

Issues Involving International Adoption

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Abstract

Challenges in adoptive families are well-documented; however, a lack of empirical research on the preadoption preparation of prospective adoptive parents for these common challenges exists. The purpose of this study was to seek a more thorough understanding of the education and preparation adoptive parents receive regarding potential child issues in international adoption. A qualitative research design was utilized to gain more in-depth knowledge of the international adoption experience that included preadoption education, transitioning into a new family structure, and services utilized. Ten participants, who are parents of internationally adopted children, were recruited for this qualitative study. Three research questions were developed regarding the challenges adoptive parents experience, how preadoption services could be improved, and participants' perceptions of preadoption training. The following six primary themes were identified: purpose, attachment, challenges experienced, inconsistent preparation, support systems, and families utilizing mental health services. Recommendations for professional practice are presented, including more current and consistent training for prospective adoptive parents as well as recommendations for increasing the numbers of family counselors with adoption expertise and enhancing counselor training to address adoption issues.

Keywords

adoption, international adoption, research and adoption, family issues

Adoption rates both domestically and internationally have declined during the past decade. In 2007 and 2008, approximately 136,000 adoptions occurred each year with 13–14% of these being international adoptions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). In 2004, the number of children adopted internationally was 23,000; this number is in contrast to 2016 when the number was only 5,400 (Adoptions in America are declining, 2017). Lopez (2018) suggested that negative press and politics may have contributed to countries closing their doors to foreign adoptive parents. Countries such as Russia and Ethiopia banned adoption to U.S. parents because of the high-profile cases of abuse or neglect (Lopez, 2018). Although the number of international adoptions overall is decreasing, the percentage of older child adoptions is increasing (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Adoptions of older children, over the age of 5, are at a greater risk of disruption or dissolution, difficulty in transitioning and attaching to a new family, and experiencing difficulty resulting from many developmental and behavioral issues (Berry & Barth, 1990; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Howard et al., 2014).

With increasing numbers of older child adoptions (U.S. Department of State, 2016), there is a reason for concern that parents may be ill-informed or ill-equipped for the behavioral and emotional issues internationally adopted children may experience (Carnes-Holt & Bratton, 2014). While many adoption stories are successful, there are still many that result in disruption or dissolution. Although these terms disruption and dissolution are often used interchangeably, their meanings

differ. For example, most international adoptions are finalized prior to parents bringing the child to the United States (Barth, Berry, Carson, Goodfield, & Feinberg, 1986). Adoption dissolution may and has occurred as a result of adoptive parents being ill-prepared for international adoption (Carnes-Holt & Bratton, 2014). Dissolution is the severance of the parent–child relationship after the adoption has been legally finalized (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). This typically results in the child being placed in the care of the State, a group home, or an institution. In contrast, disruption refers to the separation of a child from prospective adoptive parents after the child has been living in the adoptive home but prior to final legalization of the adoption.

Disruption and Dissolution

Information and statistics regarding disruptions and dissolutions in international adoptions vary significantly and depend upon several factors. In a study conducted by Festinger (2006), disruption rates varied between 9% and 15%. Coakley and Berrick (2008) reported the range of disruption rates to be

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6–11%; however, a study of older child adoptions revealed a much higher disruption rate of 25%. In 2010, data reported to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services by individual states for the fiscal year 2010 showed dissolution cases of 41 individuals who were internationally adopted at the time they entered the custody of the state (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012b). According to studies performed in various locations in the United States, the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012b) reported that 10–25% of adoptions disrupt. Factors of age, behavioral and emotional maladjustment, attachment disorders, prior abuse, unrealistic expectations of adoptive parents, and lack of family support all contribute to disruption and dissolution rates in adoptive families (Howard et al., 2014).

Parenting by way of international adoption can be a wonderful, rewarding, and challenging experience. In addition, it may present some unique experiences of which prospective adoptive parents may be unaware. There is little empirical research regarding the preadoption education and preparation for prospective adoptive parents on potential child mental health issues (Nicholson, 2002). Although a majority of international adoptive families have success stories, there is a need to educate parents of the potential that their child may experience difficulties forming attachments, regulating behavior, and performing academically (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005; Merchant, Borders, & Henson, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2000). Researchers have indicated that internationally adopted children have many barriers to overcome when transitioning from orphanages or foster care; therefore, parental education on potential child issues and available resources for parental education and child therapy need to be essential components of the adoption process (Berry & Barth, 1990; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Purvis, Cross, & Sunshine, 2007). Many adoptive parents are not provided with adequate preadoption training on common child issues. Well-meaning families who are unaware of potential issues that may occur postadoption are often unable to identify attachment and behavior difficulties and are uninformed regarding professional help and services in their respective areas. This is important because the numbers of international adoptions are declining, leaving millions of orphans worldwide needing homes, and many parents longing to provide a home for a child and expand their families. The need for adoption is present; however, because of the negative attention international adoption has received, the increase in older child adoption with associated risks, and the challenges unprepared families are experiencing, the future of international adoption is questionable.

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges adoptive parents of international children experience and how education, preparation, and mental health services helped address these issues. This information may help prospective adoptive parents better prepare for potential child issues that are prevalent among children who come from backgrounds of trauma, abuse, and neglect, which in turn may lead to dissatisfaction and disruptions in the adoptive home. In this qualitative study, the primary researcher sought to highlight the necessity

and benefit of preadoption education and training for prospective adoptive parents of international children, to emphasize the need for available postadoption services as well as parenting attitudes and behaviors that lend to more successful transitions into the new family. This type of research is necessary to improve the experience of international adoption for adoptive parents and children.

Participants

For this study, purposeful sampling included only individuals and couples who had adopted internationally with one or more children. Additionally, participants were U.S. parents, either single or married, who have had custody of that child or children for a minimum of 6 months. The intent was to learn from adoptive parents as they had prepared for and experienced the process of international adoption. Based upon information acquired from the review of literature combined with the review of recent case studies, the participant selection for this instrumental case study yielded 10 participants. Of the 10 participants, there were a total of 15 internationally adopted children represented in this study. Adoptees originated from countries in South America, Africa, Russia, and Asia.

The research questions posited in this study were as follows:

1. What aspects of international adoption are challenging for adoptive parents? What elements may be contributing to dissolution?
2. How could preadoption services be improved to better train, educate, and prepare prospective adoptive parents?
3. What are the perceptions of adoptive parents of international children on the effectiveness of preadoption training provided by adoption agencies and/or mental health-care providers?

Parents who had adopted a child or children internationally were contacted via e-mail, Facebook groups, and face-to-face; these parents were introduced to the study and invited to participate. A brief letter of introduction detailing the project with the researcher's contact information was provided. With permission of the Facebook page administrators, the letter was posted on Facebook international adoption groups. An invitation to participate in the study was extended to individuals and couples personally known to the researcher via e-mail. In this study, 5 of 10 participants were interviewed in person at their respective homes. The remaining five interviews were conducted via Skype. Semistructured interviews allowed the researcher to not only ask each participant a prepared set of questions, but additionally it allowed for probing further for clarification and deeper meanings as opportunities arose. This type of interview protocol was used to guide open-ended interviews with adoptive parents (Creswell & Poth, 2018) so that all had approximately the same questions to which to respond. Interview questions were designed with the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological perspective and

Ainsworth and Bowlby's (1991) attachment theory. A follow-up questionnaire created in Qualtrics (2018) was sent securely to participants via e-mail. These questionnaires allowed the participants an opportunity to reflect on, complete, and expand upon information that may have been omitted in the interviews. Using a checklist, the primary researcher asked which topics of preadoption education the parents had received and how this information was obtained. Participants were also given open-ended questions to provide any additional information or perspective that may have been omitted in the interview.

Results

A total of six prominent themes emerged. These were (a) purpose, (b) attachment, (c) challenges experienced, (d) inconsistent preparation, (e) support systems, and (f) families utilizing mental health services. The most prominent emerging theme from the data was attachment. Children adopted internationally are at a higher risk of attachment difficulties due to institutionalized care, often resulting in neglect or abuse (Rycus, Freundlich, Hughes, Keefer, & Oakes, 2006). All 10 participants reported attachment as a predominant theme in their international adoptions that required specific procedures and education to address properly. Participants reported a desire for more information regarding recognizing attachment difficulties and how to address these concerns.

More than half of the parents interviewed for this study had knowledge of and practiced some form of cocooning. Cocooning occurs when the family isolates from the rest of the world to enhance and solidify attachment and bonding between parents and child. This technique promotes a smoother transition into the new family system (Brenner, 2016).

Parenting an adopted child, particularly one who is trying to attach with a new family, is expressly different than parenting a biological child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014), a situation confirmed by participants in this study. Parents having better support systems who successfully controlled their negative reactions and kept expectations low were more successful (Valdez & McNamara, 1994).

Another prominent theme that emerged and helped answer Research Question 1 involved challenges experienced. All participants discussed stress that occurs and is expected to accompany such a profound change to the family structure. Five families reported maladaptive behaviors as a primary source of family stress. Children who present with traumatic histories and attachment difficulties may exhibit behaviors that contribute to stress in the family (Carnes-Holt & Bratton, 2014). These symptoms may persist long after placement with the new family (Gunnar, 2001). Four families reported concerns for their children already living in the home especially with regard to how the new addition changed the family dynamics. Marital stress was also a significant issue mentioned by five participants.

A prominent subtheme that presented a challenge to families of international adoption was knowing very little about the history and prior upbringing of their child. Most families

reported that there was limited information available on their child; however, most did not believe information concerning their children was deliberately concealed; these parents believed that agencies or orphanages gave the information they had. Only two participants reported feeling like they had been given thorough and accurate information about their child(ren); they reported that they received updates and pictures of their child somewhat regularly. Four families reported receiving misleading information in the "fairy-tale" version of their child's past history.

The adopted children of all 10 families spent time in an orphanage. Of the 15 children represented in this study, 4 lived in an orphanage for less than 1 year, and 11 children resided in an orphanage for 1 year or longer. Some families had more positive impressions of the care their child received at the orphanage; however, they all agreed that an orphanage is not a good substitution for a family. Specifically, orphanages are overcrowded, usually with volunteer workers, and individual attention to children is lacking.

Differences in race and culture may initiate challenges for the adoption experience (Davies, 2011). Even in our contemporary culture, nontraditional families are still undervalued in comparison with traditional families (Katz & Doyle, 2013), which may lead to insensitive responses by others. Five participants discussed cultural differences being a challenge in some way for their family; these participants highlighted the need to adjust their learning, even their location, to accommodate differences in culture or race. A difference in language could magnify communication issues until enough common language exists between parent and child. Some parents learned to speak a few words of their child's language to help with communication, and they utilized the Internet to help with this challenge.

The theme of support systems was a significant theme that emerged. This theme directly answered the following research question:

Research Question 2: How could preadoption services be improved to better train, educate, and prepare prospective adoptive parents?

Participants discussed systems that were utilized or needed for their children and families prior to, during, and following adoption. Some of these systems were beneficial for the family and some were lacking. Syne, Green, and Dyer (2012) reported that due to the challenging demands placed upon adoptive parents, relevant, consistent, and high-quality support is imperative. Most parents reported having some level of support from their agency or social worker prior to completion of the adoption. Only three participants reported satisfaction with the level of support they received postadoption. Only a few participants stated that the follow-up that occurred postadoption was adequate, and some did not have any follow-up. All parents expressed the importance for support and guidance in the preadoption phase as well as the need for continuation of those services postadoption.

Since most participants reported dissatisfaction with preadoption training materials, they reported their insight into what aspects could be implemented to update and improve these materials. One participant, who did not receive any preadoption training or education at all, expressed frustration and difficulty finding knowledgeable professionals to help with their attachment difficulties. In the following paragraph, this participant shared suggestions from their experiences to improve this system:

I just tend to think getting attachment specialists involved in at least setting the preadoption curriculum. . . . Unfortunately, attachment is a very small specialty. . . . The people who would normally put together that kind of curriculum do not necessarily have a real understanding of what attachment should be. So, having some folks who actually know about this, put it together and prepare parents of what could happen, is important. I really do believe it could make all the difference in the world. And I do think it needed to be understood from the very beginning, what we were doing. It could have made a key difference.

All participants reported use of services for their children. Although mental health services was one type of service used, other services were also relevant for children who had medical requisites, developmental delays, or special needs. Participants desired knowledge of and access to services which could help support the needs of their children. All 10 participants reported connecting in some way with other adoptive parents at some point in their adoption process; they found this type of support to be the most beneficial of all, and they in turn have all offered this type of support to new and prospective adoptive parents.

Two themes that span all three research questions were inconsistent preparation and families utilizing mental health resources. Since most adoptive parents reported dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of preadoption training, this created a challenge for these adoptive parents; this outcome addresses the first research question focusing on the aspects of international adoption that are challenging for adoptive parents and the elements contributing to dissolution. Within this theme are also suggestions for improvements for preadoption training and preparation.

In some instances, preadoption education and preparation were provided by adoption agencies or liaisons. In other instances, the education resulted from information researched by the participants. Of the 15 internationally adopted children represented in this study, 12 were adopted through an agency, 2 were adopted directly through an orphanage, and 1 utilized an adoption lawyer to complete the process. Levels of training and preparation provided to adoptive parents varied greatly between methods of adoption and between agencies. Also, the amount of research pursued by adoptive parents independently differed. Two of the 10 families believed that their agency prepared them adequately for the adoption process and potential issues that could occur. For example, some were required to complete online trainings and were given packets of information to read and study while waiting for their child.

Another theme spanning all three research questions is the theme of families utilizing mental health services. Half of the families participating in this study reported challenges with these services. Improvements to these services suggested by participants are presented in this section, as well as participants' perceptions of services they had utilized. As Carnes-Holt and Bratton (2014) indicated, families who adopt comprise the highest need for mental health services due to losses and instability that occurred in the child's early years. Therefore, it is not surprising that virtually all families interviewed for this study used mental health services in some capacity. Most families were connected with a social worker during some part of the adoption process, primarily for the completion of home studies. Some families utilized counseling services to address family issues relating to the adoption. While some of these experiences were positive and helpful to the family, others were lacking.

Recommendations

The authors provide the following four recommendations regarding the ways to enhance the international adoption experience.

Recommendation 1

Adoption workers and mental health providers serving the adoption community should provide an updated curriculum specific to international adoption to all prospective adoptive parents, regardless of their method of adoption. Adoptive parents employ numerous methods by which to complete their adoptions. Private adoption agencies are most frequently used (Berry, Barth, & Nedell, 1996), although some parents may choose to adopt directly through an orphanage, adoption lawyer, or other adoption liaison. Regardless of the venues, it is necessary that all adoptive parents consistently have access to the same preadoption knowledge and educational curriculum. Uniform and up-to-date curricula need to be easily and readily available to all adoptive parents of international children. Private adoption agencies typically provide this education (Lawler, Koss, & Gunnar, 2017); however, since some families select other methods by which to adopt, a system for ensuring access is made available, equitably, is needed. Because all adoptive families are required to go through the process of a home study to complete their adoptions, it is recommended that social workers or agencies completing home studies ensure that the curriculum is disseminated to every adoptive parent. In addition to the specific and updated curriculum, a comprehensive list of applicable resource materials should be provided to all prospective adoptive parents. These resources should include, but not be limited to, conferences, books, trauma training, movies/videos, blogs, and online support groups.

It is further recommended that counselors and other adoption specialists compile a comprehensive list of resource materials to provide to all prospective adoptive parents. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012a) has an extensive library

addressing issues relevant to adoption, as does the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development (2018). Although agencies may be unable to enforce the condition that parents utilize these materials, all parents should have the option to access the curriculum and resource materials independently. A comprehensive list of adoption education curricula and resources should be provided to every prospective adoptive parent to ensure that all parents have access to the same information.

Recommendation 2

Mental health professionals, adoption agencies, and family counselors should recruit and educate more qualified and expert adoption counselors who are available to assist adoptive families. Family counselors, in universities, for example, might focus on the need for qualified adoption counselors and help increase the number of these specialists by providing more opportunities for learning the most current theories and up-to-date strategies applicable to common adoption challenges. Since many participants in this study reported that counselors knowledgeable in the issues relevant to adoption challenges were difficult to locate, participants utilizing mental health services reported a desire to only see counselors who had a personal experience with adoption. Although the specific criteria may be difficult to ensure, family counselors in the university and community should help prepare counselors-in-training with theories and strategies specific to attachment, trauma and abuse, and social justice.

Participants expressed a need for counselors who are trained as experts on attachment styles and parenting a child with insecure attachment. Even participants living in larger cities reported difficulty finding counselors knowledgeable of attachment, adoption, effective parenting strategies, and managing behaviors. Increasing the numbers of well-informed and trained adoption counselors will help fill this gap in supportive services.

Recommendation 3

Counselors should create and supply a list of possible support services that may be utilized to address specific needs for adoptive families. Most adoptive families require ongoing medical, physical, educational, and/or mental health services postadoption. To ensure a consistent follow-up process once families have arrived home, adoption specialists should provide a comprehensive list of possible support services, including clearly defined terms to inform families of available services to address possible needs and should make this knowledge readily attainable.

In addition, support groups or experienced adoptive parents were reported as being the most helpful sources of support and information for adoptive parents. Providing adoptive parents the means to network with others experiencing the same needs and challenges may help adoptive families access specific information. Furthermore, this type of support may help parents realize they are not alone in their struggles.

Counselors should also help adoptive families connect to existing support groups, as well as create and maintain available networks of adoptive families and/or support groups that could provide support either virtually or face-to-face as needed.

Recommendation 4

Mental health professionals, adoption professionals, and family counselors should benefit from the findings of this study. The challenges adoptive parents reported experiencing coupled with relevant theories and counseling strategies should guide the creation of the preadoption curriculum to help prepare parents for these challenges. This study identified specific components needed in preadoption education, including attachment, ecological perspective, support services, trauma, and other adoption-related theories to create a well-rounded curriculum. Adoption counselors and agencies should be responsible for disseminating this curriculum to prospective adoptive parents.

Adoption experts should create an updated curriculum specific to international adoption. Adopting internationally usually involves adopting a child who has been orphaned or abandoned, often requiring care in an orphanage setting which is often associated with neglect and abuse (Purvis et al., 2007). Additionally, children adopted internationally are typically older, and this trend is increasing (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Since these factors differ from the usual private, domestic adoptions occurring in the United States, a curriculum specific to prospective adoptive parents of international children is warranted.

Although each child and family dynamics are unique, common challenges exist in international adoption. An up-to-date curriculum is needed to help prepare prospective adoptive parents for these challenges. Parents must be informed so that they are aware that the challenges will likely occur, and postadoption services will likely be needed and may be expensive. Parents who have low expectations often have higher levels of satisfaction with their adoptions (Valdez & McNamara, 1994); participants of this study confirmed this level of satisfaction.

Trauma-based relational intervention is a contemporary approach for addressing challenges associated with abandoned, neglected, and abused children living in orphanages (Purvis, Cross, Dansereau, & Parris, 2013). Based on their own personal research conducted either prior to or following their adoptions, participants suggested that prospective adoptive parents should attend seminars and/or read books such as those by Purvis, Cross, Dansereau, and Parris (2013). All participants reported gaining knowledge from the above resources, which was profoundly impactful and helpful in preparing for their adoptions or addressing adaptive challenges. It is recommended that the trauma-based relational intervention model be included in curriculum for international adoption.

Attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and cocooning materials (Brenner, 2016) are recommended as requirements for the preadoption curriculum. This knowledge

is necessary for integrating all family members and successfully bonding as a new family unit. Delivery of this curriculum is salient. Although some people prefer reading books and articles, others prefer audio or video files, while some others prefer a conference or in-person delivery. Curriculum offered in various modes may satisfy the needs of persons with various learning styles.

Since participants communicated gratitude for support and information from experienced adoptive families, networking opportunities with adoptive parents should be made available via videos, blogs, and face-to-face support groups. Current adoption stories presented by adoptive parents, including their successes and challenges, as well as realistic expectations are needed components of the preadoption curriculum. Because all participants mentioned the desire to network with other adoptive parents, helping parents connect with experienced adoptive families' needs to be established in the preadoption education phase.

Implications

Implications exist for family counselors in universities, in agencies, and in private practice to become well-educated in theories relevant to adoption to create an effective and up-to-date curriculum for adoptive parents. Another implication for family counselors and adoption specialists is to ensure that this material is consistently disseminated to prospective parents of international adoption, whereby prospective adoptive parents have equal access to updated and relevant education and training.

Additionally, these research results have implications for family counselors in training in universities who may want to learn how to counsel adoptive families. With current events of children being separated from their parents, parents being deported, and their children being left behind, this issue will likely continue to be relevant and increasingly important in the future. Another implication is the demand for current training materials on attachment as well as follow-up services post-adoption by trained and knowledgeable mental health professionals.

Results from this study suggest that adoptive parents have difficulty obtaining both support and counseling services from mental health providers with expertise in adoption issues. Because adoptive families seek and need mental health services at a greater rate than nonadoptive parents (Carnes-Holt & Bratton, 2014), an increase in the numbers of mental health providers who are highly trained in addressing the challenges adoptive families experience is warranted; further, the information may be useful for prospective adoptive parents, adoption workers, family counselors, and other mental health professionals.


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