

**Field-Initiated Research on
Successful Adolescent Adoptions
Executive Summary
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The Center for Child and Family Studies in the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina with collaboration from the South Carolina Department of Social Services conducted a research study entitled *Successful Adolescent Adoptions*. This study focused on families who “successfully” adopted children as adolescents and was designed to expand knowledge on adolescent, family, and systems factors associated with successful adoptive placements for adolescents. The United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families funded this study under the Adoption Opportunities Demonstration Projects category. The priority area was targeted field-initiated research and service demonstration. This study examined six research questions through a qualitative research design.

1. What is successful adolescent adoption on three levels: placement, maintenance, and beneficial outcomes?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines “success” or “successful” in two ways that are relevant to adolescent adoption: 1) the achievement of something desired or planned and 2) having a favorable outcome. As to the first definition, all of the parents in this study planned to maintain the adoption with no disruptions or dissolutions; at the time of the interview, they all had succeeded with at least one adolescent adoption. However, two of the families who adopted sibling groups were unable to successfully adopt one of the siblings. As to the second definition, parents in this study said that favorable outcomes must be viewed relative to each adolescent. Many said that adoptive parents must have realistic expectations for the adolescent. For example, while a favorable outcome for one adolescent may be obtaining an advanced degree, another might be expected to complete high school successfully. Several parents reported that the adolescents they adopted were doing well in their adult lives.

In previous research studies, stability and quality of relationships were identified as common indicators of adoption success. Over half of the parents in this study talked about success in

terms of the family relationship. They said their adoptions were successful because they function and feel like a family. A few also talked about stability in terms of everyone having survived the experience so far. The teen is still in the home, and everybody is still alive.

Adoptees also defined success in terms of stability and relationships. They were asked to rate the adoption experience on a scale from great to awful. Most rated it very positively indicating they thought it was pretty great. When asked to explain their high ratings, the adoptees talked about the normalcy of their current life. They were finally a part of a “normal” family. Stability, or having a permanent home, was key to their positive ratings. They also talked about family relationships in terms of having parents instead of caseworkers, being safe and secure, and doing the things a normal teen does.

Parents and adoptees also talked about life being better. Both talked about having families and being loved. Many adoptees seemed especially excited about having a new extended family. Some were experiencing grandparents for the first time. Parents talked about their satisfaction with their families and their pride in their children’s accomplishments.

2. What factors correlate with successful adolescent adoption?

Sorting out exactly why some adoptions work and others do not is challenging and beyond the scope of this research. It appears that there are some things that contribute to successful adoptions, but these factors are not present to the same degree in every successful adoption. Parents and teens in this study identified four keys to success: commitment, personality, support, and assistance when needed. These keys suggest some of what is needed to make adoptions work.

Commitment. Both parents and adoptees talked about a need for commitment in terms of making the adoption work no matter what. Adoptees described commitment as working with their parents, and parents described it as “hanging in

there” no matter how difficult. It appears that people approach commitment in different ways. Some parents and adoptees are committed to the *concept* of adoption. In other words, they decide to adopt or be adopted and make it work regardless of the person involved. Others bond or attach to a particular person and make a commitment to that person. In some cases, this bond is immediate, based solely on looking at a picture or meeting the person one time. Other times, the parties must get to know one another before becoming attached.

Personality. Parents and adoptees talked about personality being a key to successful adoption. Adoptees thought having a positive attitude was important, while parents talked about flexibility and having a sense of humor as being key. Both thought that it was the commitment of all parties working together that made the biggest difference. Adoptees also said it was important for the parents and teens to be compatible. It makes things much easier when those involved have common interests and get along well.

Support. Both parents and adoptees talked about the need for support. Both groups seem to be saying, do not go it alone. Parents talked about getting support from a variety of people including professionals, family, and friends. Adoptees just talked about needing the support of their adoptive parents. A few parents talked about getting their ultimate support from God. Things just seemed to work out. Regardless of the source, it is clear that having someone to talk to or someone who will listen and give advice during the difficult times is important.

Assistance When Needed. A review of the disruption data was instructive in determining what parents needed during the difficult periods. It is apparent that getting help at critical periods is key. This means the parents have to ask for the help in a timely fashion and, when services are needed, the agency must respond to the families’ needs in a timely manner. Most of the parents in this study got the help they needed when they needed it.

3. How do adoptive parents make the decision to adopt?

There is no simple answer as to how parents make the decision to adopt. Based on interviews with parents in this study, it is clear that the decision to adopt is a process, not an event. There are many identifiable steps in this process, and people enter the process at different points depending, in part, on their initial view of adoption. About half the parents in this study (59%) said they planned to adopt, and 41% had no plans to do so. Parents with plans to adopt were either actively searching for a child or passively open to the prospect of adoption. Parents with plans to adopt identified four reasons for adopting: infertility issues, empty nest syndrome, single but wanted children, or always wanted to adopt. Those with no plans to adopt came to their decision because they found a specific child in need of a home and they decided to adopt that child. In this study, parents not looking to adopt came in contact with the children they later adopted through volunteer activities, chance encounters, or foster parenting. Those who first served as foster parents without the initial interest in adopting said they decided to adopt because someone asked them to adopt the child, they became attached to the child, or they wanted to provide some stability and support for the child.

Parents who planned to adopt followed a search process that initially involved investigating the possibility of adoption, identifying an adoption agency that met their needs, meeting training requirements for that agency, and then working with the agency to actively search for a child. In searching for a child, over one-third of the parents (38%) in this study used whatever resources were available to them, including both public and private adoption agencies or the Internet. The process of finding a child to adopt and going through the placement procedures often took years and many parents had to adjust their initial search criteria in order to find a child.

Passive adopters and those with no plans to adopt did not actively search for a child. They skipped the initial search steps described above.

These parents found a specific child and then decided to adopt that child because they had some emotional attachment to him or her. These parents then contacted the adoption agency and determined what they had to do in order to adopt that child. The paths of those who planned to adopt and those who did not plan to adopt converged at the point of finding a child. From that point forward, they followed similar steps in adopting the child.

After finding a specific child to adopt, the child visited the new family to get to know it better. After the visitation period, the adolescent moved into the adoptive home. Most states require the child be in the home at least six months prior to the finalization of the adoption.

Based on the parents' descriptions of their progress through this decision making process, factors that either facilitated or inhibited progress toward the adoption were identified. For example, there was no set amount of time required for visitation prior to the child moving into the adoptive home. The caseworker, parents, and the adoptee typically determined when the child moved into the home. In some cases, the visitation period was cut short and the adolescent moved into the home after very few visits. Although these families continued with the adoption and successfully finalized, they had a more difficult adjustment period than others with a lengthier visitation. Facilitating and inhibiting factors are described in detail in the full report.

When asked why they chose a specific child, about half of the parents in this study said emotions were the leading factor. This was especially true for those parents with no plans to adopt. Parents who adopted for emotional reasons talked about making a connection, clicking with the child, and experiencing love at first sight. The more practical decisions about age, gender, and race appeared less important. Many of the parents with plans to adopt "stretched" the age range of the child they were willing to accept because they connected in some way with an older child. For the other half of parents in this study, practicality took the lead. These parents talked about providing a

home to a child, finding a good match, or providing opportunities for the child. The personal connection did not play as prominent a role.

4. How do adolescents influence the decision to adopt?

The role of adolescents in the adoption decision-making process is complex. As minors, they are not in full control of the decision to be adopted. The actual legal decisions about adoption are ultimately left up to the adults. However, adolescents in this study did influence adoption-related decisions through their involvement in the adoption process and their acceptance of the adoption decision. Agency policies, caseworker attitudes, and individual characteristics of the adolescents shaped the adolescents' involvement in the process and acceptance of the adoption decision.

The responses of teens in this study indicated that their involvement in various aspects of the adoption process not only helped to shape the direction of the adoption, but also helped their own acceptance of the process. The caseworkers in this study who promoted involvement communicated openly with the adoptees throughout the process. They kept the adolescents informed of the termination-of-parental-rights process, sought their opinions concerning the type of families the adoptees were seeking, and allowed them to control some aspects of the process such as the timing of placement or finalization. Agencies that promoted involvement did so by having visitation and trial placement periods so that teens could become acquainted with the prospective adoptive families and determine whether they wanted to become part of those families. Some of the adolescents promoted their own involvement in the adoption decision-making process by being vocal about their desire to be adopted and about the types of families they preferred. Allowing adolescents more opportunities to be involved in the process helped them become more invested in and accepting of that process.

Data analysis revealed that teens' acceptance of adoption is a two-part process. Teens accept the need for adoption and then accept adoption by a particular family. In this study, the adolescents' acceptance of the need for adoption was facilitated by their involvement in the adoption process. This involvement helped them to better understand their birth parents' issues and problems. This in turn helped them to realize that their parents could not adequately perform as parents. Coming to terms with birth family issues helped these teens move on with their lives and accept the need for adoption. Adoptees in this study who dealt with these issues prior to adoption finalization adjusted to the new family more easily.

Adoptees in this study described having a family, better opportunities, someone to love them, and being with their siblings as reasons for accepting adoption by a particular family. Most of the difficulties anticipated by the adoptees related to adjusting to new situations and having to make more changes. Many of these adolescents had already experienced many moves and adjustments. They anticipated that this adjustment to adoption would also be difficult. The idea that this might be the last time they make this type of adjustment probably made the prospect a little easier to bear. They continued to worry about being rejected by the family or the community. Although many had given up on their birth family's taking care of them, they still cared deeply about them and worried they were betraying them by moving on. Having continued contact was important to many. The fact that these teens could weigh the pros and cons and accept adoption is a testament to their desire for an improved existence despite the anticipated difficulties. Findings in this study indicated that adolescents need a voice in the adoption process.

5. Do the findings from the study suggest testable models to predict successful adoption?

Rather than propose testable models, a series of questions were generated that could form the basis for additional investigations or studies. Five sets of questions are included here.

1. Are those adopted during adolescence delayed in comparison to adolescents raised in birth families? In comparison to those remaining in foster care until they age out? If so, in what areas are they delayed? What are the implications of these delays for programs offered for these adoptees and for those aging out of foster care? At what age do those adopted as adolescents graduate from high school? At what age do those aging out of foster care graduate?
2. What is the opinion of adolescents currently in foster care concerning adoption? Would they like to be adopted? Would they like to know more about adoption? If they would like to be adopted, what is keeping them from being adopted? If they are opposed to adoption, what would it take to convince them to be adopted? If they had to be convinced, would they have adoption success rates similar to those who did not have to be convinced? Would they have more difficult adjustment periods than those who did not have to be convinced?
3. What role do caseworkers have in the parents' decision to adopt? What role do they play in the adolescent's adoption? Do child protective service caseworkers have an impact? What kind of impact? What about adoption caseworkers? What is the current attitude of caseworkers concerning teen adoption? How much of an impact do these caseworkers have on teens' opinions of adoption?
4. What programs or services have been established in states for those aging out of foster care? Are parts of these programs available to adoptees? Are these programs or services acting as disincentives to adolescent adoptions? If so, what can be done to eliminate the disincentives? Are these new services and programs helping youth as they age out of foster care? Do adopted adolescents need these services? If provided, would they help adoptees make the transition to the adult world more smoothly?

5. Would a recruitment effort focusing on helping teens and adults form attachments help to increase the number of adolescent adoptions? Would it increase the success rate of adoptions? Would these programs or a variation of them be useful in stretching prospective parents with regard to the age of the child at adoption?

Discussion

It is clear that a variety of future studies or investigations are needed. Researchers are advised that many teens are very emotional about the issues around their adoption. They have put it behind them and often do not want to talk about it with anyone. They want to have normal lives and not be singled out. This makes it difficult to obtain a representative sample of teens and gather all of the perspectives teens have concerning adoption. Different data collection strategies may be useful in overcoming some of these difficulties. A few of the teens complained about paperwork associated with adoptions so researchers are cautioned about paper and pencil data collection. Some Web-based data collection tools may be more appealing to younger adoptees.

Some of the questions asked in these interviews would lend themselves well to focus group interviews. With focus groups, parents and teens separately could come to consensus on some of the issues and would strengthen the findings. A combination parent and adoptee focus group might also provide insight on some issues. Researchers should consider this approach in future studies.

6. What are the practice and policy implication of the findings?

Based on findings in this study, a variety of recommendations can be made to improve practice in the adoption field.

1. *Include recruitment strategies that offer opportunities for adults in the community to get to know teens in foster care.* Some teens and adults will make an adoption decision only after forming an attachment to a

specific person. While many adults would not consider a huge commitment like adoption, or even foster care, they might be willing to commit a few hours a week to a foster child. Once they form an attachment, these adults could then be recruited for adoption. In order to capture those who need to form an attachment, new programs should be created, or community programs utilized (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Junior Achievement, 4H, Special Olympics, school service projects, etc.), to provide opportunities for foster youth to meet and form relationships with adults. Adults should be encouraged to volunteer in community programs, and foster youth should be encouraged to become involved or volunteer in these programs.

2. *Recognize that parents will proceed at varying speeds through the adoption process; programs should accommodate their varied needs.* Some parents are eager and in a hurry to find a child to adopt while others will gather information and take their time in making adoption-related decisions. Some people take months or even years to come to a decision to adopt. Unless people make a decision not to adopt, they should still be considered potential adoptive parents, and information may need to continue to be shared with them over a period of time rather than only at the beginning of the process. Parents who are in a hurry should be provided information as quickly as possible and be counseled about realistic time frames for going through the steps of the adoption process.
3. *Develop a coordinated orientation program for parents considering adoption.* The findings suggest that public and private adoption agencies operate separately and do not coordinate services needed by families as they begin investigating the possibility of adoption. As a result, prospective adoptive parents often have to contact several agencies before they obtain the information they need. A coordinated effort among agencies to provide basic orientation sessions on adoption throughout the year

would help people gather enough information so they can make a decision about whether they want to pursue adoption. These sessions, and/or possibly a Web site, should include information about all of the agencies in the community or state that provide adoption services. A coordinated effort would streamline the investigation process, put prospective adopters in contact with an agency appropriate for their needs, and decrease the number of people turned off by the process early on.

4. *Support prospective adoptive parents and provide information to them as they work through the “stretching” process, but allow them to initiate the stretching whenever possible.* At the time of the actual search for a child, many people are discouraged at not finding a child that fits their criteria. Some continue their search, adjusting their criteria as they realize they may not be able to find their ideal child in a realistic time frame. Others may need support without pressure to more gradually expand their established criteria about the type of child acceptable to them.
5. *Allow parents and adolescents to have an adequate visitation schedule prior to moving the adolescents into the home.* Speeding up the visitation too much may result in a more difficult adjustment period because both parties have to get to know each other and learn to live together at the same time. When a full visitation schedule is not possible, provide extra support to the parent and adolescent to help them with this dual adjustment.
6. *Employ caseworkers who specialize in adolescent adoptions. These caseworkers should have positive attitudes about teens and be eager to find permanent homes for them. Include teens in the adoption process. Streamline the process as much as possible so that the teens can be adopted when they are ready.* Many adolescents are adopted because a dedicated caseworker is determined to find a good home for them. With the proper preparation and support,

teens can be convinced that adoption is a good alternative for them. Once they have accepted this fact, teens wanted the legal process to move swiftly so that they can move forward with their lives.

7. *Individually prepare adolescents for the adoption process by doing six key steps: 1) explain their legal status, 2) offer adoption as a viable option for permanence, 3) offer support and information as they consider adoption, 4) explain how the adoption process will proceed, 5) assess adolescents to determine their level of adjustment regarding birth family issues, and 6) provide support as needed to help them deal with these birth family issues appropriately.* Keeping adolescents aware of what is happening and what may happen to them is important. When they do not know what is going on, they tend to make up their own story, which seems to make them more worried about the process.
8. *Design and implement an adoption training program that focuses on various age ranges of children to be adopted (e.g., infant, toddler, school-aged, adolescent, etc.) and that includes information on resources available to families both before and after the adoption.* All adoption agencies provide basic adoption preparation training, but not all agencies offer adoption training focused on the age of the child to be adopted. Adopting parents need to be prepared for the types of challenges they are most likely to experience with their child, and they will be more receptive to all of the information shared during the training if they can see how it pertains to their own adoption. Adopting parents particularly seem to like hearing from others who have adopted in the same age range. While it is difficult to discuss specific services available to each individual family in a group setting, a thorough overview of the types of resources and supports that exist would be beneficial to adopting parents to at least give them some idea of what is out there. Individualized follow-up is needed after the

training to insure parents remember what resources are available.

9. *Provide formal and informal support groups to families throughout the adoption process and into the adoption.* Adolescents who have spent time in foster care or in orphanages are prone to having special issues that can make adjusting to family life more difficult. Families, both parents and teens, can benefit from talking to others who have been or are going through the similar situations. Support groups are especially useful beginning when the child moves into the home and continuing into the first year or two after finalization. It is important to remember that this is a very busy period in these families' lives and that unless the support groups are conveniently located, the families are unlikely to attend. An alternative for these families might be an online chat room or LISTSERV where adoptive parents and adopted teens can talk to others about their shared experiences and exchange ideas.
10. *Provide monetary and other supports throughout the adoption.* Most families, regardless of their income, benefit from receiving a subsidy for the adolescents they adopt. While some families would not be able to adopt without financial assistance, others are able to use the subsidy to help with counseling expenses or to provide extras to the teen that they would not otherwise be able to afford, such as braces, summer camp, tutoring sessions, or private school. Subsidies can be especially useful for teens wishing to attend college, as their adoptive parents frequently have not had much time to prepare and save for this expense. Many adoptive parents report that their teens are about two years behind their peers as far as their social and educational development is concerned. A lot of these adolescents will not complete high school until they are 19 or 20 years old. Consequently, financial support to these families should continue past the adoptee's eighteenth birthday. Similar consideration

should be given to other post-adoption support services offered by the agency.

11. *Initiate or continue contact with birth families when it is safe to do so and when the adopted adolescents desire it.* Since adolescents typically have long-term histories with their birth families, they frequently have strong attachments to them. As a result, ongoing contact with the birth family is usually desirable. This contact can be helpful to the teens in coming to terms with their families' limitations and in learning how to protect themselves in unsafe situations around them. When possible, contact with members of extended families should be initiated by the adoption agency prior to the adoption so that there are no lingering issues about whether the teen should have been adopted outside of the birth family.
12. *Agencies need to provide ongoing support for parents and teens and to make sure that families are aware of these services and how to access them. Parents must seek this support in a timely fashion, and the agencies must provide it in a timely manner.* Adopting an adolescent can be stressful and a strong network of support from a variety of people including professionals, family, and friends can reduce the strain. Regardless of the source, it is clear that having assistance and support during the difficult times is a key to success.

Advice for those Considering Adoption

There is an enormous amount of good advice from parents and adoptees concerning teen adoption. Although the parents were more prolific with their advice, the adoptees also shared some important information. Many of their thoughts echoed those of their parents.

Get to Know One Another. People considering adoption – both parents and children - should get to know as much about one another as possible before agreeing to the adoption. Adoptees advised teens to feel comfortable with the family before making the commitment. Parents advised

prospective parents to know as much as possible about the child's background so that better preparations could be made to work with him or her.

Make the Right Decision. Although they used some different words, both parents and adoptees advised those considering adoption to make the right decision for themselves. Both recommended considering all of the possibilities before agreeing to the adoption. The adoptees said that kids should not let themselves feel pressured and that families should consider all of the impact on their lives.

Work Together. Both parents and adoptees thought the adoption goes more smoothly when both parties work together. Adoptees urged adolescents to be more easygoing and try to get along with their new families. Parents recommended that parents use their sense of humor and be flexible.

Do It! Ultimately, both parents and adoptees said that adoption is worthwhile and that, despite the difficulties, they would highly recommend it. The parents described it as a great adventure that changes the lives of all involved. The adoptees thought it was the greatest thing in the world and was much better than being in the system.

Conclusions

“I think adopting teenagers is important,
and it is doable.”

- *L.W., parent who adopted a 13 year old*

It is clear from this research that there are many paths to adoption. In this study, all of these paths led to success. For parents in this study, success is a relative concept. They have realistic expectations, are exuberant over the favorable outcomes, are generally happy that they have survived, and enjoy being together as a family.

None of the families interviewed have been able to maintain the adoption in isolation. They all rely on their families, friends, and various professionals for support from time to time. This is not unlike biological families who look to others for help during difficult times.

Adoptive parents may be more apt to seek professional help more quickly than parents with biological children because of the overwhelming difficulties some of these teens have experienced and because it is expected and acceptable to do so.

The commitment of both teens and their parents to make the adoption work plays a major role in achieving success. Like most birth families, they did not give up on one another but kept on working at their special issues and challenges.

No startling revelations were made in this study, yet the findings should not be dismissed. While most parents in this study were pleased with the adoption process, all felt that the process could be tweaked, and in some cases, totally revised. While it is easy for adoption professionals to look at the recommendations and say these recommendations are already being implemented, the wise reader will pay close attention to what parents and teens are saying. Things can be better. The adoption can be easier. More teens need homes. Adoption professionals should make it as easy as possible to find these homes and help adolescents be successful.