



PART
Practice And Research Together

Post-adoption Support

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What is this **PART**icle about?

This **PART**icle outlines the nature of adoption and highlights key issues related to the need for post-adoption support.

»» How to use this PARTicle

PARTicles are concise and practical literature reviews covering challenging child welfare issues. They provide practitioners with up-to-date research on substantive topic areas and capture client, practitioner, and academic perspectives.

- Read this PARTicle individually and then discuss it with your Supervisor.
- Recommend that your team read this PARTicle and discuss it at your next team meeting. Use the Discussion Questions to begin and guide conversations.
- Provide this PARTicle to the families you are working with. Use it to start discussion around issues clients are facing at your next meeting.
- Think critically about this PARTicle and the research it contains; what additional questions do you have after reading it? What more do you want to know?
- Explore the PART website for other evidence-informed resources related to this topic, e.g. search the E-library for related material; explore the PART webinar archives for past webinars on similar topics.

»» Three Key Points:

- 1) Key issues experienced by adopted children and families relate to early childhood trauma, separation and loss, and changing family dynamics and adjustment.
- 2) Post-adoption support needs are non-linear and will vary dependent on the children, the family and their needs at any given time.
- 3) There are four types of post-adoption support services recommended: i) Educational and information services; ii) Clinical services; iii) Material assistance; and iv) Support networks.

»» Discussion Questions

- 1) How do you/your agency prepare and support families in the pre- and post-adoption periods?
- 2) Discuss the concept of the post-adoption experience being non-linear. Has this been the case with the families you have worked with? How have you navigated this process with children and families?
- 3) What is your experience of the post-adoption support needs of birth families?



» Introduction¹

Since the late 1990s policy in the US, UK, and Canada has increasingly focused on improving permanency outcomes for children living in out-of-home care. An increasing number of children and youth living in the care of child welfare systems are being adopted each year¹¹ leading to increased attention being given to the service needs of adopted children and their families.¹⁷

» The Unique Nature of Adoption

Many children who are adopted through the child welfare system have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment before entering foster care.^{2,31} These children may also have had many placements while living in out-of-home care.³¹ Many of these children may also be identified as having special needs. Special needs generally refers to children who have characteristics or needs that may lead to challenges in finding them permanent adoptive placements.²¹ Potential challenges include (though may not be limited to) children who are older, sibling groups, children who have special emotional, behavioural, developmental and/or medical problems, and children who have experienced trauma related to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect.³⁷

The process and experience of adoption is often accompanied by feelings of grief and loss. Many children, who have lost contact with key attachment figures, not through death, but through neglect, abuse or abandonment are unable to mourn this loss.²⁶ For most children living in out-of-home care, the time that is needed in order to go through the usual process of mourning has often been filled with an accumulation of further losses and changes.²⁶ Losses that children involved with the child welfare system have suffered are generally related to the most significant relationships in their young lives. The importance of ensuring awareness of the impact of these unique losses for adoptive parents and families is critical as children may cope with these feelings in many different ways, for example, by displaying challenging behaviour or emotionally withdrawing. Issues related to identity formation may also arise, as the normal developmental challenge of identity formation may be more complicated particularly during adolescence, for children who have been adopted.²⁰ A positive parental environment and understanding about potential struggles with forming a stable identity for children appear to be vital for a successful adoption.²³

¹ While many of the issues outlined in this PARTicle focus on the post-adoptive needs of those adopting children publicly through the child welfare system, many will also be relevant to those adopting both privately and internationally.

² The terms foster care and out-of-home care will be used interchangeably throughout this PARTicle.



In many cases, because of their children's significant needs, families cannot take on the task of caring for and supporting their adopted children alone. For many children and families, post-adoption support is critical to their ability to move forward and reduce the risk of the adoption's disruption.^{3, 31} Studies have shown that post-adoption services provide significant benefits to adoptive families and help them to develop a better understanding of their children and how to parent them.³¹

The transition to parenthood is often accompanied by changes in mental health, physical health, and intimate partner relationship dynamics.^{9, 18, 42} These challenges may be enhanced for adoptive parents, who often face unique experiences and obstacles as they transition to parenthood. In comparison with biological parents, adoptive parents are more likely to have had experiences with infertility, to parent a child of a different racial, ethnic, or cultural identity or with emotional, behavioural and psychological difficulties, and are generally older, first-time parents.^{12, 19, 46} Stress felt by adoptive parents has been associated with a lack of needed knowledge about parenting and children, e.g. information about specific parenting techniques, how to discipline children, and how to access academic and social programs for their children. This lack of knowledge and experience has been attributed in part to the suddenness and unpredictability of a child being placed in their care.²⁹

» Why is Post-adoption Support Needed?

While most adoptions succeed and adoptive families stay together³⁸ it is important to recognize that the issue of post-adoption support affects many adoptive families. According to the Evan B. Donaldson Institute,¹⁵ for every adoption that doesn't work out, there are many more . though it must be stressed, still a minority . in which the families struggle every day to address the often-serious, sometimes-unnerving problems their children developed before they were adopted.+

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) began surveying adoptive families in the United States and Canada in 2010 about their experiences and needs related to post-adoption support. Findings indicate that adoptive families require ongoing and varied supports to successfully parent children adopted from foster care.³¹ The usage rate of clinical services by adoptive families has been found to be approximately triple that of the rate reported by birth families.^{24, 45} This increased usage may be attributed in part to a greater willingness or desire to seek help among adoptive parents and with a greater need for assistance.¹⁵ In 2013, the Adoption Council of Ontario (ACO) conducted a survey regarding need and experience of mental health supports among

³ The term disruption is used in this PARTicle to mean a child's removal from an adoptive home either before or after finalization of the adoption.



adoptive families in Ontario. Of the 445 adoptive families who responded to the survey, 74% of adoptive families had used some kind of professional services (other than their adoption worker or their agency worker) since their child(ren) had been adopted. Sixty-four percent noted that one or more of their children have mental health issues, the most predominant being anxiety (70%), ADHD (64%), attachment issues (53%), and trauma-based issues (46%).¹ Thirty percent of the families had more than one child with mental health issues indicating that a substantial number of families are experiencing challenges that likely require support and intervention from external professionals.¹

Policies in the US, UK, and Canada increasingly focus on improving permanency outcomes for children living in out-of-home care.¹¹ In Ontario for example, permanency has been identified as a fundamental goal for Crown Wards, with adoption being viewed as the most important form of permanency.³⁰ With this in mind, the population requiring post-adoptive supports is likely to increase over time as the number of children being adopted through the child welfare system increases. Additionally, the majority of children in out-of-home care may have unique needs by virtue of the fact that they were removed from their homes perhaps because of some form of abuse and/or neglect, and many will have experienced interrupted attachments as a result of multiple placements.¹⁵ Given that these needs may be present when in foster care, those same needs will likely require similar support at the very least at the beginning of an adoptive placement, and perhaps beyond.

Adoptions that disrupt typically do so for a complicated mix of reasons including, mental health issues, the child's past history, and unrealistic caregiver expectations. Systems barriers such as poor matching of children to families, poor preparation of adoptive parents and children, misinformation or incomplete disclosure about a child's needs, and inadequate post-adoption support increase adoption disruptions.³⁸ Timely intervention by a professional skilled in adoption, attachment, and trauma issues can prevent concerns from becoming more serious problems.¹⁰ Given that the challenges associated with special needs adoptions do not dissipate in a steady predictable fashion, but may occur in a succession of achievements and setbacks over time, it is important to determine the supports that adoptive families need well beyond the initial placement,²⁸ and to be aware that the need for and type of support will likely change over time. While all families face challenges and bring their own unique strengths to coping with their particular challenges, adoptive families are unique and will fall along a continuum on a variety of measures related to family functioning.¹⁵

Key Issues faced by Adopted Children and Families

- 1) Separation & Loss ■ Most children and youth who have been adopted experience some level of separation and loss, which can create significant challenges throughout childhood and into adult years.



Key Issues faced by Adopted Children and Families

- Children and youth adopted as infants may still experience a range of emotions related to separation and loss, such as grief, identity confusion, fear of rejection, and low self-esteem.
- Separation and loss issues, and associated emotional turmoil, often appear or reappear during special events (e.g. holidays, birthdays, adoption anniversaries) and at different developmental stages, particularly adolescence.¹⁰
- Post-adoption support can:
 - help children and youth to deal with their emotions, mourn previous losses, and come to terms with their experiences;
 - support adoptive parents and families in understanding and addressing issues related to their child's loss, separation, trauma, attachment, and identity.¹⁰

2) Early Childhood Trauma

- Many children and youth who are adopted have experienced early trauma as a result of abuse, neglect, and/or early deprivation. Children and youth who have been removed from their family of origin and placed in foster care, particularly those with multiple placements, often have experienced chronic or complex trauma.¹⁰
- Research indicates that cumulative trauma experiences are associated with greater complexity and severity of symptoms.⁸ Children who have experienced trauma may develop coping strategies for dealing with stress and perceived threats that continue even when they are placed in safe environments.
- The effects of early trauma on a child's development may not always be evident until later years.¹⁰ Experience of early childhood adversity prior to adoption has been found to substantially increase the level of psychiatric problems in adulthood, especially when maltreatment was severe suggesting that vulnerability of early-maltreated children persists even if they are removed from problematic environments and are raised in enriched circumstances.⁴⁴
- Post-adoption support can:
 - help children learn new ways of thinking and responding when facing stress and perceived threats;
 - help adoptive parents understand their children's behaviour in the context of trauma, build their capacity to cope with challenges, and identify appropriate strategies to meet their children's needs and allow healing to occur.¹⁰



3) Emotional, Developmental, Physical, & Behavioural Problems

- Adopted children and youth have elevated risks for emotional, developmental, physical, and behavioural problems linked to early deprivation, maltreatment and trauma, prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, and emotional conflicts related to loss and identity issues.^{7, 43, 15}
- Post-adoption support can:
 - provide information and guidance to adoptive parents on how best to respond to their children's needs and behaviours;
 - strengthen coping skills and/or provide respite care to take a needed break from ongoing parenting demands.¹⁰

4) Family Dynamics and Adoption Adjustment.

- Adoption introduces a range of issues that affect individuals and families in different ways. Adoptive parents may experience their own feelings of loss and grief and the post-adoption experience may lead to strain on marriages or partnerships. Some family members struggle with unrealistic expectations of the adoptive experience. Families in which adopted children or youth are of a different race, culture, or ethnicity than that of an adoptive parent, as well as non-traditional families, may face additional challenges from public scrutiny and their child's search for identity.²⁵
- Post-adoption support can:
 - provide opportunities for adopted children and youth and their family members to explore and address adoption-related issues with others in similar situations through participating in peer-support groups and community-building activities while also lessening isolation among adoptive families.¹⁰

5) Openness in Adoption

- Many adoptions today are planned to involve some level of openness. For example, in Ontario, laws have been passed that allow for a range of openness arrangements in public adoption³² to maintain some level of contact between birth and adoptive families. In closed adoptions, at some point, many adopted people seek information about their birth family and/or to reconnect with birth relatives.¹⁰
- Post-adoption support can:
 - support birth and adoptive families who are maintaining open adoption relationships;
 - support individuals who are looking for information or searching for their relatives;
 - provide assistance to adoptive parents in responding to their child's questions about their birth parents.¹⁰

6) Continuing Needs

- For children who enter foster care at an early age, the risk for poor physical, behavioural, and emotional outcomes does not appear to lessen when children leave foster care and move to a more permanent environment, e.g. adoption.²⁶ Research has shown that the high-level of service needs that many children living in foster care have follow them into their adoptive families.¹³ There is little evidence to show that there is a lessening of these challenges, even long after finalization of the adoption.¹³



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- Post-adoption support can:
 - provide adoptive families with education and information about the ongoing challenges that may arise for their child(ren).¹⁰
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»» The Non-linear & Individual Nature of Post-adoption Support Needs

Challenges and difficulties in adoptions may manifest years after placement. Therefore, there is an established need for ongoing post-adoption support given the lifelong process of adjustment that is involved for all members of the adoptive family.³⁶ Support needs will come and go as the adoptive family develops its own pattern of functioning and times of crisis and change, e.g. arrival of new siblings, adolescent challenges, divorce, and death. Time unlimited and in-home post-adoption services have been found to show a decrease in placement disruptions and an increase in family satisfaction.³⁴ Post-adoption support is important not only in the immediate post-placement period, but also in the long-term. Adoptive parents' needs in the post-placement period may vary, depending on the age of the adopted child, their personal history, and life experiences.⁴

Effective support services for adoptive parents have been found to be those which are aligned with the caregivers' specific needs as they adjust to parenting over time.³ For example, in the early stages of the adoption process, peer support groups can be an effective support as they serve to decrease the isolation of adoptive parents as they transition to parenthood. Individual and family counseling for increased family cohesion becomes important later in the process and as the child ages.²⁹ Most critical is the need to provide appropriate, timely, and individualized support that is adoption-informed and adoption-competent throughout the course of the family's adjustment and development.

»» The Importance of Pre-adoption Support & Education for Parents and Children

Successful adoption practice, pre- or post-placement, requires practitioners be realistic about what adoption offers. Knowing that the risk of a difficult adjustment is a reality that can help adoptive parents to have reasonable expectations, a critical component of successful adoptions.⁵ Preparing parents to expect rejections may be helpful so that caregivers do not give up the belief that their adopted children will eventually welcome a close reciprocal relationship.³⁵ Families should be educated about the challenges of adoption and assess their own ability to parent children with certain disabilities. The better practitioners are acquainted with families (and families know their own strengths and limitations), the easier it is to effectively match families and children.³⁹



It is recommended that families know everything possible about the child including the child's previous experiences, birth parent and sibling histories, subsequent experiences with different foster families, medical history, etc.³⁹ While it may be feared that complete disclosure will frighten adoptive parents away, incomplete disclosure can be the catalyst for disruption. Parents who lack the knowledge to help their children are more likely to end an adoption with a sense of failure and frustration, whereas parents who know a lot about their children have a chance to go into the adoption with realistic expectations.³⁹ It is important however, to be mindful of the timing of disclosure, readiness of parents, and their receptivity to this information.¹⁴

Comprehensive adoption preparation has been found to be predictive of a greater use of general and clinical post-adoption services. Preparation is encouraged to be viewed as one of many resources for adoptive families. Parent knowledge may increase parental capacity to advocate for child and family needs through engagement with services.⁴⁷ Preparing prospective adoptive parents for the challenges they may encounter could help them to feel better prepared for the transition to adoptive parenting.²⁹

Because children living in out-of-home care have often experienced chaos, trauma, and loss, preparation of children is equally as important as that of adoptive parents. If a child has never experienced stability or safety with birth family members, or has had multiple out-of-home placements, he or she may need support to understand what life with their adopted family may be like.³⁹ The primary goal of preparing children for adoption is to help them to live safely in a new, permanent family. It is recommended that children are honestly told what may lie ahead.³⁸

» Barriers & Challenges to Post-adoption Support

A range of complex help-seeking issues, barriers, and challenges to accessing and engaging in post-adoption support have been identified. Challenges and facilitators vary between parents; what may be a facilitator for one parent (e.g. support from family and friends) may be a challenge for another (e.g. lack of support from family and friends).²⁹ Some adoptive parents have been found to prefer to go it alone and see if improvements occur, while others may be uncomfortable with the perceived intrusion into family life that they may associate with seeking support.⁴⁰ The following barriers to accessing post-adoption services have been identified:

Macro Issues

- Lack of information about where to turn
- Affordability and cost of services



Macro Issues

- Insufficient availability of post-adoption services
- Scarcity of adoption competent providers
- Long waiting times for receipt of services
- Adoption worker turnover and discontinuity
- Limited access due to location or hours of services
- Inadequate and/or poor preparation for the potential stress that accompanies the demands related to parenthood
- Inappropriate service availability, e.g. if a referral to parenting class is necessary, often it can be difficult to locate resources appropriate for adoptive parents
- Challenge of finding appropriate and affordable respite providers
- Unknown histories: biological/social/environmental histories may be incomplete^{2, 10, 16, 29, 41}

Micro Issues

- Families' limited knowledge of service availability
- Reluctance among parents to seek support possibly stemming from unrealistic expectations and/or not wanting to appear 'inadequate'
- Concern regarding negative consequences and stigma associated with seeking help and being adopted
- Adoptive families preference for informal rather than formal support and help
- Adoptive parents viewing adoptive parenting as 'no different' from biological parenting
- Lack of knowledge and information necessary to detect problems/issues
- Unwillingness to disclose difficulties as a consequence of the pressure felt by many adoptive parents to be a 'model parent' stemming from personal and societal expectations associated with the strong desire to parent that led them to adopt
- Fear of being blamed and/or being seen as incompetent
- Development of mental health difficulties in adoptive parents during the post-placement period; post-adoption depression often goes unrecognized and untreated.
- Parent concerns with leaving a child who has attachment/separation anxiety issues^{10, 16, 29, 41}

» Types of Post-adoption Support Services

Post-adoption support needs range from occasional support to intensive intervention. Adoptive parents and families may seek a combination of concrete and clinical services as well as informal supports as needs arise.¹⁰ Post-adoption service needs commonly requested by families can be grouped in the following categories:⁶

1) Educational & Informational Services

- Information and referral related to available services and resources, including



community-based resources;

- Parenting education, e.g. what to expect following adoption, how to address their child's grief, resources specific to their family type (e.g. single parent) and adoption type (e.g. open, special needs);
- Marriage and relationship education, e.g. services that build relationship and communication skills, and address strains that may arise during adoption experience;
- Background information, e.g. child's medical, genetic, and social history. It has also been recommended that this background information include child welfare related information and associated documents such as psychological assessments, worker notes of visits, information regarding foster placements and families etc. since these too are a key part of the child's life;²
- Openness, search, and reunion support.¹⁰

2) Clinical Services

- Adoption competent therapeutic interventions for children and families, e.g. to help adopted children address issues resulting from early trauma, separation, loss, identity confusion, and crisis events;
- Adoption competent community services, e.g. therapists, school personnel, doctors;
- Support to obtain appropriate and regular respite services.¹⁰

3) Material Assistance

- Financial assistance, e.g. to purchase community services that help meet the child's educational/physical/emotional needs, should be ongoing and easy to access;²
- Medical assistance.¹⁰

4) Support Networks

- Peer support services for adoptive parents may: i) Reinforce that while the adoptive experience varies for individuals and families, there are typical experiences and responses; ii) Reduce isolation; and iii) Create improvements in parenting knowledge, confidence, and commitment, e.g. support groups, informal gatherings, group outings, mentor or buddy programs, web-based chat groups;
- Peer support services for children create opportunities to interact with other adopted children and youth and to see that their experiences and feelings about being adopted are common and shared with their peers.¹⁰

Additional service needs for targeted subgroups include advocacy services, support groups for siblings, emergency assistance, and crisis intervention.²⁸



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