Adolescent adoption: Success despite challenges

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Accepted 14 June 2005
Available online 19 August 2005

Abstract

Though in terms of adoption adolescents are considered a “special needs” group, targeted by recent federal legislation, adoption of adolescents is an area about which we have only limited understanding. This paper reports selected findings from an exploratory, qualitative study that elicited from 58 parents and 37 adolescents their views on successful adolescent adoptions. Specifically, it addresses how participants describe successful adoption, their challenges, and how they account for the success of their adoptions. Findings provide insights into participants’ subjective meanings of success, going beyond the usual measures (primarily intactness). Using participants’ words, the paper describes common themes related to successful adolescent adoption and also demonstrates some of the variation among participants. Parents and adolescents, both strikingly realistic in their appraisals of adoption, provided similar themes from unique perspectives. Theoretical considerations are discussed, and implications for practice are suggested.

Keywords: Adolescent adoption; Success; Challenges

1. Introduction

Adoption, historically a central child welfare service, has changed in recent years. Viewed in the past as a service to families, primarily infertile couples desiring infants, adoption is now considered a service to children needing permanent homes. Increasingly,
these are “special needs” children, considered hard to place for adoption. About adoptions of one group considered to have special needs, adolescents, we have only limited understanding, though they have been targeted by recent federal legislation—the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89, ASFA) and the Adoption Promotion Act of 2003 (H.R. 3182). To address this, we went to parents and adolescents themselves to learn (a) how they described successful adoption, (b) challenges presented by the adoptions, and (c) how they accounted for the success of the adoptions. Providing their perspectives helps us go beyond the usual measures of success (primarily intactness) and understand more about what success means to parents who have adopted and to their adolescent adoptees. Theoretical considerations and implications for practice are suggested.

2. Review of literature

Adoption has changed considerably over the past fifty years in terms of both the purpose of the service and the population of available children. In the 1950s and 1960s, most adoptions involved healthy, Caucasian infants adopted by middle- to upper-middle-income, married, infertile, and Caucasian parents (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). By the 1970s and 1980s, changes in social mores and the advent of legalized abortions and reliable contraceptives resulted in a dramatic decrease in the number of healthy Caucasian infants available for adoption. During this same period, however, the demand for babies increased as more couples began to experience fertility problems associated with the delay of parenthood (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992).

The increasing demand for children to be adopted coincided with concern within the child welfare system about the growing number of children in foster care. Federal legislation, The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272), responded to this concern. However, the legislation’s initial success in reducing the numbers of children in care through reunification, adoption, or other permanency options (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002) soon stalled (Barbell & Wright, 2001). Many children entering or remaining in care had special needs (older age, disability, serious medical problem, emotional or behavioral issues, minority ethnicity, and belonging to a sibling group) that were considered barriers to adoption (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Rosenthal & Groze, 1994).

Additional federal legislation, ASFA, was passed in 1997 again attempting to reduce the number of children in care. ASFA stipulated tighter timeframes for moving children out of foster care and into permanent arrangements, re-emphasized adoption, and provided states with additional incentives for the adoption of children with special needs. Between 1997 and 2002, adoptions increased by 64%, and adoptions of children with special needs increased by 63%. However, a backlog of older children (age 9 or over) remained, comprising over one-half of the children waiting to be adopted (H.R. 3182). Wertheimer (2002) estimated that children aged 11 to 15 comprise 22% of the adoption-eligible population but only 14% of actual adoptions. The Adoption Promotion Act of 2003 (H.R. 3182) specifically focused on older children, better targeting incentives to meet the needs of this population.
3. What we know about adolescent adoptions

Our knowledge of adolescent adoption is scant, despite the legislative and practice interest. Few studies address adolescent adoption (Barth & Berry, 1988), and those that do are often limited in terms of helping us understand this specific population. Many lump all special needs adoption populations together rather than focusing on adolescents (Elstein, 1999; Haugaard, Wojslawowicz, & Palmer, 1999). We lack consensus on the age group comprising “older” children, which has been variously defined as anything from three years into adolescence (Elstein, 1999; Haugaard, et al., 1999). The appropriateness of some comparison groups has been questioned (Wilson, 2004). Last, heterogeneity in the population (Wilson, 2004), which may include a range of pre-adoption and post-adoption factors (e.g., age at first placement, number of moves, age at adoption, siblings), family factors (e.g., other adopted, foster, or biological children and demographics), and child factors (e.g., behavioral issues), can make generalizations difficult.

3.1. Adolescent adoption and disruption

Studies addressing adolescent adoption have typically focused on factors associated with disruption, with intactness being the primary measure of success (Reilly & Platz, 2003), though other outcomes may be included. Studies looking at special needs adoptions have documented that older-child (variously defined) adoptions are more apt than are other adoptions to disrupt and to have other undesirable outcomes (Barth & Berry, 1988; Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, & Carson, 1988; Boyne, Denby, Kettenring, & Wheeler, 1984; Groze, 1986; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988). Besides older age, factors that have been reported as associated with disruption and other undesirable outcomes of special needs adoptions include child emotional and behavioral problems (Barth & Berry, 1988; Groze, 1986; Reid, Kagan, Kaminsky, & Helmer, 1987; Rosenthal & Groze, 1992, 1994), a history of sexual abuse and multiple placements (Festinger, 1986; Kagan & Reid, 1986; Smith & Howard, 1991, 1994), non-foster parent or non-relative adoption (Barth & Berry, 1988; Festinger, 1986; Groze, 1995; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Smith & Howard, 1991), and lower economic status (Barth & Berry, 1988; Groze, 1986, 1995; Rosenthal et al., 1988). Single-parent adoptions were found to be no less stable than two-parent adoptions (Barth et al., 1988). Rigidity, father uninvolvement, and unrealistic expectations have been associated with negative outcomes (Barth & Berry, 1988; Glidden, 1991; Groze, 1995; Kagan & Reid, 1986).

Results are equivocal regarding the effects of sibling-group placement (Bourguignon & Watson, 1989; Rosenthal et al., 1988) and educational level (Barth, 1988; Barth & Berry, 1988; Festinger, 1986; Rosenthal & Groze, 1990; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Smith & Howard, 1991). Also, minority status was found by Rosenthal et al. (1988) and Rosenthal and Groze (1990) to be associated with disruption, but neither Barth and Berry (1988) nor Festinger (1986) found an association.

Reilly and Platz (2003), looking at child, family, and agency factors associated with success in special needs adoptions, concluded that child characteristics and parental expectations had the greatest impact upon adoption success, in terms of parental satisfaction, parent–child relationship, and impact on the family and marriage. In
addition, 58% of the families in their study reported not receiving enough information about their adopted child. This is consistent with other literature documenting the negative effects of inadequate information, preparation, and services (Barth, 1988; Barth & Berry, 1988; Barth, Berry, Goodfield, & Feinberg, 1986; Groze, 1994; Groze, Young, & Corcoran-Rumppe, 1991; Katz, 1986).

3.2. Expanded definitions of success

As shown above, studies might include outcomes other than disruption, such as parental satisfaction, parent–child relationship, and impact on family and marriage. Haugaard et al. (1999) reviewed five studies specifically addressing adolescent adoption and concluded that adopted adolescents showed higher levels of problem behavior. Miller, Fan, Christensen, Grotevant, and van Dulmen (2000) found adopted adolescents at higher risk for school problems, substance abuse, poor psychological well-being, physical health problems, and fighting than non-adopted adolescents. Barth and Berry (1988) looked at not only intactness but also educational achievement, family adjustment, and emotional and developmental functioning.

Rushton and Dance (2004), in a study of 133 late-placed adoptions and permanent foster care placements, provided a different view of intactness by looking at three groups—intact and happy (never thought of ending it, positives outweigh negatives), intact with problems (mostly early stages, child aloof, thought of disruption), and intact but not happy (child rejecting, threaten to run, severe school and behavior problems). They found that over 1/3 of intact adolescent placements were highly problematic.

4. Suggested directions for further work

Several authors offered suggestions regarding research and practice in adolescent adoption. Rushton and Dance (2004) addressed the complexities in the concept of intactness as a success measure, pointing out that sometimes adolescents might live outside the home (respite, birth home, other place) though there has been no legal disruption. In addition, their looking at intactness with different levels of happiness or unhappiness led them to wonder about the motives behind the determination to continue problematic adoptions and to suggest a helping approach based upon coping with ongoing problems. They added that determinations of success depend upon whose perspective, in relation to what objective, and at what point in time.

Haugaard et al. (1999) suggested the potential for research on outcomes to provide families information about factors associated with successful adolescent adoption, challenges, and means for achieving success despite stresses. Reilly and Platz (2003) called for identification of additional constructs for measuring positive outcomes. Cowan (2004) concluded from a study regarding adoption of older children that more homes are available than commonly thought, and Elstein (1999) identified attitudes of professionals as a major barrier.

Goodman and Kim (2000) called for expanding our definitions of outcomes by looking at subjective measures of success rather than only normative and comparative measures,
noting that many participants in adolescent adoptions report that they are doing quite well despite falling short in terms of normative or comparative definitions. Moving to subjective definitions means going to participants for their own views of success. Particularly lacking in existing studies is input from the adolescents. Wilson (2004), in a review of adoption research, calls for a more thorough understanding of how adoptees make sense of and evaluate their adoptions. Only by going directly to them, Wilson writes, “can we learn from the vast majority of adoptees who are well adjusted and help those who may struggle to make sense of their unique and special family experiences” (p. 695). The study reported here addresses many of these issues.

5. Methodology

The findings presented here were generated from an exploratory study at The Center for Child and Family Studies, College of Social Work, University of South Carolina, in cooperation with the South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS). The study addressed various aspects of successful adolescent adoption, including how adoptive parents decided to adopt, how adolescents influenced the decision, and what factors correlated with successful adolescent adoption as well as the topics presented in this paper—how adoptive families and adoptees described successful adoption, challenges they faced, and how they handled those challenges.

6. Sampling and description of participants

For inclusion in the study, families had to meet the study’s initial definition of success—that an adolescent adoption had remained legally intact (including families in which the adolescent lived out of the home for some period of time). Purposive sampling occurred in two waves, the first limited to South Carolina and the second national. Original recruitment attempted to locate, through SCDSS records, 45 adoptive parents and 45 young people who had been ages 12 to 18 when adopted by their foster parents from July 1, 1991, through June 30, 1997. Due to confidentiality issues, researchers were not allowed direct contact with adoptive families. Rather, SDCSS staff sent a letter to families who met eligibility requirements inviting them to participate. As this yielded only 12 families who were willing and eligible to participate, the researchers expanded the study to families outside of South Carolina who had adopted an adolescent and also included families who had adopted adolescents not in foster care in their homes before the adoption. In the initial research proposal, 45 families were to be recruited for participation in the study, based on the number of families in South Carolina who had adopted adolescents in a 10-year time frame. When the target population was expanded beyond South Carolina, researchers decided to continue recruiting and interviewing until answers to the questions became repetitive and no significant new information was being gathered. Thus, 37 additional families were enlisted from the national sampling. Ultimately, 49 families from 18 states participated, and 58 adoptive parents were interviewed.
Adolescents were solicited through participating families rather than contacted directly, as many were under 18 or still living with their parents at the time of the interview and it would have been difficult to find many of these adoptees except through their adoptive parents. Of 76 adopted adolescents identified, 37 from 30 of the study families participated. A total of 95 people (58 parents and 37 adolescents) from 49 families participated in this study. Descriptive information on participants, provided through self-report, is presented in Table 1.

It is difficult to determine the representativeness of this sample, as there is little information for comparison. One appropriate comparison, however, is the sample of the Reilly and Platz (2003) study, which included families in Nevada receiving adoption subsidies or with adoption subsidy agreements (meaning these were special needs adoptions though not exclusively adolescent adoptions). This sample was similar to ours in some respects, though there were differences. Parents’ ages were similar, as in their sample primary caregivers’ ages averaged 44.9 years, and in our sample 41% of the parents fell in the 41–50 years age range. In their sample, 79% of the primary caregivers were married or

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Table 1
Description of participants
living with a partner, compared to 61% of our parents. Their sample included slightly more non-Hispanic white primary caregivers (86.1%) and fewer Blacks (9.5%) than ours (78% and 18%, respectively). More primary caregivers in their sample than parents in ours had attended some college (40.7% versus 29%) or graduated from college (18.3% versus 12%). However, in terms of advanced degrees, 16.4% of their primary caregivers had attended some graduate school, while 24% of our parents actually held advanced degrees.

Determining adoptees’ pre-adoption careers in care was difficult. For this information we chose to rely on self-report rather than going to children’s records, as it would have been extremely time-consuming and expensive for researchers to review the files, which were often incomplete anyway. Though having exact data on pre-adoption history would have been helpful, it was not considered essential for achieving the goals of this exploratory study.

All but 1 of the adolescents reported being in care before the adoption. Two had only 1 foster care placement, and that was in the home of the parents who eventually adopted them. Among the others, however, the number of placements was unclear, and there were discrepancies between adoptive parent and adoptee information. Some adolescents were placed in care at young ages and could not remember the number of placements, and often the adoptive parents were not given all of the information in the child’s record, or the record itself was incomplete. According to the researchers’ best understanding, the adoptees in this study had from 1–35 placements, with a mean of 6 placements. Time in foster care ranged from 6 months through 13 years and averaged 6 years. Most (91%) had been adopted only once, but 3 had a previous adoption that dissolved.

We have better information about adolescents’ adoptions than about their pre-adoption careers, as the adoptive parents themselves could provide this based on their own experiences with the adolescents. Fifteen (41%) of the adolescents were adopted by their foster parents. Six (16%) were adopted by people who were not their foster parents but with whom the adolescents already had a significant relationship (caseworker, therapist, mentor, or friend). Sixteen (43%) were adopted by parents who had not fostered the adolescent or known him or her well and either had an acquaintance with the adolescent or were complete strangers. These included 4 were adopted internationally. Thirteen (35%) had at least 1 sibling placed with them.

Over two-thirds (68%) of the adolescents came into their adoptive homes between the ages of 10 and 19 and were adopted within 2 years. Of these, 38% were ages 10–12, 54% were ages 13–16, and 8% were ages 17 or 18. Under one-fifth (17%) of the adolescents came into their adoptive homes between the ages of 3 and 9 and were adopted 3–9 years later. Of these, 62% were ages 7–9 and were adopted in 3–5 years, 31% were ages 4–6 and were adopted 5–9 years later, and one person (6%) came into the home at age 3 and was adopted 9 years later. About 11 adolescents (15%) we have insufficient information, typically because they were part of a large sibling group or multiple adoptions within a family.

7. Instruments, data collection, and analysis

As no other studies had developed interview protocols covering all of the research questions in this study, researchers constructed interview instruments. After
being reviewed by other researchers, front-line workers, and SCDSS adoption staff and being piloted on two families, the final versions of the instruments were constructed. The parent interview instruments contained 83 (foster parent form) or 79 (non-foster parent form) items covering basic information about the families, the adoption process, and adoption outcomes. The instrument for adoptees contained 71 items covering similar information. Responses to selected items are included in this paper.

Over a 2-year period, 91 interviews were conducted, including 37 individual interviews with adolescents and 54 interviews with parents (50 with individual parents and 4 joint with 2 parents). Five interviewers were used over a 3-year period to conduct the interviews, and all received training regarding administration of the instruments.

Twenty-two interviews were conducted face-to-face and 69 by telephone. Interview length varied from 30 min to 3.5 h, with adolescent interviews tending to be the shorter. All were tape recorded, with the telephone interviews being recorded through a speaker phone. All interview transcripts were reviewed by the co-principal investigator, and some families were re-contacted to clarify answers. The co-principal investigator also compared the audiotapes and transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts and review content. No differences were noted between interviews conducted over the phone and those conducted in person.

Data related to participant characteristics were analyzed using the SPSS software (SPSS, 2003) to produce simple descriptive statistics. For other responses, the primary method of analysis was qualitative and used the N6 software package (N6, 2002). Three researchers coded the data one after another. The first person doing the coding identified the categories. Subsequent coders used these same categories or developed new ones. After all coding was completed, the coders gathered to resolve differences. Because all discrepancies were resolved in this way, inter-rater reliability was not calculated.

8. Findings

Study findings are presented regarding (a) how participants described successful adolescent adoption, (b) the challenges they faced, and (c) how they accounted for success. Within each topic, findings from parents and adolescents are presented, followed by a summarizing table.

9. Describing successful adolescent adoption: adoptive parent responses

We asked adoptive parents if they considered their adoptions of adolescents to be successful and, if so, to explain. Their responses addressed being a family, providing the adolescent with a better quality of life in the present, and achieving a higher quality of life in the future. To further understand what went into success, we asked parents to describe the most meaningful and positive aspects of adoption.
9.1. Being a family

For over one-half of the parents in the study, a marker of successful adoption was being a family, which had several dimensions. We describe these as fitting in with the family, emotional relatedness, commitment, and accepting the adoption for what it is. In addition, they described meaningfulness in terms of the rewards of parenting.

9.1.1. Fitting in with the family

Over one-half of the parents (57%) reported that they considered the adoption successful because they and their adolescents did things like or just felt like a family. A typical comment was, “We have become a family”. Participants frequently mentioned that the family fit together and the children fit in, though a few mentioned that it could be a struggle. Said one, “What makes a family work is when all the puzzle pieces fit together. So sometimes we have to try harder to make it work”. Others emphasized that they had achieved “normalcy”.

9.1.2. Emotional relatedness

Another aspect of being a family dealt with emotional relatedness. Adoptive parents described this in terms such as “connecting with us,” “attached to us,” parents “staying involved,” and a parent being “someone who cares”. Most frequently, however, adoptive parents talked about emotional relatedness in terms of love. One parent said, “I fell in love with her”. Another said, “We did become a family, and we do love each other”.

9.1.3. Commitment

A few adoptive parents described their family unity in terms of a commitment to a permanent relationship. One parent said, “No matter what we went through, it was never going to mean that she was going to lose any level of my relationship”.

9.1.4. Accepting

Last, parents saw success as accepting the adoption for what it was, being realistic. Comments often described some negative aspect of the adoption that was overcome by persistence or accepting it. Said one, “I was expecting him to show a little more bonding and affection than he actually did, but I didn’t have a real high expectation level. I was able to work through that”. Another said, “You accept what you get and do the best you can”.

9.1.5. Parenting

Occasionally parents described success in terms of being a parent and the importance of parents. One parent said her adolescents “understand what it is to have parents, and they know the difference”. In response to the questions about meaningfulness and positive aspects, most responses referred to parenting. A few parents addressed wanting a child. One said, “It is something that I’ve always wanted—a bunch of kids”. The enjoyment they received from parenting was expressed by a few parents. For example, one parent said, “I love being a parent. It was absolutely fabulous”. More typically, however, comments were specific to being
recognized and owned by the child as a parent. One parent described the most meaningful aspect of adoption as “the first time she called me ‘Mom’ and didn’t have to think about it”.

A variation of the parents’ feeling owned as parents by the child was their pleasure at being chosen by the adolescent. One said, “The fact that she wanted to adopt me was most meaningful. It is the biggest compliment that I could receive”.

Last, an aspect of parenting that was meaningful to participants was seeing the adolescents grow and change. A typical response was, “The most meaningful was watching them grow and become young people and being able to get along in the world and having friends. It was meaningful just to watch the whole process”.

9.2. Quality of life in the present

Several adoptive parents described success in terms of quality of life that they offered the adolescent. Sometimes the emphasis was on making a positive difference. One parent said, “They are 250% better off now than where they would have been”. However, parents also talked about being alive and together, as one commented that the adoption was successful “because he’s still here,” and another said that “after 11 years I am alive and she is alive, so it is a success”.

Many parents saw the most meaningful aspect of adoption as providing a good home and family for adolescents who needed them and making a difference. Parents talked about “helping someone, giving him the chance he deserves, seeing him grow” and giving an adolescent “stability where he would probably just have been passed around in the system”. One parent commented that she was specifically glad that she had kept a sibling group together.

9.3. Quality of life in the future

Some parents (about 18%) described success as including favorable outcomes in the future, after the adolescent has been successfully launched into young adulthood. Some talked about the adolescent’s generally being OK in the world and being able to “make it”. As one parent said, “I am proud of them and the way they have chosen to live their lives. They have learned to stand on their own two feet”. A parent who had adopted an adolescent from an institution provided a strong statement of the meaningfulness of the adoption saying, “I really feel that we have absolutely changed a life that was thrown in the trash and would have ended up on the street”.

Others addressed a range of specific achievements—educational, career, and family. One captured this in her statement, “I believe it was a success in that we gave her a place to launch into adulthood. She graduated from high school..., she got married before she got pregnant. She is still married 10 years later. As far as I know, neither of her kids has ever been in the foster care system. She was able to support herself and held down a fulltime job”.

A few mentioned avoidance of trouble as an indicator of success. One parent said she would feel safer when her adolescents had gotten past “all the stuff with drugs and
everything that could happen to them”. Another saw success as reaching 21 without getting into trouble.

10. Describing successful adolescent adoption: adoptee responses

Gaining an understanding of adoption success from the adoptees’ perspective was a key component of the study. Careful attention was paid to wording questions in this area to ensure that opinions about success were accurately gathered. To start adolescents thinking about their adoptions and to stimulate discussion in a relatively non-threatening way, we used a rating scale to begin our enquiry about adoption success. Adoptees were asked to rate their adoptions on a scale from 1 to 10 (with 1 being awful and 10 being great) and to explain their ratings. Most (88%) gave ratings of 8 (21%), 9 (38%), or 10 (29%). Responses to two additional questions—about the best and worst aspects of adoption and whether adolescents would choose adoption again—deepened our understanding of their views of success.

Some responses were general statements of being happy or things going well, often despite rough times. However, most responses fell into the three categories of having a family, quality of life in the present, and quality of life in the future, paralleling parent responses.

10.1. Having a family

Adoptees’ responses often combined several ideas about family, love, and belonging. An adolescent said, “I got a family and found love. I have everything that one hopes for; I fit in the family”. Another said he got “love, comfort, warmth, and whenever I need somebody, I go to my mom”.

When adoptees were asked about the best aspects of adoption, they repeatedly said it was having a family. Some added comments about love, support, and stability—“a home to come to when you are not feeling safe,” not having to “bounce around” anymore, people to take care of you, someone to go to and talk to, getting attention, and having the “right” family.

In response to the question as to whether adolescents would choose adoption again, 95% (35) said that they would. Explanations similarly addressed the importance of having a family, referring to being part of a family, love, support, caring, “one place to stay,” and “having people who are here for me”.

10.2. Quality of life in the present

Adoptees described success in terms of improving their current lives and offering them “normal” lives. Providing details, one said, “I have a driver’s license and I drive. I have friends, and I get to go to overnights and do school events. My parents are very reasonable and supportive people. There is no comparison of what my life is now to what it was before”.

Addressing what they liked best about adoption, adolescents provided more details about how adoption improved their lives. Benefits included “freedom to grow
up and not feeling like you’re in a prison,” “traveling and the social activities,” “getting to meet a lot of people and going to school and having a lot of friends,” being on a basketball team and being “pretty good at it,” getting to “eat as much as you want,” and “finally having Christmas”. One said, “My life is structured, and I live in a house. We have a car, a phone, animals, and a life. I don’t have to worry about being abused and having to move around. It is nice to have a mother who is not an alcoholic”. Describing why they would choose adoption again, a few adolescents mentioned things related to present quality of life, including appreciating the safety it provided, being happier, and being able to make “improvements” in themselves.

10.3. Quality of life in the future

Adolescents explained their success ratings in terms of their futures but did not emphasize the future as much as did parents. One adolescent said, “My dad is loving and caring and wants me to make something of myself”. Another said, “It helped me finish high school and get into college”. Adolescents provided little elaboration concerning their futures in response to the other two questions. One adoptee, however, expressed this deeply, referring to being “molded into the person I am today”. She continued, “There are times when I actually look back and start talking about my life and realize that it is actually me that I am talking about. If I saw a movie about my life I would be in tears. I think how lucky I was”.

11. Summary

Table 2 summarizes parents’ and adolescents’ descriptions of adoption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adoptive parents</th>
<th>Adopted adolescents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being a family</td>
<td>• Having a wanted child, being chosen, owned as parent, enjoyment, see child grow&lt;br&gt;• Fitting in with family—parent/child relationship, child fits, normalcy&lt;br&gt;• Emotional relatedness—love, caring, connection, attachment, involvement,&lt;br&gt;• Commitment&lt;br&gt;• Accepting—realistic</td>
<td>• Having a family, fitting in, normalcy&lt;br&gt; • Love, belonging&lt;br&gt;• Commitment&lt;br&gt;• Realistic—not perfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life/present</td>
<td>• Here and alive, better off, grow&lt;br&gt;• Better environment—good home, family, stability</td>
<td>• Have and do things, privileges, activities, celebrate holidays, normal live, advantages&lt;br&gt;• Better environment—love, support, stability, safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life/future</td>
<td>• Success—making it in the world, specific achievements, better off&lt;br&gt;• Not in trouble</td>
<td>• Success—better off, general and specific</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. Challenges to successful adolescent adoption: adoptive parent responses

Parents were asked two questions—if they had ever considered disruption and their views of the worst aspects of adoption—intended to elicit information about the negatives or challenges in adolescent adoption. Responses addressed behavior and other adolescent problems, effects on the parents’ lives, process issues, and financial issues. Parents showed remarkable ability and willingness to describe the negatives, despite their overall satisfaction with adoption. Rarely were the negatives seen as the overriding factors in a successful adoption. Rather, they were seen as challenges.

12.1. Behavior and other adolescent problems

When parents were asked if they had ever considered disruption, 26% said they had. Most explained this in terms of adolescent behavior problems, such as “nasty arguments,” doing “nasty things,” “calling me those names,” not taking responsibility, and constant struggling. One parent who had contemplated disruption described “blowouts” and added, “We had conflicts around the drugs and all sorts of things. I’ve had to leave him in jail, and it broke my heart, but he had to learn to take responsibility.”

For some, early stages of the adoption were especially difficult. One said she had contemplated disruption three weeks before papers were to be signed. She explained, “The closer we got to the day to sign those papers the worse he got. He was just testing us to see if we really wanted him.” But early problems may continue. One said, “I loved her but I couldn’t stand her, and sometimes now I want to throw her out because she can be so difficult emotionally.” For one parent, the problem was quite severe, as the adolescent began sexually abusing another child in the home. Even those who said they had not considered disruption often mentioned difficult behavioral challenges. One said she had not considered disruption, “not even when he tried to kill me.” Another feared disruption when she felt the adolescent was not bonding. “To this day, he still doesn’t call me mom,” she said. A few thought the adolescent would decide to leave. “The first time I thought it would disrupt was because I thought he would run, and we wouldn’t go forward with him,” said one.

12.2. Effects on parents’ lives

Responses parents gave as to the worst aspects of adoption, while identifying behavior problems as the biggest factor, also emphasized the effect these problems had on the parents and their lives. Almost half of the parents (44%) mentioned stress, tension, and emotional drain related to the adolescent’s difficult behaviors as being the most negative aspect of the adoption. One described dealing with problem behaviors as “exhausting”. For some, the
behaviors and resulting stress continued even after the adolescent reached adulthood, taking a physical as well as an emotional toll.

Sometimes maintaining an acting-out adolescent in the family threatened the marriage or other relationships. One mother said, “I didn’t think we would make it, and I thought it was going to cost me my marriage”. Over one-fourth of the parents (26%) talked about the effect of the adoption (though not necessarily behavior problems) on other relationships. One mother commented, “His family turned against us even to the point that when his father died, they didn’t even acknowledge our children in the obituary”. Another said, “I have lost a couple of friends, and I wouldn’t have expected that”. One commented that another child already in the home “felt slighted because she had to share a room”.

A few parents reported a loss of personal freedom. Yet none seemed overly concerned, recognizing that most parents have thought of escape and freedom during difficult times. One couple experiencing their second set of children realized they were still tied down: “It is very hard when they are acting out to realize that our biological child is now almost 26 years old and we could have been on easy street a long time ago, and here we are dedicated to these kids”.

12.3. Process issues

Legal or process issues were challenges that threatened the adoptions. Two parents were afraid that relatives would interfere, one expressing fear that they “were going to go to court and sue me”. One parent adopting internationally was concerned about getting citizenship for the adolescent, mentioning extended “interactions with Immigration and the lawyers”. Another parent talked about the difficulties of getting the children freed for adoption. “Their mother was into drugs and substance abuse, and the ride we had up and down with the courts was very frustrating. We had to take vacation days from work. We made numerous trips to court, which was ninety minutes away”.

12.4. Financial issues

One parent mentioned as a reason for considering disruption the costs when an adolescent needed residential care. Financial issues were also mentioned as negative aspects of adoption by a few parents (6%) who had experienced problems as a result of the added expenses incurred in adopting an older child. One mother said, “We want her to have a lot of things and, definitely, she is an expensive hobby”.

13. Challenges to successful adolescent adoption: adoptee responses

Adoptees provided their own views of the challenges of adoption through their responses to questions about the worst aspects of adoption, whether they would choose adoption again, and the “ratings” they assigned to their adoptions. Their responses addressed missing birthfamily and other aspects of their previous lives, issues with their adoptive families, process issues, and other issues.
13.1. Missing birthfamily and previous life

Though 11 (27%) adoptees thought there was no worst part of adoption, those who could identify a worst part mentioned most frequently missing their birthfamilies or other aspects of their pasts. They mentioned “leaving your biological family,” “not being able to see your family, only being able to see them on weekends,” “letting go of the people from my past,” and not being able to “go down the branches of my family tree”. One said, “You don’t get to see what you looked like when you were a baby”. One adolescent mentioned “not having all of my brothers and sisters living together”. An internationally adopted adolescent reported, “The worst part is not being able to go to Russia and see my friends when I want to and not being able to see my counselor”. But perhaps the most poignant response was the following:

The part that hurts me is my birthday. I celebrate with my adoptive parents, but toward the end of the night I go upstairs and think about my birthparents and wonder if my birthfather thinks about me, since I was his last child. Thanksgiving has come to be a hard holiday, because my adoptive father lost his dad on the same day 2 years after my birth mother died. Every now and then I will remember special dates from my birth family. The day I graduated I remembered that it was my birth parents’ anniversary.

13.2. Issues with the adoptive family

The second most frequently mentioned challenges were things the adolescents did not like about life with the adoptive family, such as curfews, rules, fights with a parent, and getting into trouble and being punished (not being able to use the phone, go outside, or use TV and the radio). One saw a downside to permanence saying, “The worst part is knowing that I can’t move away. Sometimes life is hard, and I was used to being able to move to a different place and live with different people”. For another, simply adjusting to the “huge change in environment” was a challenge. One mentioned several points of dissatisfaction with his parents—they are old, don’t trust, (Mom) thinks she is always right, and Dad doesn’t run interference. One mentioned that the family did not accept his being gay, though his mother “loves us all the same”.

13.3. Process issues

Like their parents, adolescents mentioned process issues as worst parts of the adoption, but for them the concern was the waiting and being turned down by many families. Process issues were also mentioned in response to the question of whether adolescents would choose adoption again. Two adolescents said that they would not want to be adopted again, and the reason for one was that “it’s a long process and a lot of paperwork”. (The other was concerned about being separated from her biological mother.) Of the adolescents who said they would do it again, however, two qualifications concerned process—“if I didn’t have to go through Social Services again,” and “wouldn’t want to go through the long process”. Process issues were also mentioned by adolescents in relation to
their ratings of the adoption experience. The two lowest ratings (1 and 5 on a 10-point scale) were explained by the length of time it took to be adopted rather than the quality of the adoption itself. One adolescent said, “It took 2 years, and we were very anxious, and at the end we debated whether we wanted to come here or not”.

13.4. Other issues

Adolescents mentioned other negatives as explanations of their ratings of their adoptions, including not being with siblings, needing a period of adjustment, fears around the finality, and not having enough information to know what was going on.

The adolescents were savvy in identifying problems but seeing that those did not mean the adoption was not a success. As already mentioned, there are things to deal with in adoption—missing family and country, not liking everything about the family—but that did not make the adoption unsuccessful. Adoption, like any parent–child relationship, did not have to be perfect to be successful. “I do still have some issues, and my mother doesn’t always get along with me. But that’s pretty typical”. explained one adolescent.

14. Summary

Table 3 summarizes findings from parents and adolescents regarding the challenges of adolescent adoption.

15. Accounting for success: adoptive parent responses

We learned how parents accounted for success of their adoptions through their explanations of why they had not considered disruption and their advice to a friend considering adopting an adolescent. Responses generally addressed commitment, support, and information.

15.1. Commitment

According to parents, the primary reason that adoptions did not disrupt, despite the problems, was commitment, including determination even through hard times. One
parent said, “I think we have been committed from the beginning to persevering, even with our own marital relationship, [which] has been frayed because of all of these issues”. Another said, “We just accepted that it was going to work because we were going to make it work”. One parent believed that sticking through the darkest hours “galvanized” the relationship with her daughter. For several parents, the determination was supported by religious beliefs, as one said, “The Lord gave me that child”. Advice parents would give to a friend considering adopting an adolescent also addressed commitment as a key to success. One would tell friends to be “willing to go to hell and back”.

Statements of commitment and determination sometimes were supported by appreciation of the special characteristics and needs of the adolescent. One said, “Adolescents are going to have problems. I just adjust myself to it and deal with it”. Another said, “Even though she has problems, she has needs, too”. Some parents mentioned having the patience and positive attitudes to live with their adolescents. One mentioned beliefs and expectations, saying, “It is all a matter of what your beliefs and expectations are. Commitment is forever. We never thought about an escape clause”.

Two parents mentioned the compensations that supported their commitment despite challenges. “There were some nights when I traveled and I would be frazzled, but I would walk in his bedroom and watch him sleep and see him safe and secure, and it was awesome,” said one.

Three parents specifically recognized that the adolescent’s commitment can make or break the adoption. “I think that 90% of the success comes from [my daughter’s] absolutely not wanting to blow it,” said one parent.

To these parents, commitment clearly was based in reality. “Be prepared for a real roller coaster,” said one parent. Another combined being realistic with understanding of the adolescent, saying, “You have to respect their past and recognize that past. They have been hurt so much and been bounced around so much by the time they are that age”. One parent expressed a common response, saying, “I am a realist, and I would talk about the negative and balance it with the positive. I wouldn’t want anyone to get into it without being sure that they could hang in there for the long haul”.

15.2. Support

Parents also mentioned support through some form of training or counseling as a reason that adoptions worked. “Our counselor was always able to pull it back together,” one said. Another said, “We worked through the issues by talking about it, having meetings [with DSS]”. In their advice to others, several parents again mentioned getting help—counseling and other supports. One advised, “Get into a support group, or at least hook up with a mentoring adoptive family”. “Get all the help you can get, and use the resources as much as you can,” said another.

15.3. Information and choosing to adopt

By far the most frequently mentioned advice from adoptive parents to others contemplating adopting adolescents was to get information around the decision to
adopt. This took various forms—knowing about adopting an adolescent, knowing the adolescent, knowing what it would mean to the family, and knowing oneself. “They have to go into it with their eyes wide open,” was a frequent comment. “Get information, get information, get information,” a parent advised.

“I would want more upfront information and to know what questions to ask,” one parent said. “It is not only normal adolescent issues but also about adoption,” said another. Parents had many suggestions, including getting tools before and during the adoption regarding how to deal with certain behaviors, finding resources to provide education about adolescent adoption, and talking to people who will share their experiences. One parent said she would share her own “special issues”. Another talked about the need to understand “what being a parent of a teenager is and then what being a parent of an adopted teenager who may have issues is”. “Spend time with my child or another child or teenagers in general,” advised one parent.

Others focused more on getting to know this particular adolescent, getting as much information as possible about the child and his or her situation. “Find out what problems they have had in foster care, and find out why they left different foster care placements,” advised one parent. Others emphasized having first-hand experience with the child. “Get to know the child very, very well,” said one. “I would tell them that if a teenager wants to be adopted, he or she will work at it also,” said another. Another advised parents to “see how the teenager feels about it. You have to know their feelings”. Only one parent mentioned actually needing to have the child in the home before deciding whether to adopt.

Mentioned less frequently were knowing yourself—“totally know what you want to do”—and understanding the impact on the family—on other children and on the marriage.

16. Accounting for success: adoptee responses

Adoptees provided their perspectives on accounting for success through responses to one question that asked why they thought their adoption worked or did not work and another that asked their advice to an adolescent who might be considering adoption. Responses addressed commitment, benefits, and information, partially paralleling parent responses.

16.1. Commitment

Most adoptees believed their adoptions worked, and in explaining this, they were most apt to mention ideas related to commitment. Typically, comments mixed ideas about the adoptive parents’ commitment, the adolescent’s commitment, and working to maintain the arrangement despite problems. Said one, “It worked because of my parents’ perseverance and understanding of me”. “I think it worked because we had faith in each other. It works also due to our commitment towards wanting to be a family,” explained another. “Like all families there are hard times, but we pull together,” said another. One adolescent explained that she was “difficult,” but her adoptive mother understood, and together they “worked through it patiently”.

Adolescents advised other teens about working to overcome problems. “There are going to be some trying times, but the Lord will work it out,” said one. Another advised that they “try their best to work with the adoptive parents”. One said, “be patient and be strong. It is not going to be easy, and you are always going to miss your real parents”.

16.2. Benefits

Another group of comments centered around the adoptive parents’ providing what the adolescent needed and their reaping benefits from the adoption. Typically, adoptees referred to specific parenting styles that they liked. One adoptee explained, “I feel like it worked because she had a way of coping with us, a way of handling us in certain situations. She would sit down and talk with us, a way a mother would do things”. Another described his adoptive father as meeting his needs, saying he is “very laid back” and “doesn’t yell”.

A variation of this theme of good parenting is being a good match, mentioned by a few participants. Adoptees talked about compatibility, having the same interests, and having things in common. “We do a lot of the same things. We were just a really good match. [Mother] is an author, and I love writing,” said one. Another identified with her mom’s background, saying, “We both have been abused in our childhood and assaulted”.

Occasionally the comments were about providing such things as a home, stability, and a family. “I think it worked because I was looking for a stable environment with caring parents,” said one. “It was ideal, because I was looking for a family at the time,” said another. An adolescent who was part of a sibling group explained, “It’s been so hard at times, but it kept us together as a family. We had a family again, a nice home, beds to sleep in, food to get out of the refrigerator, which is something we never had before”.

For several adolescents the adoptions worked because of their own assessment that the adoption was good for them in the short run or the long run. One addressed the benefits of having a home and family, saying, “No matter how old you are you still need love and you need to give love. You need someone to see on the holidays and need grandparents. You need a family and the support they give”. Another said, “You can be happier knowing that this is my mom and my dad and not worrying about where you are going to be in a week or a month”. Absent adoption, teens would have “no one to guide them or help them with college”. Another supported adoption saying, “You should think about if you had to go somewhere else; you could be living in a trailer and being sexually abused every day”. Addressing the longer term one said, “I can look back and see where I’ve been. And look at me now”.

16.3. Information and choosing to be adopted

When adolescents talked about informational needs, they focused on knowing about their prospective parents so they could choose well. Their advice to teens who may be
considering adoption showed what they believed to be critical in choosing adoption, which for adolescent adoptees was an important aspect of success. They advised teens to go with their feelings (perhaps their version of parents’ “know yourself”), not be pressured, know the family and be sure it is a good match, and try to make it work. A typical remark was, “Do what you think is right for you and what’s going to help you in life.” “My suggestion is to look at all of your possibilities and do what your heart tells you and do what feels and looks right to you,” said another adoptee. Another said, “You shouldn’t let people pressure you if you don’t want to be adopted,” and another advised, “Don’t rush into anything.”

However, going with feelings was based upon knowledge of the adoptive family. Adoptees believed in knowing the family well enough to be sure they were a good match. One advised, “You want to have a family that matches with you and that you feel a connection with”. One advised, “Take time to learn about the family. It is just like having a girlfriend. You need to get to know the person first before you jump into the relationship”. Another talked about “testing it out,” advising teens, “When they go for visits, make sure it’s what they want. Don’t jump into it right away just because they want a family”.

17. Summary

Table 4 summarizes findings from parents and adolescents regarding how they accounted for the success of adolescent adoption.

18. Summary, theoretical considerations, and practice implications

In this paper, using the words of participants, we have described common themes related to successful adolescent adoption and also demonstrated some of the variation, as we believe practice must speak not only to what is common among families but also to
what is unique. Findings have been summarized in tables at the end of each section. In each of the three summarizing tables, the researchers were struck by two aspects of participant responses that may be seen as unifying themes. First, though not always identical, parent and adolescent responses were highly complementary. Second, responses from parents and adolescents were reality based.

Parents and adolescents, coming from different points of view, provided information that not only addressed similar themes but also provided details describing how each theme looked from different perspectives. Parents wanted children, and adolescents wanted parents. Parents could provide a better home and environment for the adolescents, and adolescents wanted all the advantages of that home and environment. Parents needed information about this particular adolescent, while adolescents needed information about this particular family. For the families and adolescents in this study, adoption had characteristics of a partnership involving a high degree of mutuality.

References to reality—realistically assessing the challenges of the adoption—ran throughout parent and adolescent responses. Parents saw as challenging adolescents’ behaviors and unhappiness, while adolescents saw as challenging conflict with parents and missing their family and pasts. Neither adoptive parents nor adolescents expected perfection. However, the reality focus extended beyond assessing challenges to include appreciation of the effort involved in making the adoption work. Both groups described what this was like for them, and each emphasized the “payoff” in terms of getting something they wanted.

18.1. Theoretical considerations

The questions that guided this exploratory study as well as our initial interest in the topic of adolescent adoptions rested primarily upon assumptions from attachment theory and developmental theory, both widely used in studies of adoption. For instance, we assumed that the decision to adopt included the desire of adoptive parents and of adolescents for a parent–child relationship, which would include some level of attachment. In addition, we assumed that adolescents would bring attachment difficulties to the adoption, frustrating the experience for both themselves and their adoptive parents.

Further, we assumed that the tasks associated with the developmental stage of adolescence would profoundly influence how they and their adoptive parents experienced adoption. Our assumptions were generally borne out.

However, we expected additional theoretical implications to emerge from our data, and this indeed occurred. Specifically, participants told us about decision making that resembled a personal cost–benefit analysis regarding the initial decision to adopt or be adopted as well as sustaining the commitment. Both adoptive parents and adolescents talked about their need for information to decide on the adoption and what they wanted and got out of the adoption that made it worth while. Further, they told us about how they coped with their challenging realities so their adoptions would be sustained.

Though we know of no studies that explore the type of decision making that participants described, coping has received some attention in the literature. Kirk (1984) provided an early look at adoptive parents’ coping strategies, which he categorized as “acknowledgement of differences” and “rejection of differences”. More recently,
Brodinsky (1990) and the Center for Adoption Studies, School of Social Work, Illinois State University, have addressed stress and coping among adoptive families. Within a context of providing therapy, O’Brien and Zamostny (2003) state that adoptive families might be aided by interventions that help them normalize challenges, build on their attributes, and maximize coping.

We suggest that with adolescent adoptions, decision making and coping may take on a larger role than in adoptions of infants and younger children and that we can understand these adoptions better and support development of more helpful services if future research explores in a more systematic way the application of decision making and coping theory to adolescent adoptions.

18.2. Practice implications

Though we emphasize the exploratory nature and limitations of this study, we believe that findings warrant our offering tentative suggestions regarding practices that may support successful adolescent adoption. First is the clear message that adolescent adoption is not only possible but can be a very positive experience. Many parents want to adopt adolescents, and many adolescents want to be adopted. Workers, families, therapists, and others involved in adoptions need to embrace this message.

Second, we must conceptualize adolescent adoption as a partnership and ensure that all involved share in that understanding and support mutuality. Parents assess and choose adolescents, but adolescents also assess and choose parents. Parents commit to making the adoption work, and so do adolescents.

Findings suggest that adoption preparation for both parents and adolescents must meet their extensive informational needs. They need much detail so they truly understand what they are choosing (or not choosing). They also need to be helped to apply this information to themselves and their own situations—information plus insight.

Though information must address the challenges of adolescent adoption, the benefits must also be made to “come alive” if participants are to choose adoption, and according to participants, who provided rich and compelling detail, these benefits are many. Parents and adolescents should be solicited to share their experiences, during both preparation and ongoing training, with those considering or having chosen adoption of an adolescent. Indeed, it is difficult to see how this information could be adequately communicated absent involving these parents and adolescents themselves.

We need to ensure that adequate services are available to help parents and adolescents handle their greatest challenges—behavior problems (from the parents’ perspective) and conflicts with parents and birthfamily issues (from the adolescents’ perspective). We must recognize and address the extent to which missing birthfamily is a potent, ongoing issue for adolescents, which may account for the depression that parents observed. As challenges are the rule and success seems to depend on coping with these challenges, services should emphasize accepting the challenges and effective coping strategies.

Systemic barriers, as experienced by both parents and adolescents, need to be addressed. The adolescents particularly can lose heart over the time it often takes for an adoption to be finalized, and this can color their whole adoption experience.
Last, we should continue to ask participants in adolescent adoption about their experiences. Though recruiting their participation and eliciting information takes effort, their input is essential for providing the full picture of what goes into successful adolescent adoption and for improving the lives of many who, by their own admission and consistent with previous research, would fare worse without adoption.

Acknowledgements

This article was made possible by grant # 90 C0 0891 from the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services. The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not represent the official views or policies of the funding agency. Publication does not in any way constitute endorsement by the Department of Health and Human Services.

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