Early Adjustment of International Adoptive Families Compared to Non-Adoptive Families

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Internationaly adopted (IA) infants often arrive in the U.S. with multiple risk factors (e.g., poor prenatal care, premature birth, adverse placement experiences) and show signs of regulatory disorders and adjustment difficulties.
- The adoptive family provides an important caregiving context that will affect the child’s regulatory functioning, emotional and behavioral development, and learning later in life.
- Adoptive parents report positive expectations and satisfaction in parenting, but many experience stress, fear, and anxiety associated with their parental responsibilities, exacerbatng adjustment difficulties of children and parents.

OBJECTIVE

Aim: Examine experiences of adoptive parents and their internationally adopted infants early in their placements in comparison to parents and their nonadopted (NA) infants.

METHOD

Participants

Infants between 6 and 20 months were recruited shortly after (within a month) their arrival to the U.S. Nonadoptive infants were matched on their age and gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IA</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14-16 months</td>
<td>5-21 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14-16 months</td>
<td>5-21 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5-16 months</td>
<td>4-12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5-16 months</td>
<td>4-12 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants’ age at first visit

- IA: 14 months
- NA: 14 months
- Adoptive: 7 months
- NA: 7 months

Procedure

Families participated in two lab visits (three weeks post-arrival and three months after the initial visit). At each visit, three cortisol saliva samples were collected to assess infants’ emotion regulation and stress responsivity. The three cortisol samples were taken early in the visit for baseline, and 20- and 40-minutes after two emotion challenges: a loud noise at a safe volume and the presence of a costumed stranger. The emotion challenges were followed by a free play period. The same experimental protocol was repeated three months later.

Parents’ post-placement experiences and the nature of parenting stress were measured using:
- Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 2002)
- Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1995)
- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).

RESULTS

- At group level, patterns emerged in parental experiences and infant stress responsivity.
- General stress: Both adoptive and nonadoptive parents showed similar perceived stress at Time 1 and Time 2 at a normative level. Across time, average stress levels for both the adoptive and nonadoptive parents decreased from Time 1 to Time 2.
- Infant cortisol: Adoptive and nonadoptive infants showed different patterns of stress responsivity. While on average, adoptive infants showed steady decrease in the cortisol levels across three collection points at Time 1 and Time 2, nonadoptive infants showed changes in cortisol level pattern at Time 2, with a slight increase at the second collection and decrease at the third.

DISCUSSION

- This study highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of internationally adopted infants and their adoptive parents, and contributes to a richer understanding of adoptive parents’ transition to parenthood.
- At a family level, adoptive and nonadoptive parents show no significant differences in their stress level or their perception of family environment. However, when looking specifically at their parenting, parenting stress decreased for adoptive parents, showing a different pattern than the nonadoptive parents. Since adoptive parents have a unique preparatory process for parenthood, and may be prepared for or expecting worst-case scenarios in becoming a parent, they may feel less tense about their parenting within even a short time.
- Interestingly at individual level, the emerging pattern disappears, and each adoptive and nonadoptive parent exhibits unique family and parental experiences. Variability was particularly evident in infants’ stress response systems. Given that each family possesses different constellation of family experiences (e.g., number of siblings in the house, number of months/years being parents, type of parenthood preparation, parents’ age), experiences of parents and infants may be related to specific, individual family structures and characteristics.

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