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The Influence of Pre-Adoptive Experiences on Children Adopted from Foster Care: Parents’ Perspectives

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Abstract

Research supports that children who have experienced abuse or neglect can experience ongoing behavioral, emotional, developmental and physical health problems as a result of these adverse experiences (Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Simmel et al. 2007). The current study of 29 adoptive parents (8 from lesbian parent families, 5 gay, 3 heterosexual) used thematic analysis to explore parents’ perceptions of how pre-adoptive abuse and neglect influenced their child’s development. Findings indicate that the majority of these parents believed that their child’s pre-adoptive Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) continue to influence their development (including their behavior, emotions, and cognitive abilities). Parents implemented practices such as talking with their child about the circumstances of their adoption and creating structure to address the impact of their child’s ACEs. Future research should explore adoptive parents’ use of external support resources in response to their children’s ACEs.

Introduction

The majority of children in foster care have experienced some form of abuse or neglect (US DHHS, 2015). Experiences of abuse or neglect in childhood are often referred to as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are known to increase the risk of poor health later in life (Felitti et al. 1998). Further, experiences of abuse can contribute to ongoing behavioral, emotional, developmental and physical health problems (Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Simmel et al. 2007). These problems permeate many aspects of a child’s life including academic performance, relationships with peers, extracurricular activities (Tan, 2006), and attachment to parents (Simms, Dubowitz, Szilagyi, 2000). Therefore, many families who adopt a child from foster care face additional stress and challenges in meeting the needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect (Goldberg et al., 2012; Goldberg et al., 2014).

There is a shortage of research regarding how parents conceptualize and talk about their child’s experiences of abuse and/or neglect. It is important to understand parents’ ideas about the impact of their children’s trauma because the extent to which parents attribute their children’s development to their ACEs may influence their parenting practices and use of external support resources.

Research Questions:

- 1) How, and to what extent, do parents conceptualize their child’s adverse pre-adoptive experiences as influencing their overall development, including emotional, behavioral, and cognitive functioning?
- 2) How and to what extent do parents integrate their ideas about their child’s abuse/neglect into their parenting decisions—such as their decisions about school and utilization of support resources?

Method

Participants

Data was gathered from 16 families and a total of 29 parents (both members of six lesbian couples, one member of two lesbian couples, both members of 3 heterosexual couples, both members of four gay couples, and one member of one gay couple). Participants were selected from a larger pool of adoptive parents participating in a longitudinal study on the transition to adoptive parenthood. Participants were selected for the current sample if they adopted a child from foster care and their child had experienced documented pre- or postnatal abuse or neglect. Further demographic data can be found in Table 1.

Procedure

Participants completed semi-structured telephone interviews approximately eight years after their child was placed with them. These interviews lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by ecological systems theory and social constructionism (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Burr, 2003). Analysis focused on the following questions: (a) How is parenting going? (Probe: what has been particularly challenging?). (b) In what ways do you think being adopted (from foster care) impacts your child’s development? (Probes: do you think any of his/her behaviors, emotional experiences, relationships with you/birth family/peers etc. are connected to his/her early life experiences?). (c) What do you see as your child’s main challenges? Can you tell me about any emotional/social, behavioral, cognitive, and physical challenges that your child might have? (d) Do you ever think about genetics and the role they play in your child’s life at this point?

Table 1
Sample Demographics

Family Level Demographics	M (SD) or N (% of 16)
Family Income	\$83,360.00 (\$80,166.51)
Family Type	
Lesbian	8 (50%)
Gay	3 (19%)
Heterosexual	5 (31%)
Child Age	
8 to less than 12	7 (44%)
12 to less than 16	8 (50%)
21	1 (6%)
Child Age at Adoption	
Less than 1 year	4 (25%)
1 to less than 5 years	5 (31%)
5 to less than 8 years	5 (31%)
8-12	2 (13%)
Child Gender	
Boy	9 (56%)
Girl	7 (44%)
Child Race	
White	5 (31%)
Latinx	6 (38%)
Black/African American/Canadian	3 (19%)
Multiracial	2 (13%)
Parent Level Demographics	N (% of 29)
Parent Race	
White	24 (83%)
Latinx	2 (7%)
Black/African American/Canadian	2 (7%)
Multiracial	1 (3%)

Results

How Parents Conceptualize the Impact of ACEs

Although some parents did not talk about the influence of adverse pre-adoptive experiences on their child, most (21 parents, 72%) did. These parents discussed uncertainty regarding to what extent their children were influenced by ACEs versus other factors, the frameworks they created to understand the impact of their children’s ACEs, and the areas that they believed their children’s adverse pre-adoptive experiences impacted.

Uncertain about What is Due to ACEs

Seven parents (four lesbian mothers, one heterosexual mother, and one gay father) from six families described being uncertain about whether a characteristic of their child was due to their adverse pre-adoptive experiences or other factors, such as their child’s innate personality or genetics. Philip discussed being uncertain to what extent his son’s behaviors were the result of genetics or “**something that happened because of what he was exposed to when he was in the room.**”

Frameworks for Understanding the Impact of ACEs

Eight parents (seven lesbian mothers and one gay father) from five families utilized distinct frameworks to understand their children’s adverse pre-adoptive experiences.

ACEs Resulting in a Medical Problem

Two parents, who each had a child with suspected Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), characterized the impact of the children’s abuse as a medical problem. Ellen (lesbian mother) explained that her daughter “**essentially has a brain injury.**”

ACEs Resulting in a Learned Behavior

The other six parents indicated that their children learned certain behaviors as a result of their abuse or neglect. Tasha (lesbian mother) explained, “**when you grow up in a family when there is no structure and the parents aren’t being parents, that really skews your outlook on life.**” Thus, these parents drew from a social learning framework to understand how adverse experiences influenced their children.

ACEs Do No Impact My Child

Two parents (one heterosexual mother and one gay father) indicated that their children’s adverse pre-adoptive experiences did not influence their development. Victoria claimed that her daughter’s experience in her adoptive family (“**how I treated her, her whole life**”) was the reason that she did not exhibit lasting attachment problems.

ACEs Impact My Child’s Development

Behavioral

Fourteen parents (eleven lesbian mothers, one heterosexual father, and one gay father) from nine families discussed the influence of ACEs on their child’s behavior. Patty (lesbian mother) reported that her son’s drug exposure causes him to have “**hyperactivity and impulsivity,**” which she cites as the reason “**he ran in the street.**”

Emotional

Ten parents (six lesbian mothers, one heterosexual mother, and two gay fathers) from eight families discussed the influence that their child’s abuse and neglect had on their emotional development, which manifested as anxiety, depression, and mood instability. Simone (lesbian mother) reported, “**There are times where she does express something with anger or emotion and we’re relieved and happy. Like okay, this is good. You need to get it out. . .Because we’re not seeing it as much as we think we should be.**”

Cognitive

Five parents (three lesbian mothers, one heterosexual father, one gay father) from three families discussed the impact of their children’s ACEs on their cognition. Laura (lesbian mother) explained that when it comes to more lenient parenting “**it’s my sense that kids from care think—they read it differently, they don’t read it like bio kids do.**” Instead, Laura argued, her kids “**read [leniency] as ‘you don’t care for me and I don’t matter.’**”

Physiological

Three parents (two lesbian and one gay father) from three families discussed the physiological impact of their children’s ACEs. These parents attribute their children’s permanent physical features, such as body size and head shape to their early neglect. Hannah said of her daughter, “**I think she will forever be smaller than she could have been if she had gotten the early nutrition that she needed.**”

Parenting Practices: How Parents Respond to ACEs

Parents discussed the practices they implemented based on their understanding of the impact of ACEs on their child. Parents emphasized talking with their children about the circumstances of their adoption, maintaining structure, and modifying their children’s behaviors.

Talking to Child about their Adoption

Nine parents (five lesbian mothers, one heterosexual father, and three gay fathers) from eight families reported discussing the circumstances of their child’s adoption with their child. All parents except two gay fathers indicated that these discussions were important for various reasons, including helping their children to understand their story (“**we’ve never tried to hide who they are or what their history is or where they come from**”), situate themselves in the family (“**she remembers very clearly the process by which we became a family and so it’s just part of our story**”), or come to terms with their adverse pre-adoptive experiences (“**it’s not because they didn’t love you, things are bigger than love sometimes, negatively**”).

Structure

Four lesbian mothers from three families discussed the importance of maintaining structure because of their children’s adverse pre-adoptive experiences. When her son was first placed with her Kim (lesbian mother) reasoned, “**he’s had a lot of loss, changes, trauma, issues, let’s just play this out a little bit and see if we have the therapy in place, let’s put some structure in place.**”

Modification

Four parents (two lesbian mothers, one heterosexual mother, and one heterosexual father) from four families discussed modifying their children’s ACE-related behaviors or cognitions. Amy (heterosexual mother) described trying to help her son feel comfortable making mistakes. For example, she would say, “**even I don’t know what this means**” when helping him with his math homework.

Conclusion

The majority of parents in the sample (72%) believed that their child’s ACEs continue to impact their development (including their behavior, emotions, and cognitive abilities). Parents implemented practices such as talking with their child about the circumstances of their adoption and modifying ACE-related behaviors to address the impact of their child’s ACEs. Researchers should explore adoptive parents’ use of external support resources in response to their children’s ACEs. Future research should also investigate to what extent parents’ perceptions of the impact of ACEs differ based on measurable differences in their children’s behavior, emotions, or cognitive abilities (e.g., whether parents who perceive their child’s ACEs as more impactful have children with more severe disabilities).

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