

# Ethical Issues in Adoption Practice

by  
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The following pertains to the ethical issues professionals face when working with members of the adoptive triad. Each of these issues is paramount in providing the best immediate and long-term care possible for members of these families.

While all members of the adoption triad should take it upon themselves to learn about the adoption process, it is also the responsibility of the adoption professional or agency to encourage and facilitate this learning. Following is an outline of ethical issues in adoption practice.



## I. Birth Family A. Education

- Professionals must be aware and sensitive to the immense amount of stress that the birth parents are under when they seek information on adoption.
- Professionals must be clear and provide education for birth parents on the options available for the child.
- The professional should discuss with the parent the benefits and drawbacks of each option and provide them time to weigh the options.
- If the birth parent decides to place the child for adoption, they should be educated on the avenues for adoption, including public and private agencies, private attorneys, closed, open, and semi-open arrangements (Groza & Rosenberg, 2001)
- At this time, birth parents should also be educated about the psychological and developmental issues that are normal through the adoption life cycle (Groza & Rosenberg, 2001)

- Birth parents should also be educated about their legal rights including the termination of their parental rights to the child and the rights of the birth father in the adoption process.
- Open adoptions, though they cannot be legally mandated, are often in the best interests of both birth parents and adoptee (Groza & Rosenberg, 2001)
- Agencies can help facilitate the open adoption by relaying photos of the child and letters between birth parents and adoptive parents.

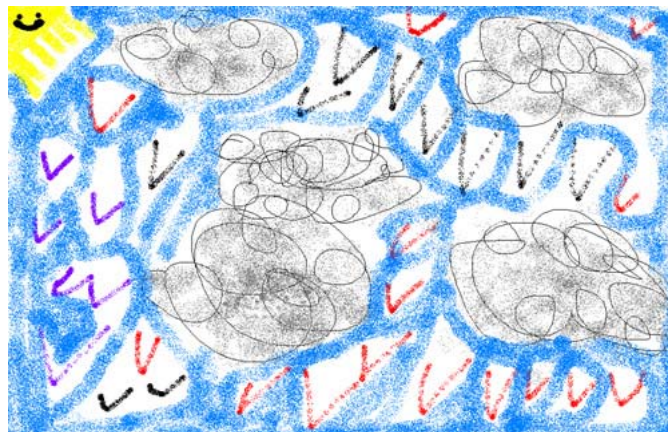
#### B. Issues of injustice, abuse, trafficking, and sale of children

- Particularly in International adoptions, some agencies or governments are capitalizing on injustices in the sending country to force or persuade birth parents to place their children for adoptions.
- Some examples of social injustices include (Hollingsworth, 2003):
  - China's one child per family policy has encouraged families to make an adoption plan for their female children. Male children are more valuable to the family because his wife is socially bound to care for his parents when they are older, which makes males more desirable.
  - Impoverished countries, such as former Russian nations, do not provide financial aid for families. This lack of resources often causes children to become malnourished and have no health care. These facts may encourage parents to place their children in orphanages.
  - In some countries, mothers have been manipulated or pressured to release their children for adoption
  - Others have found that agencies or individuals have bought and kidnapped babies, or paid teenage girls to get pregnant and release their children for adoption.

#### C. Post-Placement Support

- As adoption professionals, it is important to remember and to educate birth parents on the lifelong adoption issues that they will confront.
  - Some of the lifelong issues of the adoption life cycle include (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1986)
    - Loss: the birth family often feels a sense of loss when the child leaves the birth family. This sense of loss often recurs throughout the family life cycle.
    - Rejection: the birth parent often feels rejecting of themselves as being irresponsible or unworthy.

- Guilt/Shame: birth parents often feel guilty or shameful for placing the child and are often judged by others.
  - Grief: because of the lack of any mourning rituals accompanying a placement, a birth family may grieve the loss of the child through the lifespan because they have not gone through the stages of grief.
  - Identity: the birth family may feel some confusion in their identities because they have no information on the adopted child.
  - Control: the birth family may struggle with a loss of control because their biological child is unknown to them.
- Post adoption, birth parents struggle with the grief and loss associated with placing their child for adoption.
  - Support groups are often helpful after an adoption for birth parents to work through their own feelings of grief and loss and to hear how other birth parents manage those lifelong tasks (Groza & Rosenberg, 2001).
  - In both open and closed adoptions, search and reunion issues will come up either by a biological child searching for his or her birthparents or by birthparents searching for their biological child. This is often a difficult process for which the birth parent may seek professional help. However, it is important for professionals to understand that it may take the birth parent a number of years between the time that they originally seek information on searching to the time that they are emotionally and psychologically ready to make contact with their child.



**"The Sky" by Casey, age 6**

"I like the sky cause it's beautiful and when the birds fly in the sky."

## II. Adoptee

### A. Best Interests of the Adoptee

- The starting point for all adoptions should be the child. Professionals who work in the adoption field must remember that the services they provide are intended to protect children, not to make a profit (ISS-USA, 2004).
- The child's best interests should be the goal of each adoption. Each child's needs should be critically assessed and should guide the search for an adoptive family (ISS-USA, 2004).

\*\*\*\*[Link to International Social Services- United States of America Branch](http://www.iss-usa.org) <http://www.iss-usa.org>\*\*\*\*

### B. Reunification

- It is in the best interests of the child to be with his birth family providing the situation is safe for the child (ISS-USA, 2004).
- The government and child welfare systems should encourage and support family preservation.
- When family reunification cannot occur, it is in the best interests of the child to stay within his kinship group or community.
- Family reunification should take precedence over long-term institutionalization due to the harmful effects of institutionalization.
- For children in foster care, continuous contact with the family of origin should occur to determine if parenting is a possible option.
- Children should also have frequent contact with siblings, whether biological or fictive, while in foster care.

### C. Permanency

- It is always in the best interests of the child to be in a permanent home.
- Once it has been established that safe reunification with the child's biological family is not possible, adoption is the next best option because it provides the child with a permanent family (Schmidt-Tieszen & McDonald, 1998)
- All children whose parental rights have been terminated should try to be placed in permanent adoptive homes, regardless of the child's age, race, or special needs.

### D. Timeliness

- Since out of home placements affect child development, a permanent home for a child should be found as quickly as possible (ISS-USA, 2004).

### E. Kin Adoptions

- Kin adoptions have many benefits for children including (Lorkovich, Piccola, Groza, Brindo, & Marks, 2004):

- Children in kin arrangements often suffer from less loss associated with the adoption because they are still surrounded by family members.
- Kin adoptions can reinforce a child's identity because the family members can often give the child information about his/her parents, siblings, grandparents, and etc.
- Kinship care often offers more stability in placement compared to foster care situations.
- Children are free from the stigma of being a foster child when they are living with a relative after parental rights have been terminated.
- Kin adoptions also can often keep the sibling relationships strong
- With all of the benefits of kin adoptions in mind, professionals working with children in foster care or adoptions should always search out family members as possible adoptive homes.
- However, there is often a conflict between knowing that both kinship care and permanency are in the best interests of the child. Often a child's kin will be willing to care for the child but not permanently adopt the child. Some other barriers to kin adoptions include (Lorkovich, et. al., 2004):
  - Inaccurate information about the adoption and the child
  - Child's physical and mental health problems
  - Housing problems
  - Court processes
  - Bad experiences with child welfare system
  - Complicated adoption process
  - Problems with birth parents
  - Lack of a desire to adopt
  - Background problems
  - Cooperation with the system
- With all these barriers to kin adoptions in mind, as professionals we need to work to educate a child's family about the adoption process and to help remove any barriers possible.
- It is also important to remember that kinship care situations may still need support and services including financial support, therapy, and support groups.

#### F. Sibling Adoptions

- The vast majority of children in foster care are members of a sibling group and it is important to keep these children together through the foster care system and into adoption (Staff & Fein, 1992).

- Siblings are important to all children, particularly to children who have been separated from their parents because (Groza, 2004b):
- older siblings can be attachment figures for younger siblings
- older siblings can help younger siblings through transitions in school and foster homes
- older siblings act as role models for younger siblings
- siblings help each other become socialized through play and normal sibling conflict
- Having siblings around makes it easier to form a personal identity
- Siblings provide closer ties to the birth family and can provide information about the birth family to younger siblings
- Having siblings together provides those children with some consistency in their lives
- When working with adoption and foster care, a priority should be to keep sibling groups together when placed at the same time, but also to search for older siblings already in the system when a new member of the family is placed in foster care.
- Kin placements should be explored for sibling groups because family members are often more willing to accept some or all of the siblings than non-family foster homes (Groza, 2004b).
- Also, when children are placed in separate homes, workers should make it a priority to coordinate visits between siblings even if parents are not permitted to attend.
- When working with siblings in a therapeutic setting, all siblings should be seen together to work on their relationships and traumas regardless of whether they reside together or not (Groza, 2004b).

#### G. Matching (Groza, 2004a)

- Matching the prospective adoptive parents to the child is an important piece of adoption work
- When trying to match a child and an adoptive family, a number of variables should be taken into consideration including:
  - Family strengths and resources
  - Family desires regarding demographics of the child
  - Family expectations for their child and their fantasies about their child
  - The child's strengths and resources
  - The child's desires and expectations
  - Both short term and long term needs of the child
  - Link to Groza Matching Handout

- When both parents and child are matched in a way that is appealing for their personal needs and expectations, it is much more likely to be a successful adoption.

#### H. Cultural Issues (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 1994a)

- Transracial or transcultural adoption means placing a child who is of one race or ethnic group with adoptive parents of another race or ethnic group.
- When working with multicultural families it is important to use adoption- friendly and multicultural language.
- Parents in a transcultural family are encouraged to:
  - Become intensely invested in parenting
  - Tolerate no racially or ethnically biased remarks
  - Surround the family with supportive family and friends
  - Celebrate all cultures, particularly the cultures included in the family
  - Talk about race and culture
  - Expose their child to a variety of experiences so that he or she develops physical and intellectual skills that build self-esteem
  - Take their child to places where most of the people present are from his or her race or ethnic group.



#### I. Intercountry Adoptions

- Placements should first be explored in a child's home country before international options are examined.
- Institutionalization
  - Agencies should provide information for all members of the triad regarding institutionalization, and information regarding the possible short- and long-term effects of living in such an environment. This information should include the following:
    - Institutionalization is defined as the "short-term or long-term placement of children in institutions, such as hospitals, group homes or orphanages. Placement in institutions during early critical developmental periods, and for lengthy periods of time, is often associated with developmental delays due to environmental deprivation, poor staff to child ratios, or lack of early childhood stimulation" (Adoption Media, LLC, 2004).

- Research has documented a multitude of issues in young children adopted from institutions, specifically in Eastern Europe and Russia.
- While the following behaviors may have worked to the child's benefit in the institution, they are often maladaptive once the child is adopted into a family
- These issues include:
  - Psychological Issues (Doolittle, 1995)
    - Attachment issues – including insecure or disrupted attachments that may lead to difficulty in attaching to the adoptive family; may lead to future behavioral problems
    - Difficulties in cognitive abilities due to neglect and lack of stimulation that often occurs in institutions
    - Difficulty in thinking critically
    - Difficulty with cause-and-effect thinking
    - Learning disabilities and delays
    - Depressed communicative abilities
  - Social Issues (Doolittle, 1995)
    - Indiscriminate affection – caused by insecure attachment to previous caregivers
    - Demanding or attention-seeking behaviors – learned to engage caregivers at any cost
    - Poor peer relationships – due to few interactions with peers or other caregivers
    - Chronic lying and hoarding food – typical institutional behavior caused by lack of resources. Due to lack of personal property in the institution, the child may or may not understand boundaries
    - Little eye contact – due to presence of few meaningful interactions with others
  - Medical Issues (Doolittle, 1995)
    - Failure to thrive
    - Hepatitis B and D
    - HIV-AIDS

- Tuberculosis
- Intestinal parasites
- Behavioral Issues (Groza, 1999)
  - Aggressive behavior – related to the harsh treatment the child has received from previous caregivers
  - Antisocial behavior - examples include stealing and hoarding of food
  - Impulsivity – due to little experience with boundaries



**A Day at the Park  
by Nikki, age 7**

### III. Adoptive Family

#### A. Pre-placement Preparation

- Choosing the type of adoption
  - Each type of adoption comes with different challenges, benefits, and laws. So it is important for prospective adoptive parents to be informed about the type of adoption that will best suit their lifestyle and expectations.
- Choosing an agency (Family Adoption Consultants handout)
  - Due to the recent increase in the number of adoption agencies that compete to serve prospective families, choosing an agency is the first decision that will affect the adoption process.
  - Agencies should feel a sense of responsibility to better the living conditions of children who stay in the institution by providing funds for medical equipment, play equipments, computers, etc.

- It is important for families to research the chosen adoption agency to ensure that the agency is truly concerned about child welfare, not making a profit.
- Steps families can take to ensure involvement with a competent agency include:
  - Evaluate the extent of services which the agency will provide, both pre- and post-placement
  - Be wary of agencies that sound “too good to be true” – no agency can guarantee a healthy child or time of placement
- Deciding on a preferable level of openness
  - Open adoptions are a fairly recent trend in infant adoptions and have gained significant popularity because many believe that children have a right, at an appropriate age and maturity level, to know their history (ISS-USA, 2004).
  - When researching adoption, prospective adoptive parents should find information on the risks and benefits to all members of the triad related to the openness of adoption.
    - For birth parents, some openness in the adoption allows them to be part of the decision about who will parent their child and in some cases provides information on how their child is growing in the adoptive family. This connection even after the birth of the child often makes the stages of the adoption life cycle easier to handle for the birth family (Sobol, Daly, & Kelloway, 2000).
    - For children, openness provides the child with developmentally appropriate information on his/her past, identity, history and medical information. It also provides the child with as much information as possible which is needed when trying to form an individual identity in adolescence.
    - For adoptive parents, open adoptions allow the family to know about and sometimes meet the birth parents and to gather information about the birth family for their child when he begins to question his history and form his identity.
- Education
  - Prospective adoptive families should be adequately educated on issues that may affect the adoptee and adoptive family both now and in the future (Farber, Timberlake, Mudd, & Cullen, 2003)

- So much of the outcome in adoption is related to expectations. Adoptive families must expect some difficult transitions when they bring an adopted child into their home. High expectations are damaging to the adoption because parents can quickly become discouraged and frustrated with their new child.
- Professionals working with adoptive families should be clear and honest about the possible issues that the adoptive child may bring into the home so that the parents are as prepared for difficult times as possible before the child arrives.
- Many agencies either provide or suggest parents be enrolled in pre-parenting classes that discuss some of the issues in adoptions such as attachment difficulties, institutionalized behavior, cultural differences, etc.
- The Home Study Process (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 2004b)
  - Training
    - Agencies should require trainings for prospective adoptive parents prior to or during the home study process. These trainings should prepare prospective parents for the needs of children waiting and help families decide what type of child or children they could parent most effectively.
  - Interviews
    - During the Home Study process, the prospective family should be interviewed several times by a social worker.
    - During these interviews, the social worker should work to develop a relationship with the family and assist them with an appropriate placement.
    - The family should be asked to explain how they handle stress and past experiences of crisis or loss.
  - Home Visit
    - Home visits primarily serve to ensure the family's home meets State licensing standards.
    - Some States require an inspection from the local health and fire departments in addition to the visit by the social worker.
    - The social worker should be looking for how the family plans to accommodate a new family member.





- Health Statements
  - Before placing a child, agencies should ensure that the adoptive parents are essentially healthy, have a normal life expectancy, and are physically and mentally able to handle the care of a child.
- Income Statements
  - Agencies should ensure that the prospective parents are able to financially provide for the adoptive child and provide adequate health coverage.
- Background Checks
  - Public and private agencies should comply with State laws and policies requiring criminal and child abuse records that may affect eligibility for adoptive parents. Along with this, all other background information should be evaluated to determine whether the family would be a good home for the child.
- References
  - Agencies should request personal references from prospective families to help the social worker form a more complete picture of the family and support network.
  - If possible, references should be individuals who have known the family for several years, who have observed the family in many situations, and

who have visited the family home and know of the family's interest in and involvement with children.

○ Home Study Report

In general, home study reports should include the above-mentioned health and income statements, background checks, and references, as well as the following types of information:

- **Family background.** Descriptions of the applicants' childhoods, how they were parented, past and current relationships with parents and siblings, key events and losses, and what was learned from them.
- **Education/employment.** Applicants' current educational level, satisfaction with their educational attainments, and any plans to further their education, as well as their employment status, history, plans, and satisfaction with their current jobs.
- **Relationships.** If applicants are a couple, the report may cover their history together as well as their current relationship (e.g., how they make decisions, solve problems, communicate, show affection, etc.). If applicants are single, there will be information about their social life and how they anticipate integrating a child into it, as well as information about their network of relatives and friends.
- **Daily life.** Routines, such as a typical weekday or weekend, plans for child care (if applicants work outside the home), hobbies, and interests.
- **Parenting.** Applicants' past experiences with children (e.g., their own, relatives' children, neighbors, volunteer work, babysitting, teaching, or coaching), in addition to their plans regarding discipline and other parenting issues.
- **Neighborhood.** Descriptions of the applicants' neighborhood, including safety and proximity to community resources.
- **Religion.** Information about the applicants' religion, level of religious practice, and what kind of religious upbringing (if any) they plan to provide for the child.
- **Feelings about/readiness for adoption.** Social workers should inquire about why the applicants want to adopt, feelings about infertility (if this is an issue), what kind of child they might best parent

and why, and how they plan to talk to their children about adoption-related issues, and feelings related to openness in adoption. For more information, read the NAIC's [\*Openness in Adoption: A Fact Sheet for Families\*](#).

- **Approval/recommendation.** Based on the home study report, social workers should recommend only the families that have the emotional and financial resources to care for an adopted child.

#### B. Post-placement Support

- It is the ethical duty of professionals working with adoptive families to provide the support that they need to become and stay strong and supportive, even after finalization.
- Adoptive families should also be provided with information on what services they are currently or may be in the future eligible for through government programs, local networks, or agency regulations.
- Some families may need a continuation of subsidies to provide for the family financially, the emotional support of the placement social worker, crisis intervention, or a variety of other information and services.
- For families that have formed through infant adoptions, needed services may include information about medical problems and learning disabilities, in addition to support regarding the telling of the child about his/her adoption in a developmentally appropriate way.
- When working in adoption, it is important to try to maintain some communication with adoptive families in case they need additional support in the future. "Ongoing contact with social workers has been shown to be one of the most important elements of long-term adoption success" (Groza & Rosenberg, 2001)
- Adoptive families may also need support in keeping the adoption as open as agreed upon before the adoption. Adoption agencies often facilitate open arrangements by sending and receiving correspondence between the adoptive family and the birth family.
- When working with adoptive families, we should be clear that our goal is to keep the family from disruption and we should provide the family with any needed and accessible support services to keep the family together.



Funny Horses, by Andrea, age 6

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