

While Families Wait: Ongoing Adoption Education for Prospective Adoptive Families

By Arleta James, PCC

I am a firm believer in pre-adoption preparation. As a professional who once served in a placement position, I understand the costs, staff time constraints, family time constraints and the competition that exists among agencies to recruit adoptive families. Yet, I firmly believe that these factors 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.

On the other hand, I also believe the following, which I wrote in my book,

It must be recognized that 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 neglected, abused, abandoned, institutionalized, etc. There is a big difference between what is learned in college and starting a first job.

Overall, I am saying that we must simultaneously acknowledge that pre-adoptive training is an essential component of the adoption process. Yet, we must also understand that preparing to adopt a child—infant through adolescent—international or domestic—requires that the family continue to receive ongoing education after the initial pre-adoption classes are concluded.

Thus, we must make better use of the waiting time—the time between the conclusion of pre-adoptive training and the actual arrival of the child. This is frequently a lengthy period of time during which agencies and families are

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engaged in paperwork and looking for just the “right” child to join the family. This period could also include so many options for the ongoing education of the parents and typical children.



This post offers some ideas about ongoing education of prospective adoptive families. I'll start with what I still consider to be the best source of information—reading! Then, I'll move onto other ways to enhance the knowledge base of the adoptive family before their new son or daughter arrives via land or overseas.

Read, Read and Read Some More!

This heading is really my mantra for all prospective adoptive families. Please read with an open mind. There is little truth to the statements, “We are adopting a young child. So, we won't have problems.” Or, “Love will be enough.” Infants can enter the family with serious and long-term problems if neglected—for even a short period of time—and/or suffered the insult of pre-natal drug/alcohol exposure. Also, as you read, ask yourself, “What does this information mean to me, the other children in my family and the child I am adopting?”

In this day and age of facebook, blogs, listservs and so on, there is much opportunity for professionals and agencies to facilitate discussions on-line about all types of reading materials. Families can be guided through the abundant adoption information that now exists. Many authors are writing study guides to accompany their works as well. Invite your families to your agency facebook. Post articles, websites and books. Invite responses by posting questions.

My top ten book picks are below. This assortment—taken together—covers everything from selecting an agency, re-grouping from infertility, the impact of trauma on children and the family, transcultural and transracial adoption issues, issues for adopted persons, and tools to use immediately upon post-placement:



- [Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents](#)
- [Adopting the Hurt Child: Hope for Children with Special Needs Kids](#)
- [Cross Cultural Adoption: How to Answer Questions from Family, Friends and Community](#)
- [Inside Transracial Adoption](#)
- [Parenting from the inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding can help You Raise Children that Thrive](#)
- [Parenting the Hurt Child: Helping Adoptive Families Heal and Grow](#)
- [Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adopted Parents Knew](#)
- [Toddler Adoption: The Weaver's Craft](#)
- [The Connected Child: Bringing Hope and Healing to Your Family](#)
- [The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind](#)
- [Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family](#)

If you are adopting as a single parent, you also want to review [Adopting on Your Own: The Complete Guide to Adoption for Single Parents](#). If adopting an adolescent, then please read [Parenting Adopted Adolescents: Understanding and Appreciating Their Journeys](#).

As for websites, my top five picks are,

- [The North American Council on Adoptable Children](#) (NACAC). Pay special attention to their [Adoptalk](#) newsletter articles such as [Inducement: Adoption Language We Understand](#), [Ambiguous Loss Haunts Foster and Adopted Children](#) and many more!
- [The Child Welfare Information Gateway](#). This website is packed with articles on all aspects of adoption and trauma. For example, [Parenting the Sexually Abused Child](#), [Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child](#), [Adoption and the Stages of Development](#), etc.
- [Child Trauma Academy](#). Again, a website packed with articles and videos to help parents understand the impact of parenting a child who has experienced such traumas as neglect and abuse.
- [PACT, An Adoption Alliance](#). This is a great resource for families adopting across racial and cultural lines.
- [University of Minnesota, Adoption Medicine Program](#) and Clinic. Go to the "topics" link and take a look at the wealth of information!

Of course, I also suggest that parents review websites related to all types of mental health diagnoses as well. Trauma (i.e., abuse, neglect, abandonment, institutionalization, pre-natal substance exposure) often leads to mental health issues. Some families will be informed of the child's mental health diagnoses prior to the adoption. Young children or older international adoptees will often be referred for therapy, psychological or psychiatric services as they mature or after they join their adoptive family. Websites that cover mental health issues include: [Children and Adults with](#)

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[Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder](#), [National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome](#), [National Institute of Mental Health](#), [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#), [SIDRAN Institute: Traumatic Stress Education and Advocacy](#) and [Sensory and Processing Disorder Foundation](#). If you need information about medical issues as well, the [Mayo Clinic](#) offers an A-Z listing—I don't think there is a medical condition that exists that isn't covered on this website.

As you review different articles, print them out and put them in a binder. Post-adoption, as issues crop up, all you'll have to do is pull out your notebook.

Okay, you really don't like to read—then listen! Visit [Adoption CDs](#) !

Attend a Conference

Conferences are a great way to acquire a lot of information! They are also a way to meet veteran adoptive parents and the top professionals in the field of adoption. Plan a vacation around the [NACAC conference](#) — you'll be glad you did! You'll enjoy a fabulous city and you'll learn more than you can believe about adoption, attachment, trauma, speech development, children's mental health, parenting tools, special education services, and more!



Local colleges, hospitals, organizations and so on offer trainings in communities all across the country. Call today and place yourself on their mailing lists. Take the day off from work to attend a training if need be.

Visit Support Groups

Take some time and locate support groups in your community—start by asking your adoption agency where you can find the nearest adoptive parent support group. Or, use the [NACAC database](#). Listen—really listen—to what veteran parents have to say. When these experienced parents talk about the difficulties of managing negative behaviors like lying, stealing, peeing in the closet, eating raw lasagna noodles in the middle of the night, etc., don't assume they are poor parents. Learn that traumatized children have many behavioral problems. Changing this behavior is a difficult task. Instead of being judgmental or critical, jot down the parenting strategies they are using. You'll need them post-adoption!

Facilitate a close relationship with one or two families. Respite their children—do so over time. Children can “honeymoon” for months. That is, when meeting someone new we are all on our best behavior. We don't let others see our bad habits—our warts and blemishes—until later on in the relationship. Children are the same. Likely, you'll have to

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spend some months providing child care to the same child before he or she will pee in your closet! But, this will be the best preparation for your adoption you can get!

Investigate the Resources in Your Community

When it comes to mental health services, there is a “one size fits all” approach. There is a belief that any therapist, counselor, social worker or psychologist can treat any mental health issue. This is simply a falsehood when it comes to the adoptee with a history of trauma. Pre-adoption is the time to locate the nearest professional who is trauma and adoption competent. There is a listing of such professionals at [ATTACH](#).



It is important to understand pre-adoption that,

The majority of educational programs that provide general training for mental health professionals exclude substantive information about families created by adoption. The prevailing schools of thought in most therapeutic training teach students to look within the family in order to determine the roots of a child's mental health issues. Adoptive families fall outside of this approach. Rarely is the adoptive family the source of the child's damage.

The adopted child's difficulties stem from the pre-adoptive trauma. An adoption-competent, trauma-competent therapist understands this. Starting out with such a professional can save hours and hours of time, and much money. Even if you must travel a distance, it will be worth the trip in terms of progress and conserved resources.

You will also want to explore the special education services offered by your district, and where to find speech, occupational and physical therapy services. An adoption-competent pediatrician or medical clinic is a benefit as well.

Your mentors from your adoptive parent support group will be a good source of referrals for all types of services.

While you are waiting, make sure you check with your health insurance carrier about what therapies are covered. Pre-adoption is the time to increase your coverage and your savings for the post-adoption services you **will** need.

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Subscribe Yourself, Your Friends and Extended Family Members to Magazines and Newsletters

Pre-adoption is the time to educate your support system to the special needs your child may bring to the family. Magazines and newsletters are great resources for this task. Below is another list of my picks,

- [Adoptive Families Magazine](#)
- [Adoption Today Magazine](#)
- [Adoptalk Newsletter](#)
- [Pact, Point of View](#)

Pass Information On to Your Current Sons and Daughters

The soon-to-be brothers and sisters are often only presented the positive aspects of gaining a sibling. Professionals and parents make statements such as, "Won't it be great to help a child who needs a home?" "I bet you are excited to have another brother and sister around to ride your bike with!"

In reality, the adoptee that has experienced [complex trauma](#) (i.e., abandonment, abuse, neglect, institutionalization), prior to the adoption, may not be able to fulfill the dreams of parents, brothers or sisters like, "I'll have another playmate." "I'll have someone to look up to me." "I'll have someone to teach things to."

We must keep in mind that how professionals and parents handle the dissemination of information about a sibling's special needs will greatly influence the adjustment of the children already in the family (Meyer & Vadasy, 1994). This, in turn, affects the adoptee's emotional well-being, and parent's state of mind. When we prepare brothers and sisters, we ensure adoptions that take into account the best interest of each member of the adoptive family.

Therefore, pass on what you learn to the children already in your family. If your birth and/or previously adopted children are older, take them to pre-adoptive classes with you. Let them help you surf the Internet—likely, they are better at this than you are anyway! Encourage your agency to initiate pre-adoptive preparation for the prospective adoptive siblings. Of course, read, read and read some more—read my articles,

- Caring for the Typical Children: A Baker's Dozen
- Time, Energy and Priorities: One Habit You'll Want to Keep
- Promoting Sexual Safety in Adoptive Families
- "This is Not the Brother or Sister I Expected: The Need to Prepare the Typical Children
- Sharing Information with the Typically-Developing Children: Pre-School to Adolescents
- "Yes" There are Positives for the Typical Kids!
- White Siblings in Transracial Families



Children's books provide a wonderful way to help describe the unfortunate experiences of the soon-to-arrive brother or sister and to prepare your resident sons and daughters to become siblings. Here are a few titles to get you started,

- [*We Belong Together: A Book about Adoption and Families*](#)
- [*Zachary's New Home: A Story for Foster and Adopted Children*](#)
- [*Pinocchio: A Classic Illustrated Edition*](#)
- [*The Colors of Us*](#)
- [*If the World Were Blind: A Book About Judgment and Prejudice*](#)
- [*Big Sister Now: A Story about Me and Our New Baby*](#)
- [*Bratty Brothers and Selfish Sisters*](#)
- [*Emma's Yucky Brother*](#)
- [*I'm a Big Brother*](#)
- [*I'm a Big Sister*](#)
- [*Just Add One Chinese Sister: An Adoption Story*](#)
- [*The Lapsnatcher*](#)
- [*A Pocket Full of Kisses*](#)
- [*Seeds of Love: For Brothers and Sisters of International Adoption*](#)
- [*Siblings: You're Stuck with Each Other, So Stick Together*](#)
- [*Borya and the Burps: An Eastern European Adoption Story*](#)
- [*A Family that Fights*](#)
- [*Can I Tell You About Asperger's Syndrome?: A Guide for Family and Friends*](#)
- [*Forgetful Frankie, The World's Greatest Rock Skipper, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder*](#)
- [*Sad, Sad Seth, The World's Greatest Writer, Depression*](#)

In conclusion, there is a lot more to do pre-adoption than complete paperwork and wait for the phone to ring with a prospective child. You can attend trainings, meet with therapists, ask your school about their services, educate yourself and your children and much more! While the waiting will still be hard, keeping busy will help pass the time. Further, involving yourself more fully in your education will pay off post-adoption; armed with knowledge and resources you are more likely to graduate into a successful position as adoptive parents.