New Worlds of Adoption: Growing Up in Complex Families

Adoptions from the Child Welfare System

Ruth G. McRoy, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Austin
February 20, 2009
Overview of Presentation

• National data on older child adoptions
• Openness in older child placements in general, foster and kinship adoptions
• Implications for research, practice and policy
Characteristics of the 510,000 Children in U.S. Foster Care System (2006)

- Avg. age 9.8 years; 52% Males/60% ethnic minorities
- In care an average of 28.3 months
  - (67,088 in care for 5 yrs or more)

- 129,000 children are awaiting adoption
Reasons for Removal and Placement in Foster Care

- Neglect
- Abuse
- Parental substance abuse
- Parental incarceration
- Child’s behavior
- Inadequate housing
Special Challenges for Youth in Care

• Multiple placement moves/losses
  - Loss of contact with birthparents, community, siblings, culture,

• Perceptions about reasons for removal
  - Child may feel responsible for removal

• Sense of ambiguous loss
  - Birthparent is physically absent but psychologically present
  - Is loss permanent or temporary?
  - Will parent try to get child back?

• Attachment issues

• Identity

• Concerns/Fears about adoption
Special Challenges for Youth in Care

- Physical and mental health problems
  - Mild to severe psychological and behavioral difficulties
- Developmental delays
- Educational difficulties
51,000 children adopted from foster care in 2006

- 51% Male; 49% Female
- Average age—6.6
  - 23% were between 10 -20 years old
- 45% White
  - Majority were ethnic minority
Who Adopted These Children?

- 69% Married couples
- 26% Single females
- 2% Unmarried couples
- 3% Single males
Older Child Placements
Relationship of Adopters to child (2006)

• 60% Foster Parents
• 25% Relatives
  – 40% of adoptions of AA children between 9 and 17 are by relatives
• 15% Non-relatives/General Adopters
Outcomes of Placements from Care

- Most adoptions are stable and remain intact (Barth & Miller, 2000)
- Many of problems experienced by adoptive families do not manifest until several years after the adoption is legally finalized (Smith, Howard & Monroe, 1998)

.
Openness in Older Child Placements

• Rationale
  – Interest in maintaining family continuity
  – Increase in kinship and foster parent adoptions
    • Reducing disruptions for children
  – Most children adopted at older ages have had prior relationship with biological family

• Still limited research on openness outcomes in older child adoptions
Openness and Adoptive Parent-Child Relationships

• Berry (1991; 1998) in California Long Range Adoption Study studied 764 families four years after placement found high levels of satisfaction with their adoption, regardless of whether open or closed.

• Frash, Brooks, Barth (2000) 8 year prospective longitudinal study of 231 foster care adoptions (CLAS) found satisfaction and consistency over time in most arrangements whether open or closed.

• Johnson & Ryan’s (2007) study of openness in families (N=429) with children age 13 or older found:
  – Most families who had contact with birthparents reported positive experiences
Advantages of Contact with Birthfamily and Foster Families in Older Child Placements

• Contact can help youth reconcile pieces of their identity.
• Can help some youth commit to adoption
• Can ease the transition to adoption
  – Hard for children to move on when they’re still worrying about whether their birth family is okay or not.
  – Prior foster families or birth family members can aid transition by assuring child that they love him and that being adopted is okay (NACAC, 2007)
Challenges to Openness

- Substance abusing birthparents
- Inconsistent visitation/broken promises to the child
- Children’s ability to relate to two families
- Birthparent issues--mental health/violence
- Adversarial court proceedings
Complex Family Dynamics in Kinship Placements (Szolnoki & Cahn, 2002)

• Relatives often assume care under stressful circumstances and are responding to crises and problems among family members
  – Child, parent and relative caregiver still within the family

• Relative adopters may suffer grief from multiple losses (Cox, 2002)
  • Loss of old family role; loss of relationship with the child’s parent; fear of loss of the child back to the parent
  • Loss of social support can lead to increased psychological distress (Kelley et al., 2000)
Characteristics of Relative Adopters

- Many are single parents
- Many are African American
- Many are older with limited resources
Kinship Placements: Connective Complexity (Schwartz, 2008)

• Dual connections to caregiver—role ambiguity
  – Is this person my grandmother or my mother?
  – Grandparents who in the past have been in a nurturing, outsider role now must be in parental role of disciplinarian.
  – Boundary issues—physical and psychological presence

• Role Reversal
  – May have to care for parents as well as grandparents

• Challenges to Openness—Child Safety
Best Practices

- Educating caregivers about available services and handling potential conflicts
- Support Groups for youth and caregivers
- Use of family group conferencing beyond placement decision making but throughout case to address relationship complexities
- Training for staff on implications of openness in older child placements
Research Needs

• Examine types of contact between relatives and birthparents
  – Research with a sample of African American relative adopters
• Long term impact of open kinship placements on children, birth parents, and relatives
• Explore issues of boundary ambiguity, grief and loss, identity, attachment outcomes over time
• How do children and birthparents handle a sense of learned helplessness and ambiguous loss?
Research Needs

• Impact of age at placement, multiple placements, sibling separation on attachment
• Role of paternal relatives and birthfathers in contact in these complex families
• Strategies leading to successfully reuniting children with birthparents
• Service delivery strategies to improve birthparent outcomes
• Best practices in maintaining family connections