

## Marriage and Relationship Education: Tips for Practitioners Working with Adoptive Couples

Adoption professionals and those in the marriage and relationship education (MRE) field are becoming more aware of the special issues adoptive couples face in their marriages. Practitioners from both disciplines may want to consider ways to bridge these two fields together by offering MRE classes in adoptive-parent training at both public and private adoption agencies or by offering them through post-adoption services. Those who are working with couples may be unaware of how much a marriage can be impacted by the special needs of adopted children.

Couples generally need to set aside time to connect and communicate in addition to being able to solve problems together and manage expectations. There are unique issues related to adoption that those working with adoptive couples may want to consider when providing MRE services. Every adopted child, whether placed into his new parents' arms in the delivery room or adopted at the age of 18, will deal with what clinicians call the "seven core issues of adoption." These issues are loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy and control (see how they relate <http://www.adoptionsupport.org/res/indexcorea.php>). At different times, adoptees will either face or suppress these issues; their emotional reactions and behavior can present challenges that can affect the parents' relationship. Adoption-related issues can be present in healthy infants who were adopted here in this country, in kids who were adopted from other countries, and in older youngsters who were adopted from the foster care system.

Adoption is a positive story, but clinicians agree that couples should be prepared to address these issues



together as they arise. This Tip Sheet highlights common issues adoptive couples face and provides strategies that MRE practitioners can use to address them.

***Arm your couples with resources.*** Couples are more likely to thrive if they stay current on research and best practices concerning the special needs and behaviors of adopted children. Encourage them to do this and have an activity in your class that consists of making a list of resources. Trainings, videos, webinars, books and articles, constantly utilized together, will provide the couple with much-needed tools to understand their children and allow them to get on the same page as parents. Make sure this resource list includes support groups. Support groups are highly recommended by couples who have participated in them during all stages of the adoption experience.

The couple may be in denial saying, "We just want to get our kid home, get the social workers out of our lives, and lead a normal life." They will experience

less stress and fewer crises if they prepare themselves with support systems like extended families, religious organizations, schools, adoptive parent groups and other resources to support them when they are going through a tough time. Finally, make sure the couple understands that when problems arise with their children, they must seek help *early* from someone who is knowledgeable of adoption issues.

**Respite care** is the provision of short-term, temporary relief to those who are caring for family members who might otherwise require permanent placement in a facility outside the home. Respite programs provide planned short-term and time-limited breaks for families and other unpaid caregivers of children with special behavioral or emotional needs in order to support and maintain the primary caregiving relationship.

**Encourage the couple to set aside time to connect.** Another class activity is to have couples find the time to have fun together as a couple. An activity or exercise to find ways to do this will be very helpful. Have them commit to going out on “dates” and a vacation (however short) for just the two of them on a regular basis. Persuade them to set aside time to talk every day, whether on the phone or in person.

**Have the couple identify child care options and address any anxiety associated with them.** Educators may also want to find out what the couple may have available for respite or childcare. In order to go on a little vacation alone and to have date nights, both parents must feel good about the childcare that is

available. Sometimes parents are unusually anxious about leaving the kids with someone else because of certain behaviors, special needs or abandonment issues. Address this in class. Have respite care guides available in your class and encourage couples to make this a priority. Other adoptive parents and foster parents, carefully screened of course, can make suitable respite caregivers.

**Help couples learn how to handle hurtful comments.** Adoptive couples are often hurt by their friends’ and families’ lack of understanding of their situation, which can then lead to resentment within the marriage (for example, a mother-in-law or a spouse’s best friend made a hurtful, offhand comment). Many adoptive couples have experienced comments like, “So when are you going to have your own child?” Marriage educators can normalize this in class, using humor and exercises in communication skills and forgiveness to address them. It may be fun to prepare themselves with comments so they are not speechless when friends or family make insensitive comments.

**Prepare couples to handle the “preferred parent” dynamic.** Children who are experiencing emotional issues may have a definite preference for which parent they will allow into their lives. The “left-out” parent needs to realize that there’s a need being met, and should learn not take it personally. The spouse of this “left-out” parent can be taught in class to offer encouragement and to prevent it from being a source of permanent contention in the marriage. The favored parent should be advised to show appreciation to the partner for such generosity of spirit and understanding.

**Normalize the “dragger” and the “dragee.”** Often there is a “dragger” and a “dragee” in the adoption world; that is, one spouse “drags” the other into adoption. It can be helpful in an MRE setting for the “dragger” and “dragee” to identify themselves. The

environment must be humorous and non-judgmental. This can help normalize the issue so that the adoptive couple understands that most couples go through the same thing. It also may alleviate any resentment, guilt, etc. one may be feeling. Address the matter when the class has been meeting for a while and rapport has been established among the group members and the facilitator.

**Explore the couple's beliefs about children who are adopted.** Have them do an exercise in class or as homework that can help them explore the seven core issues of adoption and how their adoptive child may feel. Make sure they understand that these issues will affect their child throughout the course of his or her life. They may want to come up with times when the child will be especially vulnerable to these issues; examples may include creating a family tree in school, going to their first prom, or even getting married and having children themselves. It is also helpful for the couple to prepare answers ahead of time to questions the child may have. If the couple is prepared for how they will respond, there will be less conflict within their marital relationship.

**Assist the couple with resolving infertility issues.** Going through infertility is a major life crisis and can be very tough on a marriage. Become knowledgeable in this area so that you understand the many significant losses, disappointments, stresses, and heartbreaks inherent to this experience. Often one or both parents experience low self-esteem, so exercises to help one spouse build the other up are helpful. Further, one parent may grieve much more than the other, and may be struggling to accept how the other is reacting to the trauma. The facilitator also may want to normalize this and explain that everyone reacts differently. Exercises and activities to help each spouse respect the other's process are key. Infertility may never be completely "resolved." In fact, it may

be a life issue for the couple that will occasionally challenge them.

**Make it clear that you understand how pre-adoption issues can create difficulties.** Concern about being blamed for their children's problems may lead adoptive parents to be hesitant to share information regarding difficulties they may be having with the youngsters. Tell the parents that you understand how the child's pre-adoption experiences and issues can affect his or her behavior and ultimately, the couple's relationship. Help them comprehend the necessity of making their marriage a priority. You may want to have them create some examples of what this will look like through experiential learning exercises (you may see a list of experiential learning exercises for download at <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/app.cfm?event=facilitatortoolkit.topic&topicid=4>).

Practitioners who are working with adoptive couples can make their MRE classes more relevant by integrating the unique issues that adoptive couples face into the curriculum. Couples will be more likely to flourish if they are armed with resources for support, are aware of their beliefs about children who are adopted, and if they prioritize time to connect. Dealing with hurtful comments, handling the "preferred parent" dynamic, working through infertility and normalizing the "dragger" and "draggee" are all part of adoptive couples' experiences that may be addressed in an MRE setting.

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## Additional Resources:

### Products from the NHMRC

[Adoption and Your Marriage](#)

[Coping with Infertility in Your Marriage](#)

Couples Communication: Three Part Series:

- 1) [Honey, Did You Hear Me?: Game Plan for Active Listening](#)
- 2) [Listening is not a Spectator Sport: Rules for Active Listening](#)
- 3) [Avoiding Communication Fouls](#)

[Infertility: A Fact Sheet](#)

[MRE Facilitator Toolkit](#)

[The Challenges of Adoption on the Marital Relationship Webinar](#)

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[Tips for Sustaining a Healthy Marriage in Children with Special Needs](#)

## More Resources:

[Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)

[Perspectives Press](#), especially their blogs

[The Center for Adoption Support and Education \(C.A.S.E.\)](#)

## Author's Recommended Reading:

Brodzinsky, David; Schechter, Marshall; Marantz Henig, Robin. *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, 1993.

Colorado Coalition of Adoptive Families (COCAF) and Colorado Post-Adoption Resource Center (COPARC). *Family Diversity in Education: Foster Care, Kinship Care, Adoption and Schools*, 2009.

Fahlberg, Vera. *A Child's Journey through Placement*, 1991.

James, Arleta. *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships When New Kids Join the Family*, 2009.

McCreight, Brenda. *Parenting Your Adopted Older Child: How to Overcome the Unique Challenges and Raise a Happy and Healthy Child*, 2002.

Silverstein, D.N. and Rosen, S. "Adoptees and the Seven Core Issues of Adoption," *Adoptive Families Magazine*, March/April, 1999.