potentially more challenging because parents often lack experience with adoption issues in their circle of family and friends. Miall (1996) identified the myth of sameness operating when adoptive parents consider that adoption issues are no different than the typical parenting adjustments associated with birth children.

Adoption-specific challenges associated with the application process of adopting a child include the *uncertainty of receiving adoption child* and *adoptive placement suddenness* once the adoption placement decision has been made. Uncertainty of receiving adoption placement is emotionally draining for prospective adoptive parents because the decision often takes a year or more.

Adoption placement suddenness is less emotionally burdensome but more inconvenient to adoptive parents because once they receive notification of placement, they often are given insufficient time to prepare their homes.

Trauma-related challenges and development of secure attachment with adoptive children both highlight McRoy's (1999) point that prospective adoptive parents need to temper their idealism regarding their expectation for a less difficult adoptive child.

Rosenthal, Schmidt, and Conner (1988) found emotional problems with adoptive children are more insidious than developmental or physical problems, which tend to be more easily identifiable. Moreover, trauma-related challenges and development of secure attachment underscore Barth and Berry's (1988) finding that adoptive parents of older adoptive children often are ill-prepared for the lack of responsiveness from their adoptive child. Miall's (1996) myth of sameness applies in that adoptive parents expect their adoptive child to respond to their caregiving efforts as a birth child with no abuse or neglect history would.

The final group of adoption-specific challenges is related to *the expanded adoptive family system* that now includes the *adoptive child interacting with birth/other children from the adopting family* and the *adoptive family interacting with adoptive child's birth/foster family*.

McDonald, Lieberman, Partridge, and Hornby (1991) emphasized the disruption danger that conflict between an adoptive child and birth/other children can have on adoption placements. Thus, it is critical that adoptive parents include their birth/other children in making the decision to adopt so feelings are discussed before underlying resentments develop. Moreover, adoptive parents need to monitor how their adoptive and birth/other children get along so conflict does not escalate and threaten their adoption placement.

Adoptive parents' interaction with their adoptive child's foster/birth family can be the most feared aspect of the adoption process because of the fear of intense conflict.

Thus, development of unrealistic adoptive parent expectations could be interrupted by utilizing descriptions of adoption-specific challenges faced by adoptive parents during placement. Not only would this possibly serve to protect an adoption placement from disruption risk, but may improve the adoption placement experience for family members.

Summary

Rosenthal (1993) noted that unrealistic parent expectations

predict adoption placement disruption. Miall (1996) explained that adoptive parents' unrealistic expectations result from the myth of sameness, whereby adoptive parents perceive adoptive parenting demands to be similar to typical parenting demands associated with birth children. To combat this myth of sameness, it is necessary to describe and differentiate adoption-specific parenting challenges from typical parenting demands. Ten adoptive couples were interviewed to identify adoption-specific family challenges, which included trauma-related challenges, adoption placement suddenness, uncertainty of receiving adoptive placement, development of secure attachment, impact of adoption on birth/other children, adoptive couples' interaction with foster/birth family.

Conclusions

Several adoption-specific family challenges potentially could disrupt adoption placements, although the challenges of uncertainty of receiving adoption placement, interacting with adoptive child's foster/birth family, and the impact of adoption on birth/other children, in particular, call for better coordinated services between adoption caseworkers and families. One recommendation to ease the load of overworked caseworkers while still providing assistance to underserved adoptive families is to pair each adoptive family in pre-placement with a counseling intern. The distinct advantages include cost-effectiveness; allows students to accrue counseling hours with an alternative family form; adoptive families would feel more supported in their parenting abilities during the adoption application phase; adoptive families would have a counselor with whom they could discuss difficulties related to interacting with their adoptive child's foster/birth family, or if conflict arises, between the adoptive child and birth/other children in the family. Furthermore, having counseling interns work with adoptive families has strong potential as a viable service delivery model for needed post-placement therapeutic services.

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