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# Understanding Adoptive Families

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Historically, adoptions grew out of the need for a couple who could not have their own children to adopt a healthy infant who “matched” their “perceived” natural child.

Society passed on to adoptive parents all the legal rights and responsibilities of parenthood and cloaked the process with secrecy to protect the court-directed family union. The child was intended to grow up as a “natural” child, often not told of the adoption. Social agencies gradually refined the process, but initially, professionals concluded that building a family through adoption was essentially the same as by birth.

Over time, the adoption process evolved into a complex system of three interlocking systems of providers (social, legal, and medical) giving services to three consumers (biological parents, a child to be adopted, and the prospective adoptive parents). In some complex cases, upwards to twenty providers are giving services, representing a variety of professional bureaucratic roles, in a single case of adoption. The minimum is three.

Today, professionals have come to realize:

- That adoptive families are unique;
- That the process and context of adoption has changed dramatically; and
- That understanding, communication and relationships about nurturing (building) a family through adoption are the keys to meaningful outcomes and fulfillment.

Today, about two percent (2%) of the adults in the United States become adoptive parents each year, a truly significant volume of new families annually. Yet, a full range of services to these families are lacking or incomplete, particularly in the area of parenting preparation and in dealing with changing needs of the family in the adoption process.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) called attention to their problem, stating, “Some client populations (adoptive parents) have been so neglected or treated with such insensitivity that to recognize their special needs and to practice with them...may be the first step toward developing an advocacy for...adoptive parents... (“Adoptive Parents and Vietnam Veterans...Two Neglected Populations,” NASW Practice Digest, Winter, 1985).

## **Adoptive Families are Unique**

Although originally intended to be a natural process, there is little that could be considered “natural” about the adoption process today. There is little predictability about the process like there is in the birth process. A pregnancy is a defined period of time in which parental expectations and preparations of both the home environment and climate of feelings can build in anticipation for the birth.

With adoption, almost total unpredictability is the rule, not the exception. The uncertainty is compounded by layers of bureaucratic scrutiny that puts the “worth” of the prospective adoptive parents under examination that, to some, seems like a congressional appointment. The intent is positive – to find the best parents available; what gets examined to make this

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judgment is often in question. This qualification process is hard to compare to any process that “natural” parents go through in our society (or any other role, for that matter).

Because of the unpredictability and unusual scrutiny, apprehension and anxiety usually accompany every step of the way through the process. Waiting the results of medical tests, fertility exams, the outcome of the home study, the decision of the application, the anticipation of the placement and the final adoption decree – all milestones are peaked with anxiety and fear of disapproval. In addition, the extended family of the adoptive parents and the circle of friends tend to be less supportive of the prospective adoption that the parents anticipated. Commonly, a vague feeling of “unnaturalness” is projected; frequently the extended family is openly opposed to the idea.

Unlike a pregnancy, the process of bringing a child into the home through adoption can sometimes stretch over a period of 2-3 years, even longer in some cases. This prolonged period of uncertainty can add undue stress to a marriage and can diminish the enthusiasm for parenting that initiated the process.

The adoption milestones of scrutiny constantly bring up life issues that are not easy to resolve in a once-and-for-all fashion (such as fertility), and touch some of the deepest held fears that people have for issues of competency, worth and survival. These are heavy issues.

However, with information, understanding, preparation and sensitive handling, these life issues can be essentially resolved and channeled into a lifetime and lifestyle of meaningful relationships and family unity.

Adoptive families cannot be expected to negotiate the maze of issues in adoption by a random walk through the process; rather, they need systematic assistance, guidance and preparations to help make the process successful, meaningful and fulfilling. Ideally, nurturing preparations should overshadow the discomfort of the process to put adoptions closer to a “natural” experience to parenthood.

Uniqueness shows up as well in the family systems factors. The elements of the family system include the unique genes and development history of the adopted child and the on-going inherent ties that the child has to the biological family. The early life experiences of the adopted child are often more traumatic, particularly if adopted with an interim foster home placement or institutional care. Some of these children show a diminished sense of self-worth and security.

Generally in most adoption situations, a sense of loss intertwines within the family system, both from the parents’ chronic reminder of loss dealing with infertility and from the on-going sense of loss in the child about the biological parents. Although these loss issues are never 100% resolved, they can certainly be resolved so that they do not interfere with day-to-day happiness and an overriding sense of family unity and love. However, these issues have to be reworked at each milestone in order to keep them from becoming “center stage” or in the “spotlight.”

Initially in an adoption, there are many mixed feelings that affect the relationships and control the issues of day-to-day living and interplay between the members of the adoptive family. These are best resolved by being aware of them, understanding their makeup and origin and developing ways to nurture the positive elements in each situation.

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Adoptive relationships, like other meaningful relationships such as marriage, may launch into a state of bliss initially and then phase into a negative period during which time issues of day-to-day living need to be resolved. Thereafter, the relationships stabilize through reworking the issues into an even keel family environment for growth, learning and loving.

### **The Process and Context of Adoption Has Changed**

The changing winds of adoption have put adoption agencies and programs into a buffeted state of change. Perhaps the biggest change is that healthy infant adoptions are significantly reduced in numbers and that expressed interests by families to adopt are significantly increased.

The trends today are for the adoption of special needs children, for all waiting children (usually older children) to be adopted, for older couples, or disabled or handicapped parents to adopt, for the full range of lifestyles, such as singles, gays and lesbians to adopt. There is a renewed interest in international adoptions from several corners of the globe. At times, there are massive efforts to place children from institutions in threat of political chaos or war, or as a response to natural disaster, such as earthquakes. "Operation Babylift" during the Vietnam conflict airlifted out huge planes of infants to distribute through organized international adoption agencies in the States. The "Adoption Window" opened briefly in Romania when a number of families raced in spontaneously to take children out of orphanages. Although the intention is to rescue children from a lifetime of despair, such adoptions are also subject to a considerable risk for a lifetime of pain, disappointment and further rejection.

### **Nurturing Families Through Adoption**

Basically, adoption agencies seek parents with good, healthy parenting skills to provide the best home possible for an adopted child. But agencies face a dilemma because adoption authorities currently have no proven procedures for identifying what is the core of their services, namely: "What constitutes quality parenting?"

Rather, they are forced to concentrate on what makes for a good "home" and self-stated information in the social histories of the prospective adoptive parents. An experienced professional social worker can usually sort through much of the interview information and make professional judgments that are generally influenced by the agency's criteria in two categories: first, there are status, employment record, legal residence, educational background, religion, race, gender and nationality; then there are quality judgments of the not-so-easy-to-document criteria, such as marital stability, the quality of emotional health or personality factors, the social climate of the neighborhood and the motivation for adoption. The judgments are usually based on the professional abilities of the interviewer and the agency's policy on what they are looking for (or what disqualifies) in relationship to how many children are available for adoption or placement.

Because the number of waiting adoptive parents far exceeds the number of infant children available for adoption, the "disqualifier" elements sometimes overshadow the potentially good elements. The bottom line of the adoption agency is to select, with the means available, the adoptive parents with the best parenting skills to raise an adopted child. Unfortunately, it is in this area of selection where the criteria get muddy.

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Generally, adoption agencies use three basic criteria in evaluating parenting skills:

- The parenting experience that the adults have had as children in their families of origin;
- What experiences they have had with children (nieces, nephews, summer camp counseling, teaching, activities with neighborhood children, etc.) and;
- The self-stated examples of how the applicants would address the special needs of the child, such as communicating the child's heritage, the issues of why and how the child was adopted and how general parenting would be given.

Unless the applicants have previously adopted a child, most prospective adoptive parents have little experience to draw upon in how to deal with these issues. Their past experiences as children or youth are too often filtered by their need to present themselves in a positive light as possible with the agency.

To show their positive side, adoptive applicants seldom can demonstrate their innate potentials for parenting skills because there is not mechanism available to tap these skills in observable or documented ways. And most important, there are few opportunities for adoptive parents to hone or refine these inherent skills for practice in their new or anticipated families. For some families, they need an opportunity to set aside, through experimental learning, the possible artifacts of dysfunction that may have been passed on from the previous generation.

The Nurturing Parenting Program addresses their need to be informed, to be aware, to identify good parenting skills, to practice them daily and to resolve through communication the major issues that arise through adoptions. The goal is to have healthy and fulfilled birth and adoptive families through nurturing.

### Adoption Alphabet: Issues in the Adoption Process

- A** Attitudes
- B** Bonding & Attachment
- C** Communication & Culture
- D** Developmental Awareness
- E** Expectations & Empathy
- F** Family System Factors & Fertility
- G** Grief & Loss
- H** Heritage
- I** Identify & Information
- J** Jeopardy of "Reclaiming Fear"
- K** Kinship & Genealogy
- L** Laws
- M** Motivation
- N** Nurturing
- O** Opportunity
- P** Parenting Preparation & Physical Punishment
- Q** Quality of Relationships
- R** Roles, Rights & Responsibilities
- S** Support & Special Needs
- T** Time Related to Work Assignments & Age
- U** Uniqueness
- V** Values
- W** Worth
- X-Y** Gender Chromosome Significance
- Z** Zip Code & Context of Community