

ALTERNATIVE PARENTING: A CHILD DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

This article is based on empirical research by the author Vinita Bhargava, PhD. For more detailed understanding of the issue the reader may refer to the book *Adoption in India: policies and experiences, New Delhi: Sage Publication (2005)*

Fertility, parenthood and child rearing have always been presupposed within a marriage in nearly all societies. Early childhood role-plays revolve around the themes of family life, in which becoming "mummy" or "papa" are essential ingredients. The role models for these enactments are the child's own parents. The cultural script for parenting is written as early as three years when the child plays "house-house". This script incorporates only biological parenthood as "real". With no models of alternative parenting, adoptive parents must create a new reality for themselves. Constructing this reality is riddled with anxiety. They seek answers to the often-unstated questions: Will the child love us? Will we be able to love someone else's child? What will people say? These doubts are seldom aired for fear that the adoption agency may not approve of them as good parents.

The period of pregnancy gives a couple time to prepare themselves for their imminent roles as fathers and mothers. Socially and emotionally there is preparation for new parenthood. In India people are unimpeded in initiating discussions regarding this impending new status. Adoptive parenthood however, gives little preparatory time and the period of search for a child is undetermined. Till the parent gets the child home there is a sense of uncertainty and this leads to a lack of preparedness for their role as parents.

As an adoptive parent I often felt the need for a social group that would help me answer the many questions that surfaced while bringing up my daughter: "When should I tell her? How should I do it, without making her feel that she is 'different'?" That was when we initiated the formation of a group of parents who themselves had been through a similar experience. In 1995, we, a group of adoptive parents got together and formed what we called "**Alternative Parenting Network Association**" (APNA). We wanted it to act as a support group for parents who had or wanted to adopt children.

In the years that followed we have had many parents joining our group. Interactions that took place in the form of picnics, seminars, meetings and just telephonic exchanges were very valuable in making us feel that we were not alone. We talked about our fears and anxieties, feeling confident that the other members would empathize with us. From the moment of seeing our child at an agency, through the ups and downs of the growing years, we shared many common concerns. Some of the developmental issues and concerns that many of us

experienced during the infancy, pre-school, middle school and adolescent years of our children are discussed below.

The Early Years

With the development of language and representational thought in the child the adoptive family enters an extremely important period of the family life cycle. For the first time, parents could begin to engage their children in discussion about adoption. There is some controversy about the most appropriate time to tell children about adoption. Some families began telling the child that she was adopted as early as two years, others waited till the child was 6-7 years and still others could not summon enough courage to do it as late as adolescence.

During the pre-school years parents were reminded of adoption being different from biological parenthood in some ways. Three areas stand out as salient, the preparation for school admissions, the growing inquisitiveness and awareness regarding childbirth and fears regarding certain behaviour patterns having genetic origin. No other aspects seemed to be apparently different from biological families.

Both parents and children face considerable anxiety at the time of school admissions. A dilemma that most parents faced was regarding whether or not to disclose the fact of adoption to the school. Several parents did not consider the school authorities capable of handling the information sensitively and therefore found an easy way out. They procured a birth certificate from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (M.C.D.) declaring the child their own. This certificate was submitted to the school at the time of admission. Some parents also reported problems with some schools, that were unwilling to take the 'adoption deed' as proof of age when no birth certificate was available. Thus, there were parents who had told the child that he/she is adopted but had given a false birth certificate to the school, to beat the system.

Adoption Disclosure

Another issue that emerged close to the fourth year was the child's queries regarding the birth process. Apparently for biological parents of a child these questions are natural and even funny. But for parents of an adopted child they pose a dilemma. Couples, who are ambiguous about whether they should disclose the fact of adoption to the child or not, experience the greatest difficulty in addressing these questions. There appears to be a gender difference with regard to curiosity towards birth and the birth process. Mothers of daughters reported a higher incidence of questioning versus mother of sons.

A few parents dutifully observed the advice of adoption agencies and they prepared an album with pictures of the child at the agency. These were shown to the child as early as two years

of age. The word adopted was used frequently in the belief that the child would understand the meaning by and by. Parents would say, "We adopted you from the sisters" or "You were adopted from Palna". The adoption story became a favourite of those children who had heard it.

The constraints of cognitive ability during the pre-school years, was evident in the limited understanding of being adopted. The child between the ages of two and five was able to make cause- and-effect leaps but could not perform the mental "operations" required for true logic. A child appeared so rational that parents are led to believe that the five- year- olds have really heard and understood their explanations regarding adoption.

Most children, however, do not understand the meaning of being adopted until 5 to 7 years of age, and even then their understanding is quite limited. Although younger children may be able to describe events leading to their adoption, in most cases, these descriptions display a conspicuous absence of real understanding. The child's verbal account represents the ability of the child to repeat, albeit with considerable accuracy, the adoption story told by the parent. Thus it is understandable why young adopted children show little distress regarding their adoptive status. The positive response is thus a result of a combination of cognitive limitation together with the warm emotional environment engulfing the initial disclosure process. Related intimately to the task of adoptive parenthood is the way in which parents and children communicate about adoption related issues.

Middle childhood Years

As the child's understanding matures and with emerging new cognitive abilities, especially those related to problem solving and logical reasoning, their understanding of adoption, too, undergoes change. As a result of growth in cognitive and social-cognitive reasoning around 8 to 9 years of age, they begin to recognise the lack of biological connectedness between themselves and their parents. Realising that they are not tied to their parents by birth but do have birth parents elsewhere may create confusion and a sense of insecurity related to his or her permanence in the family.

With peer relationships becoming significant at this age, children wanted more than anything to conform and to be a part of the group. If there was anything that made them different from others, they were likely to be teased and ridiculed about it.

The externally located socio-cultural attitudes are important. With growing maturity and increasing capacity for logical thinking children begin to realise the flip side of the adoption story. That is to be "chosen" he/she must have been given away. Beginning at around 7 or 8

years, children can differentiate between adoption and birth being alternate ways of forming a family. What also becomes clear is that everyone enters the world by being born and that most children become members of their family by being born into that family. They realise that being adopted means having two sets of parents-- those who conceived and gave birth to them, and those who are looking after them. The increasing sensitivity to appreciate another's point of view brings to the child's notice the circumstances that led to his/her being given away. The middle school child makes spontaneous efforts to find out the circumstances surrounding his/her birth and the reasons for being given away.

The notion that a child grieves for her birth family even if she has not known them has been proposed in research. The grief of adoption experienced by children who were placed as infants is usually less intense than that experienced by children who were older at the time of placement. The longer a child lives with the first attachment figure the greater the likelihood that she will show emotional distress if she is forced to separate. This explains the eruptions of behavior problems in 6 or 7 year olds who were previously quite well adjusted to the emergence of adoption related loss experienced at this stage.

The Family Romance Fantasy

An important developmental goal for a school age child is to establish herself beyond the domain of the immediate family. The period between 9 and 12 years is spent in preparation for the move towards independence that is a characteristic feature of adolescence. What teachers, friends and others say gains importance over what a parent may suggest. Thus the opinion of the peer group may challenge the assurance of a parent. This process necessarily brings the child in conflict with the parent. A common outgrowth of this parent child conflict is the emergence of what Freud called "family romance fantasy." He believed that all children, adopted or not, go through it. In a situation where the fantasy is in a large measure real the resolution of it may be more complex. Therefore it is believed that adopted children find it harder to resolve it-- a situation where there is always the other set of parents who may be bestowed with all the positive qualities - allowing the child to continue attributing the negative qualities to the parent who is dealing with the child on a regular basis.

Adolescence

The physical changes that take place during adolescence are dramatic and universal unlike the not so universal psychological upheavals. Although Erik Erikson and Anna Freud were convincing in their "crises" of adolescence, many empirical psychologists have failed to find convincing evidence of psychological turmoil during teenage years.

For a majority of adoptive families with adolescent children the period was characterized by considerable psychological stress very similar to biological parents as well. This stress was in most instances a result of development in physical, cognitive, emotional and social functioning and its implication of understanding issues regarding their adoptive status.

It is during the adolescent years that children begin to think about any additional information about their origins. For the most part, search is restricted to gathering information about the birth parents and extended birth family, visiting birthplace and for some children and learning more about their cultural, ethnic or racial heritage. Searching actively for the birth parent may begin in the late 20's or early 30's

Knowledge gathered from the films and television gives the child a fairly negative image of birth parents that give up their children. There was probably therefore less romanticism related to the search. Most children expressed a sense of futility in trying to find out more about their birth parents.

An understanding of the developmental trajectory that adoptive families go through overlaps in most places with what happens in biological families except that adoption disclosure introduces another reality that adoptive parents must deal with at each developmental stage. I think it helps to face this reality and accept it rather than close ones eyes to it and pretend that it doesn't exist. As adoptive parents we have a responsibility to reach out to others and provide them with a script for parenting that will instill in them the confidence and pride we have in being adoptive parents.

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