

The Development of Realistic Expectations Pre-Adoption: Myth or Actuality?

By Arleta James, PCC

Pre-adoptive preparation is a means of helping prospective adoptive families understand the types of issues that have caused children to be available for adoption. The content, format and length of pre-adoptive education classes vary per state regulations, the Hague Convention and/or individual agency preferences.



Pre-adoption, optimism and excitement prevail. Attending a series of training classes is simply viewed as a means to an end—a child! Yet, whether adopting internationally or domestically, families are encouraged to learn as much as they can about the impact of institutionalization, neglect, abandonment, physical abuse, sexual abuse, pre-natal drug and alcohol exposure and the impact of moving from foster home to foster home, or from a hospital to an orphanage and perhaps to a second orphanage. This [complex trauma](#) may lead to lifelong difficulties—even if adopting an infant or young child. The expectation that “love will be enough” is a myth.

Professionals also need to evaluate their expectations of pre-adoptive training. The information shared during pre-adoptive preparation is critical to the post-placement well-being of each family member. Costs, staff time constraints, family time constraints and the competition that exists among agencies to recruit adoptive families are not a license to take short cuts, nor do they permit tailoring a program designed more for the convenience of the family than for the thorough preparation of the family.

Overall, pre-adoptive preparation must be viewed as an ongoing process. Educating a family about the impact of a traumatized adoptee, on each member of the adoptive family, will be a process that extends into the adulthood of the adoptee. Pre-adoptive education is a starting place. At the end of a successful training program, the following

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

benefits are realistic. The common thread of these suggestions is that they lead to the family obtaining early intervention. Help attained at the onset of trouble is likely to minimize the duration and intensity of the family's struggles.

- An overriding theme of a thorough pre-adoptive education program is that the family may expect problems. Even if the family does not believe the material, they will gain trust in the agency. Post-placement as difficulties do crop up, the family recalls that the agency informed them that problems could occur. So, the family does not hesitate to call the agency for assistance. The family is aware that the agency will not think they are "bad" parents who should not have the child. The family who calls and states, "You told us things wouldn't always go well, but we didn't believe you" is in a much better position than the family who feels the agency left them ill-informed or misinformed. This family is not likely to call the agency to ask for referrals to qualified adoption-competent professionals. Critical time is lost in accessing help.
- Any pre-adoptive training is virtually a drop in the bucket of knowledge. We go to college for two, four or more years to prepare for a career. We go to pre-adoptive education classes for 20, 24, or 36 hours to prepare for parenting a child who has experienced many insults to his development and beliefs about the world. In essence, we receive less training to carry out the most important job undertaken by adults—parenting! Further, the prospective family is frequently receiving information in light of having no experience with children who have been traumatized. Much learning will occur "on the job" after the child has arrived in the family.
- During the training process, parents and the resident children should have the opportunity to form a support system consisting of the agency staff, the other families in their pre-adoptive training classes and one or more veteran adoptive families. An array of supports means that the family is likely to reach someone, with experience, to talk to quickly. Families who enter a crisis need help fast! They need to talk to someone who can "normalize" what is happening in their home. They need to converse with someone who can offer solutions—immediate and long-term.
- Identifying adoption-competent professionals within the family's community is another important matter to be learned via training classes. Such resources might be geographically situated a distance from the family's home. However, it is often better to seek the help of an adoption specialist, even if there is travel time involved. Pre-adoptive trauma creates a mental health threat to the child and family akin to the physical threat posed by cancer, diabetes, cystic-fibrosis or other terminal and chronic medical conditions. Armed with this list of resources, the family is swiftly able to arrange for relevant services.

In conclusion, parents must recognize that they need to be pro-active. Seek out other adoptive families prior to the child's arrival in your home. Determine whether or not there is community funding available for post-adoptive services. Talk to your health insurance company. Gain an understanding of your mental health coverage. *Read, read and read some more!* Over the past ten years there has been an explosion of information in the areas of attachment, adoption and trauma. Ultimately, you will be responsible to help yourselves, the children you already parent and your adoptee navigate the relationships necessary to become a family.