

As Father's Day Approaches: Strengthening the Role of Adoptive Dads

By Arleta James, PCC

It is certainly heartbreaking to learn that your child has a mental health issue, learning disability, physical disability or other type of special need. Parents want their children to reap all of the benefits that life has to offer, and parents want to provide their sons and daughters every available opportunity to climb to the highest rung on the ladder of success. Coming to terms with the fact that "your" child may struggle is a difficult process for mothers and fathers.

However, adoptive fathers are often at a particular disadvantage. Adoption services tend to be dominated by women. Mothers are often the driving force throughout the adoption process. Along the way, there is only a sprinkling of male presence. Thus, the unique strengths (and weaknesses), viewpoints and needs of male parents in the lives of their children-by-adoption are not addressed. Yet, both fathers and mothers possess the capacity to significantly influence the healthy growth and development of their children with special needs, and to impact their potential as successful and well-adjusted adults.



Let's take time this Father's Day to acknowledge the ways men cope when a child with a history of complex trauma joins the family. Let's also offer some suggestions to strengthen the role of the father in adoptive families.

One factor that impacts the adjustment level of parents, including fathers, is whether the child's diagnosis is known in advance of the adoption, is obvious at an early age or if there is the dawning of a gradual awareness that their child is living with a disability. *Denial* is a likely male coping skill if the child's issues are identified at later ages. Across cultures, men are reluctant to accept that such a situation has occurred to them and their family. Their response is, "This isn't really happening." "This happens to other families, but not to us." There may be an especially prolonged period of denial among fathers who have minimal interactions with their children. So, time spent with children and the quality of that time may be a critical component in the father's capacity to accept the adoptee that arrives affected by complex trauma.

Once informed that their adopted son or daughter has mental health issues or special educational needs, fathers and mothers respond differently. Fathers often become especially concerned about the costs of providing for their children, whether their children will fit in and develop successfully, and whether their children will be able to support themselves in adulthood. Mothers are concerned about the emotional strain of caring for children with special needs and about the child's ability to get along and be happy.

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)

Fathers are also more concerned about whether or not their child—especially sons—interact in socially acceptable ways. They are concerned about the level of social and occupational status their child achieves. Overall, fathers tend to be more concerned with the long-term implications of their children's difficulties. These different responses contribute to the ways in which parents involve themselves in caring for their son or daughter with a history of abuse, neglect and abandonment.

The most common response pattern of fathers is *withdrawal* from child-care and child rearing responsibilities. Many men increase their work obligations or their participation in activities outside of the home. This frequently leads to marital conflict. The wife states, "You need to be home more!" or asks, "How can you (husband) leave me (wife) to deal with so much?" The husband says, "I'm working so much. How much more can you expect?"

Overall, a disengaged dad is frequently a grieving dad. His marriage is in conflict and diminished marital satisfaction often leads to a decrease in male self-esteem. His role as financial provider for the family is compromised. The future of his newly adopted child is unknown. Time with birth and/or previously adopted children has been reduced. These are all losses.

We must help men understand the consequences for pulling away from the family. Rather than remind fathers of their responsibilities to their wives and children, we need to increase our capacity to help men acknowledge and resolve their grief and loss.

Restricted attachment to the adoptee may occur if a father perceives his child with special needs as consistently presenting major disruptions to treasured family activities. He may have trouble integrating this child fully into the home and daily activities. Overall, dads look for similarities between themselves and their newly adopted children, just as a birthfather looks for common interests between himself and his birth child. He knows that his transculturally adopted daughter may not have his eyes or complexion, but with his early and consistent influence, she may develop his sense of humor or his enjoyment for blues music. This enlightened coping response offers another avenue for a father to assimilate this child into his family.

Altering the above-described negative coping skills, to assume a stronger role in the family, is compounded for adoptive fathers as men tend to have higher levels of emotional and social isolation than do women. Many men establish a very limited group of friends and neighbors with whom they can share their stories, dreams and problems. Unfortunately, too many social service professionals make this worse by ignoring fathers. Adoption support programs typically offer a range of resources for mothers, staffed by female service providers in a mother-friendly climate.

Families are likely to be strengthened when fathers can find ways to engage with their family. Part two of this blog, coming Tuesday, offers ways to bolster the role of the father in adoptive families.

Strengthening the Role of Adoptive Dads - Part 2

As we learned in Part One of *How is Dad Coping*, adoptive fathers develop coping styles that may be counterproductive to forming strong, healthy connections between all members of the adoptive family. Denial, withdrawal and restricted attachments lead to marital tension and the absence of the father from the family.

Yet, when we help men find ways to include themselves more in their family life, they report less sadness, fatigue, pessimism, guilt and stress, as well as greater feelings of success, enhanced self-satisfaction and better decision-making abilities. Mothers and all the kids also benefit when dad is on board and feeling his best!

Below are ways adoptive fathers can strengthen their role in the adoptive family:

- Give yourself plenty of time, space and opportunities to process your reactions to the unfolding information about your child's condition and/or challenging behavior. Initial reactions of fear, anger, retreat, denial and sadness are normal, but may be over the edge or initially difficult to handle. *Take your time and pace yourself, but don't retreat from your parental responsibilities.*
- Develop a plan to collect lots of relevant data, informational statistics or diagnostic materials about the specific condition of your child. Rarely is there a need to make any immediate decisions about your child's future. Speak with professionals and service providers with expertise who will help clarify your concerns in a calm and clear manner.
- After discussion with your child's mother and other helpful family members, begin figuring out what your options are likely to be for your child, now and in the future. Give serious consideration to how you will support your other children's transitions. Focus upon avoiding the displacement pattern that many siblings experience when a child with special needs takes so much time away from their family time.
- Make it a priority to maintain and strengthen your relationship with your child's mother. Too many fathers place the primary focus on their children's needs, to the exclusion of their couple connection. Build in time for the two of you and respect that needed time.
- Never give up your dreams for your child, but be open to adapting them as time progresses. Dreams don't die, they grow and shift and thrive.
- Be open to meeting and talking with other fathers who have dealt with similar situations. Find a local father's program, a parent organization, your adoption agency or a family support group that encourages fathers to share insights and assist with problem-solving. If a parent group for fathers doesn't exist, consider starting one of your own. Visit the North American Council on Adoptable Children and view, *Starting and Nurturing Adoptive Parent Groups: A Guide for Leaders.*
- Get immersed in the daily routine of your child and family and learn to enjoy the journey. Enhance your knowledge of the ages and stages of child development, especially how her/his diagnosis will impact those stages. Pay attention to the details so you can anticipate and address situations that may add significant stress to your family dynamics. Most importantly — be there, be there, be there.
- Tune into your own needs and take care of yourself. Schedule your couple time, father/child time with each child you parent, mother/child time and alone time. Be especially open to feelings of grief and loss. Most men ignore or minimize these emotions and tend to express them through anger and control.
- Become an advocate for your child. Learn how to positively navigate the systems that should and will be providing services for your child. Research and understand the laws that will affect your child — IDEA, IEP's, ADA, Section 504 and others.
- Develop a list of targeted resources that are available to families of children with similar special conditions — medical, psychological, financial, social, educational, spiritual, cultural, legal, recreational, vocational and family supports. The links in this blog and the Reading and Resources on This Topic (right) will help you get started with this idea.

In conclusion, a strong, involved Dad contributes greatly to the development of all his children. In fact, the child who has two psychologically active parents is,

- exposed to a diverse array of interests and activities
- more socially flexible
- more successful in his or her academic endeavors
- more successful in athletic endeavors
- higher in self-esteem
- better able to problem solve
- less impulsive
- stronger in moral development/empathic concern for others
- less stereotypical with people regarding gender issues
- more resilient at times of maximum stress
- Less likely to engage in various types of risk-taking behaviors
- More satisfied with family life and sibling relationships

Fathers do make a difference! As Father's Day approaches, fathers, mothers and professionals are all encouraged to think about the ways the role of the father can be strengthened in adoptive families.