

Adoption Disruption

Material used in some parts of this factsheet is gratefully attributed to Rick Tsukada, a psychotherapist and licensed social worker in Casey Family Services' Post-Adoption Services Program in Hartford, Connecticut.

PREVENTION

Adopting parents and case workers as a team can:

1. Attain the child's complete health, genetic, family history in written form and if possible, orally delivered by past care givers and birth family members. Use video or audiotapes as well as paperwork about placement history, addresses. Include photos and belongings that the child may treasure.
2. Resist the natural tendency to rush into an adoption. Children take longer to adopt parents than vice versa. For some children, resistance to the adoption is their only real power.
3. Realize that parental love, while powerful, will not adequately fit the needs of some children who have fragile backgrounds. Most parental love is conditional on positive responses from their children. These children may not know how to trust or how to return nurturing without giving up their power.
4. Every relationship needs more positive than negative input. Healthy adult relationships require a 5 to 1 praise ratio and children with fragile backgrounds require at least 10 to 1. Praise is crucial in raising these children.
5. Recognizing good behavior helps reinforce normal behavior.
6. In advance of an adoption, get connected to services a child may require and learn how to advocate for those services.
7. Parents should not assume that they correctly understand a child's words. Many children have developed their own code and language that must be learned by parents.
8. Examine realistic expectations of the child and the parents' unique role in this child's life that may vastly differ from day-to-day parenting tasks.
9. Enlarge the definition of extended family to include important people from the child's past whose presence may be a healing connection for the child and who can be enlisted to verbally give permission to the child to join their new adoptive family.
10. Seek out specialized education that fits the child such as alternative schools, home schooling or a school that excels in understanding and serving the educational needs of children who have special needs.
11. Put respite care and childcare into place before adopting. For single parents, create a "tag team" support system.
12. If children are already in the family, carefully observe the child to be adopted in interactions with their potential siblings.

AFTER CARE FOR PARENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED AN ADOPTION DISRUPTION

1. Normalize the wide range of strong feelings experienced in a crisis that, like a death in the family, rocks the souls of parents and immediate family members. Feeling raw for a long time is a normal expectation after living through a disruption. Families who experience a disruption are survivors of chronic trauma and need interventions that address more than grief and loss.
2. Because parents in a disrupted adoption come in conflict with personal, public and cultural beliefs about parenting, they may be blamed and misunderstood. Try to avoid seeking validation from those who may not have the knowledge nor the capacity to understand.
3. Join with parents who have experienced disruptions to validate and honor your efforts. When others you expected to support you withdraw, build a new support system with those who are in the know.
4. Pay attention to the impact of the disruption on children within the family. Help them find their voice and grieve what happened to them.
5. Couples will need to spend time on rebuilding the foundations of their marriage that may have been rocked by the disruption experience.
6. Put words around the pain of disruption as a first step in reclaiming your lives in a healthy way.
7. Practice describing how you personally were affected, telling your story with a focus on yourself rather than on the child or on the adoption.
8. Don't get stuck blaming social workers. Rather, practice reclaiming yourself through giving up the role of teaching others until you feel healed enough to advocate for change in a way that you may be heard.
9. Move towards honoring and paying homage to the memory of your relationship with the child.
10. When you are able, make a list of the good you found inside yourself around your heroic efforts in raising this child.

AFTER CARE FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED AN ADOPTION DISRUPTION

1. If possible, maintain consistent care for the child immediately after a disruption, keeping the same daycare, childcare, school and teachers.
2. Just as children need to be prepared for each step of the adoption process, adults need to explain each step of a disruption in a way that children can understand.
3. Engage a therapist well versed in adoption and in disruptions.
4. While the first tendency is to sever all ties between the child and the family, consider if this is the best practice and if it benefits everyone involved. Contact may be advisable in some cases to take care of unfinished tasks.
5. Consider holding a ritual around the unraveling of the adoption, after consulting the child's counselors and therapists. If indicated, carry out the ritual in a way that the child can understand and can participate.
6. Therapist Vera Fahlberg suggests that a child's placement history be reconstructed, identifying a person to whom the child was able to attach and working cooperatively with that person in planning the child's future.
7. Some school age children may need permission from a significant attachment figure in their past (face-to-face, via video or audio tape or in written form) before they feel free to join another family. The task of building a bridge for the child from one placement to another can be invaluable.
8. Just as parents need to describe their personal experience in order to move towards healing, so do children, often under the guidance of a trained professional during the adjustment period after a disruption.