Preparing, Educating, and Supporting Adoptive Parents: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?

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Rationale for Adoptive Parent Preparation, Education & Support

• Changes in adoption practice have resulted in greater diversity in adoptive family life

• Greater diversity has been accompanied by greater parenting challenges associated with:
  -- increase in adoption of special needs children
  -- increase in transracial placements
  -- increase in open placements
Rationale for APP (con’t)

• Generally assumed that adoptive parent preparation, education and support is associated with:
  -- more realistic expectations on the part of adoptive parents
  -- better parenting skills on the part of adoptive parents
  -- increased support seeking and utilization of relevant supports on the part of adoptive parents
  -- greater stability of adoption placement
  -- greater satisfaction with adoption on the part of adoptive parents
  -- reduced adjustment problems for adopted children
EBDAI: Adoptive Parent Preparation Project

- Seek to develop best-practice standards regarding the preparation, education & support of adoptive parents

- Specific focus is on preparing adoptive parents to better understand & manage the mental health & developmental needs of their children

- Current project does not provide detailed curricula for preparing & educating parents, but rather is a roadmap of the practice principles, educational content areas, and methods that should be followed to ensure that adoptive parents are well-prepared to meet the parenting challenges of adoptive family life
Foundation for Best Practice Standards

• In developing best-practice standards, we relied upon information derived from:

  -- empirical research
  -- social casework literature
  -- existing education and training programs
  -- consultations with adoption agencies, adoption attorneys, & adoption clinical professionals
  -- interviews with adoptive parents
Obstacles to Adoptive Parent Preparation & Education

- Inadequate training of adoption professionals in relation to adoption, mental health, child development, & family dynamics, both in their schooling & on the job

- Insufficient financial & staffing resources to develop & implement ongoing adoptive parent preparation and education programs

- Inadequate guidelines regarding the necessary scope & content for adoptive parent preparation & education programs

- High staff turnover, especially in the public child welfare system
Obstacles (con’t)

• Biases of some adoption professionals who view adoption in an unrealistic manner & either ignore, downplay, or dismiss the differences & challenges that can be associated with adoptive family life

• Under-representation of birthparents & adult adoptees in professional positions associated with child placement and parent preparation

• Viewing adoption as a business focused primarily on making placements, with too little attention to supporting those placements

• Tensions between adoptive parents and professionals that undermine the receptivity of parents to the information & support offered
Obstacles (con’t)

- Inadequate information about a child’s birth family & history
- Inadequate post-adoption services in most communities
- Inadequate training of mental health professionals in areas related to adoption
- Lack of receptivity to the information provided or lack of use of services on the part of parents because of their unique personal vulnerabilities, insecurities, and/or unrealistic expectations & beliefs related to adoption
Basic Beliefs & Principles Underlying Adoptive Parent Preparation and Education

- All children have a right to a loving & permanent family
- When children are unable to live with their biological family, adoption represents an appropriate, normal & healthy way of providing for their physical & emotional well-being
- Adoption is a lifelong experience, with the potential for influencing the person at every stage of development
- Adoption involves the connection of the child to at least two, and possibly more, family systems
- Growing up in an adoptive family is a different and more complex experience than growing up in a biological family
- Adoptive parenting is associated with unique childrearing challenges
- Adoption is connected to the experience of loss, which must be understood, accepted, and respected
Basic Beliefs & Principles (con’t)

• Loss in adoption is normal, not pathological
• Adopted individuals have a right to know about their origins and the circumstances of their adoption
• Respect for the adopted person’s birth family is fundamental to his/her emotional well-being
• Birth family members should be seen as potential resources for children, whenever possible
• Race & culture matter. Children have a right to learn about their race & culture & to take pride in their birth heritage
• Responsible adoptive parenting rests upon a realistic view of adoption
General Recommendations for Adoptive Parent Preparation & Education

- Educate adoption professionals
- Educate mental health professionals
- Make preparation, education, & support a mandatory and ongoing process
- Provide an objective & balanced view of adoption
- Create an environment conducive to effective parent preparation & education
- Utilize a multi-method, multi-source approach to parent preparation & education
Educate Adoption & Mental Health Professionals

• Need to promote the inclusion of adoption training in the curricula of graduate training programs

• Need to develop continuing education programs on adoption geared to all the helping professions

• Educating professionals begins with a self-assessment of their views, beliefs, & attitudes about adoption-related & mental health related issues

• All adoption professionals need to be broadly trained in areas relevant to the preparation, education and support of adoption, including but not limited to:
Educate Professionals (con’t):
Content Areas

• Ongoing changes in adoption practice
• Laws & policy associated with adoption practice
• Awareness of personal values, beliefs, & stereotypes related to adoption & mental health
• How race, ethnicity, culture, & sexual orientation influence adoption practice & adoptive family life
• Biological, experiential, social, & cultural factors influencing child development and adoptive family life
• Mental health issues in adoption
• Developmental issues in adoption
• Family lifecycle & parenting issues in adoption
• Intervention strategies targeting adoption-related issues (e.g., loss & identity)
• Awareness of community resources relevant for adoptive families
• Impact of adoption on birth family
Timing of Adoptive Parent Preparation & Education

- APP&E begins during the homestudy period
- Prospective adoptive parents too often are not ready to assimilate the information at this point because of their focus on getting a child & because of the lack of relevance of certain information for the immediate parenting goals they will face
- APP&E needs to be an ongoing process; there should be natural progression from pre-adoption preparation to post-adoption education & support
- Best practice standards require that APP&E not only be a routine part of the adoption application & placement process but also that it be integrated into a well-developed and accessible post-adoption service program
- For adoption professionals who are unable to provide appropriate post-adoption services, best practice standards require that they be knowledgeable about relevant community resources & provide this information to their clients
Providing an Objective & Balanced View of Adoption

• Successful adoptive parenting rests upon parents developing & maintaining realistic expectations about adoption, their children, & their ability to help their children

• Realistic expectations are one of the best predictors of placement stability, adoption satisfaction, & healthy parent-child relationships

• Facilitating realistic expectations begins with providing an objective & balanced view of adoption (i.e., both the benefits & the challenges/risks associated with adoption) and the adopted child’s background

• Conflict for professionals – what to share & how to share it
Providing an Objective & Balanced View (con’t): What’s are the Issues?

- Birth parents or other birth family members often present with psychological and/or psychosocial histories that are difficult to talk about with adoptive parents.

- Similarly, older placed adopted children often have identifiable problems, or histories, that are difficult to discuss.

- Adoption professionals often don’t know how to discuss these issues – sometimes ignore or minimize them; sometimes exaggerate potential problems in an effort to be forthcoming.
  - inadequate training
  - inconsistent research findings
  - lack of guidelines for discussing “difficult” information
Providing an Objective & Balanced View (con’t):
Basic Principles for Sharing Information

• Full disclosure is absolutely necessary –
  -- allows for better preparation of parents to manage the potential or actual problems that exist
  -- fosters more realistic expectations allowing for an informed decision regarding the adoption
  -- reduces the risk for the agency of a wrongful adoption lawsuit

• Disclosure should be a balanced presentation, allowing for a realistic description of the potential problems but without exaggerating or over-pathologizing the birth parents or the child. Certainly, there should be nothing said that demeans the birth family.

• Disclosure also should provide information which allows parents to expect that their efforts can make a significant difference in the life of the child – perhaps even leading to a very normal pattern of adjustment (but not guaranteeing it).

• In short, disclosure should deal directly with the potential problems, but also offer realistic hope for the possibility positive outcomes -- note the benefits of adoption in the life of children with adverse histories.
Providing an Objective & Balanced View (con’t): Basic Principles for Sharing Information

• Information on a birth parent’s life and adjustment, or a child’s pre-placement life & adjustment, represents person-specific information.

• Translating the implications of this information for long-term adjustment of the child is very difficult, however, for a variety of reasons:

  -- research data are about groups of individuals, which doesn’t necessarily apply to any one person who has a similar experience as the research subjects

  -- there is no single developmental pathway between biological predispositions or early developmental experiences and later forms of psychological adjustment
Concept of Multifinality

- Similar beginnings often lead to different endpoints

- \( C_{1,2,3} \)

  - \( C_1 \) (no long-term problems)
  - \( C_2 \) (mild problems)
  - \( C_3 \) (severe problems)

Prenatal Exposure To Drugs
Concept of Equifinality

• Similar outcomes stem from different beginnings

- **C₁**: Significant Prenatal Exposure To Drugs
- **C₂**: Low Level Prenatal Exposure To Drugs
- **C₃**: No Prenatal Exposure To Drugs
- Normal Range Of Academic Adjustment
Basic Principles (con’t)

- Two Important Concepts to Emphasize:

- Risk – A risk factor is any variable that precedes a negative outcome of interest and increases the chances that the outcome will occur. Risk does not mean that the negative outcome will occur.

- Resilience – A resilience factor is any variable that increases one’s ability to avoid negative outcomes, despite being at risk for adjustment problems.

- Resilience is not a universal or fixed attribute in a child, but varies according to the type of stress experienced by the child, as well as the context of the stress.
Examples of Resilience & Protective Factors

• Child Characteristics
  -- good intellectual functioning
  -- appealing, sociable, easygoing disposition
  -- self-efficacy, self-confidence, high self-esteem
  -- good coping skills
  -- talents

• Family Characteristics
  -- close relationships to caring parents
  -- authoritative parenting (warmth, structure, high expectations)
  -- socioeconomic advantages
  -- connections to extended supportive family
  -- religious faith

• School & Community Characteristics
  -- adults outside of the family who take a positive interest in the child
  -- connections to social organizations
  -- attendance at effective schools
Methods & Strategies for Adoptive Parent Preparation and Education

• APP&E must take into account information about adult learning styles – i.e., that adults learn best through interactive, multi-method, multi-source approaches rather than simply through lecture format or assigned readings; information should have a direct relevance for their immediate goals.

• Typical Preparation & Education
  -- Individual preparation to explore client’s motives, attitudes, expectations, and personal history, as well as to present information on the prospective adopted child
  -- Group sessions focusing on general adoption information, as well as exposure to experienced adoptive parents, adult adoptees, birth parents
  -- Videos, online courses, webinars, assigned readings
  -- Exposure to relevant community resources
Methods & Strategies (con’t)

• Issue: Many adoptive parents aren’t ready to hear what is being presented
  – Personal vulnerabilities
  – Strong sense of self & capacity to parent

• Issue: Don’t know the best methods/strategies for adoptive parent preparation & training; need to develop evidence-based approaches to training and education

  Question: What strategy should be used for validating any specific preparation & training program? What is/are the appropriate outcome variables of interest?
Summary:
Long Term Goals of Adoptive Parent Preparation, Education & Support

• Helping parents
  -- view the world of adoption through their children’s eyes
  -- develop realistic expectations about themselves and their children
  -- develop a range of strategies for managing their children’s behavior
  -- learn about the relevant resources that are available in their community
  -- become open to accepting help
  -- develop the knowledge to explain their children’s needs to others
  -- learn to advocate for their children’s needs
  -- learn about the need for self-care
  -- foster healthy, loving, nurturing, and satisfying relationships with their children