Becoming a Family: Parenting Stress and Internationally Adopted Infants' Stress Responsivity

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Internationally adopted infants often arrive in the U.S. with multiple risk factors (e.g. poor prenatal care, premature birth) and show signs of regulatory disorders and adjustment difficulties (vanIJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). The adoptive family provides an important caregiving context for children's development. Adoptive parents report positive expectations and satisfaction in parenting, but many experience extensive fear, stress and anxiety associated with their new parental responsibilities (McKay & Ross, 2010). This may exacerbate adjustment difficulties of children and parents (Atkinson & Gonet, 2007). This investigation aims to examine experiences of adoptive parents and their internationally adopted infants early in their placements.

Data collection is ongoing; the current sample included 11 newly internationally adopted infants (M=14 months, range=6-20 months; 45% female, 55% male) and their mothers who were recruited from the International Adoption Clinic at a metropolitan medical center. The infants were adopted from China (36%), Russia (18%), Ethiopia (18%), Vietnam (9%), Korea (9%) and Guatemala (9%). Families participated in two lab visits (three weeks post-arrival and three months after the initial visit). Mothers, post-placement experiences were measured using the Adoptive Parent Post-placement Appraisal, a qualitative survey that describes adoptive parents' challenges and problem solving behaviors, the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) (Abidin, 1995) and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), which measure the extent and nature of parenting stress. Additionally, quantitative measures of infant heart rate and salivary cortisol were taken to provide information potentially relevant to the infants' emotion regulation and stress responsivity.

Three salivary cortisol samples were taken from each of the adopted infants at each laboratory visit. The samples represent baseline, and 20-and 40-minutes post-emotion challenge, in order to assess cortisol reactivity and regulation. The two brief emotion challenges (loud noise, costumed figure) were followed by a free play period. The same experimental protocol was repeated three months later, resulting in six cortisol samples retrieved from each of the internationally adopted infants in the study. Preliminary data on 11 infants suggests several patterns of cortisol reactivity and regulation, including potential blunting of the stress response, as well as change over time as infants adapt to their new homes.

Analysis of the parental questionnaires revealed three overarching themes: (1) a strong desire to be the best parent possible and/or to form the strongest bond possible with the child; (2) feelings of anxiety and stress regarding their parenting skills; and (3) a decrease in parental stress across time.

This study highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of internationally adopted infants and their adoptive parents. The initial adoption transition may dysregulate the infant’s stress-response system, and heighten parental anxiety. Yet parenting stress may decrease within even a short time, and infants, stress response systems may become better regulated. Questions remain about the extent to which this is a reciprocal system within the family, as well as the implications for prevention and intervention programs.