FAMILY MATTERS
Supporting Adoptive Families with an Attachment-Based Intervention

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‘New worlds of adoption: Growing up in complex families’
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ADOC:
- www.adoptionresearch.nl

Wereldkinderen
- www.wereldkinderen.nl
- Chair Adoption Studies
Overview Family Matters

- Adoptive parents:
  - A shocking case study
- Adopted children’s background:
  - Effects of institutional care: new evidence
- Complex families:
  - The case of adoptive parents
- Attachment-based interventions:
  - What works?
- An intervention for adoptive parents
- Translating research findings into practice
Adoptive parents: A shocking case study

Newspapers

Iowa man kills his 4 Korean adopted children, then himself

MOSCOW — The grim case of a Washington-area toddler who died of heatstroke after his adoptive father left him in a parked vehicle for nine hours is national news in Russia, fodder for angry political commentary and kitchen-table discussion.
The Scientific Debate

Child Abuse Fatalities Among Internationally Adopted Children

Laurie C. Miller
Wilma Chan
Robert A. Reece
Linda Grey Tirella

International Adoption Clinic, New England Medical Center

Adam Pertman
Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

Keywords: child abuse; fatalities; international adoption

More than 250,000 boys and girls have been adopted from other countries by American parents since 1989 (Immigrant Visas Issued, 2006). Most of these children have experienced prenatal risk factors (low birth weight, prematurity, lack of medical care and/or exposure to drugs, alcohol, tobacco), as well as risk even years to complete their international adoptions. Procedural delays and setbacks are common in international adoptions, due in part to the complex requirements of U.S. and foreign government bureaucracies. Throughout the process, significantly, there are multiple opportunities for agencies to appraise and educate the prospective parents. Parents who adopt in

Child Abuse Fatalities

- “Thus, it has been shocking and horrific to realize that, since 1996, there have been 18 fatalities (in 17 families) of internationally adopted children because of suspected or proven cases of abuse and/or neglect by their adoptive parents.”

(Miller et al., Child Maltreatment, 2007, vol. 12, p. 378)
One of the Responses in the Debate

Supporting Parents So That They Can Support Their Internationally Adopted Children: The Larger Challenge Lurking Behind the Fatality Statistics

Megan Gunnar  
Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota

Seth D. Pollak  
Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Madison

We are pleased to be asked to comment on the letter by Miller and colleagues. Adoptive parents in the United States are embracing the option of international adoption on an unprecedented scale. Numbers have

What Do We Really Know?

- But what do we really know about adoptive parents
  - Elevated risk of (fatal) abuse and neglect?
  - Or broader: what about their parenting abilities / coping with stress?

- Evidence from 2 sources:
  - A reply to the scientific debate in Child Maltreatment based on Dutch data
  - First results from a worldwide meta-analysis on adoptive parents
A reply from the Netherlands

- Data collected through all 17 Dutch child protective agencies (CPS) on all cases of certified child maltreatment in 2005
- Family composition of the maltreated children was compared to a large national representative sample in the Netherlands
- No elevated risk of child maltreatment in adoptive families

Van IJzendoorn et al., Leiden University, in prep.
Risk of Abuse and Neglect?

- (Fatal) abuse by adoptive parents is a tragedy for the family as a whole: child, parents and the broader adoptive family network
- However, we should not jump to conclusions based on shocking popular media reports
- Studies should examine the relative risks of adoptive versus nonadoptive parents
  - Netherlands: no evidence of elevated risk
- Also, which risk factors may be involved in / triggered by the child’s background?
Presentation

- Adoptive parents: A shocking case study
- Adopted children’s background
Adopted Children’s Background

- Institutional care:
  - Neglect & abuse
  - Malnutrition

- Lack of nurturing care
- Lack of opportunities to develop secure attachments
Adopted Children’s Background

- Research studies point to ‘structural neglect’ resulting in:
  - Developmental delays
  - Insecure and disorganized attachment
Effects of Pre-Adoption Adversity

- Pre-adoption adversity
  - Separation(s) and loss
  - Malnutrition
  - Neglect and Abuse

- Effects on children’s
  - Cognition
  - Physical growth
  - Attachment
Cognition: IQ of Children in Institutional Care

- Meta-analysis
- 75 studies on IQ of children in institutions
- combined effect: 
  \[ d = 1.10 \]
- mean IQ child in institution is 84
  (normative IQ: 100)

Institutional Care and Subsequent Foster Care: Recent Study

- 136 children in Romanian institutions
- randomly assigned to remain in institutional care ($n = 68$) or placed in foster family ($n = 68$)
- control group: 72 normative children
- significant benefit of placement in family

Nelson et al., 2007 in *Science*
Effects on Cognition: Adoption as Intervention


* significantly different from norm
Physical Growth: Case Study

Van Geest & Juffer, 2007, Adoptietijdschrift (Dutch)
**Meta-Analysis: Reduction of Growth Delay After International Adoption**

![Graph showing reduction of growth delay in height, weight, and head circumference.](image)

The Case Against Institutional Care

- It means loss!
  
  • Loss of centimeters and grams
    – 3 to 4 months stay in institution is 1 month growth delay
  
  • Loss of IQ points
    – Mean IQ child in institutional care is 84 (normative: 100)

  • Loss of emotional security
    – 3 out of 4 children in institutional care are insecurely attached
Meta-analysis of Attachment

- Adoptees more often insecurely attached?
  - Adopted before / after first birthday
  - 17 studies
  - \( N = 772 \) adoptees

- Adoptees more often insecure disorganized?
  - 11 studies
  - \( N = 468 \) adoptees

Risk of Insecure Attachment

Risk of Disorganized Attachment

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  - The case of adoptive parents
The Case of Adoptive Parents

- Complex family
  - Somewhat older, higher SES
  - Background: often infertility
  - No genetic bond with child and permanent (invisible) connection with birth parents
  - Role model handicap (Kirk, Brodzinsky)
  - Plus: confronted with delays and difficulties of post-institutionalized children
Adoptive Parents

- Hypothesis: (somewhat) more difficulties in parenting an adopted child

- Meta-analysis of studies on adoptive parents’ parenting behavior and adjustment

- Preliminary outcomes: no differences

Juffer et al., Leiden University, in prep.
Implications

- Adoptive parents do not seem to be at risk for less optimal personal and parental adaptation
- However, even ‘normative’ parents can be challenged by the delays and difficulties presented by post-institutionalized children
- Therefore, supporting adoptive families is a promising avenue
- And a fruitful focus is: attachment and sensitive discipline
Presentation

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- Attachment-based interventions:
  - What works?
Attachment

- Attachment in infancy predicts later adjustment in adopted children, particularly their social development in middle childhood and adolescence

Stams, Juffer, & Van IJzendoorn, 2002 in Developmental Psychology, vol. 38, p. 806-821

Attachment and Sensitivity

- Children feel (in)secure depending on how their parents comfort/support them
  - How do parents react when children are frightened, tired, ill, etc.? Supportive? Comforting?

- Crucial role for parental sensitivity*

- Resulting in different patterns of (in)secure child-parent attachment relationships

*Confirmed in meta-analysis by De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, Child Development, 1997
Parental Sensitivity

- Parental sensitivity (Ainsworth):
  - Perceiving child signals accurately
  - Responding in adequate / prompt way

- These two elements are important for intervention!
  1. Awareness, perceiving, observing
  2. Reacting
How to Promote Secure Attachment?

- Meta-analysis of intervention studies aimed at promoting secure attachment in children
  - 88 interventions
  - > 7,500 families

Less is More

- Short-term interventions (up to 16 sessions) significantly more effective than longer interventions to promote parental sensitivity

Focus of Intervention Studies
Promoting Secure Attachment

- Sensitivity-focused interventions promote secure attachment in children

Meta-Analysis Disorganized Attachment

- Only sensitivity-focused interventions succeed in reducing disorganized attachment

Conclusions Meta-Analyses

- Less is more
- Sensitivity-focused interventions most effective in:
  - promoting attachment security in children
  - reducing attachment disorganization in children
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Development of VIPP

- Development of VIPP: Video-feedback Intervention to promote Positive Parenting

VIPP

- More than 20 years work in the field of early childhood intervention
- Video with videotaped MODEL not successful*
- Intervention with video-feedback in adoptive families (started in 1985)

* Lambermon & Van IJzendoorn, 1989 in Early Childhood Research Quarterly
Adoptive families

- Randomized control trial
- Adoptive families without (90) and with (40) birth children
- Children from Sri Lanka, South Korea and Colombia
- Adopted at very young age (< 6 months)

Intervention

- Focus on parental sensitivity and adopted child’s attachment security
- Intervention: 3 sessions of video feedback and a personal book with parenting tips

Parental Sensitivity

Significant effect in both sub-samples: adoptive families with(out) birth children

Disorganized Attachment

- Both types of adoptive families:
- Video-feedback group:
- Significant lower number of insecure disorganized attached children

Juffer et al. (JCPP, 2005 and chapter 9 book Promoting Positive Parenting)
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Adoption aftercare service in the Netherlands

• first years after arrival
• offer for every new adopted child (including special-needs and older-placed children, sibling placements)
• up to four visits of video feedback
• parents pay about 100 Euro for this service
Video-Feedback Intervention

- At Leiden University extended to other types of families
- Extended from infants to toddlers and preschoolers
- Elaborated to standardized protocol: VIPP
- Extended with extra module:
  - VIPP-SD focus on Sensitive Discipline
Model for intervention

Intervention

VIPP

VIPP-SD

Discipline

Sensitivity

Attachment security

Fewer child problems
Evidence Base of the VIPP Intervention

VIPP effective in samples of:
- Adopted children
- Insecure mothers
- Children with externalizing problems
- Eating disordered mothers
- Insensitive mothers

Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, Leiden University, in prep.
Presentation

- Children’s attachment security
- Adopted children’s background
- What works?
- An attachment-based intervention for adoptive parents
- Translating research findings into practice
- How does it work?
Features of VIPP

- Home-based
- Short-term (4-6)
- Children 0-5 years
- Use video fragments
- Parents are their own model
- ‘Here and now’ approach
- Focus on strengths, positive moments
- Active involvement of the parent (‘expert’)
- Supporting relationship between home visitor and parent
Video feedback: filming

- Parent and child are videotaped
- During daily situations at home
- Short episodes: 10-30 min.
- For example during play, meals, etc.
Video feedback

- Watching the videotape together
  - Selected fragments + comments

- Focus on positive interaction
Training VIPP-SD

- Training institutes for international audience
- Manual
- Training DVD
- Feedback
Encouraging Security

- Adopted children are at risk of insecure and disorganized attachment
- Short-term interventions like VIPP and VIPP-SD can support adoptive parents
- Video feedback helps parents to react sensitively to a child with subtle signals or ‘mis-cues’
More catch-up than delays in adoptees

- Although they show resilience and catch up, adopted children’s delays and attachment needs require extra, specific attention
- Adoptive parents seem to show normative parental capacities but they may need extra support to help their children
From Holland With Love

- A Dutch present
  - Not a Tulip
  - Not a Mill

- But Music by a Dutch Artist
Lavinia Meijer

Website (Dutch and English):
http://www.laviniameijer.com/

Video clip:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2jQWGky2y4

Harp Solo

A Dutch artist

Adopted as a child from Korea

Played in the 2009 New Year’s concert in Korea where she met her birth father for the first time
Further reading


Websites:
www.socialsciences.leidenuniv.nl/educationandchildstudies/childandfamilystudies/
www.adoptioanresearch.nl