



**national
healthy marriage
resource center**

NHMRC December 2008 Webinar Frequently Asked Questions

The Challenges of Adoption on the Marital Relationship

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The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center broadcasted a webinar entitled “The Challenges of Adoption on the Marital Relationship” on December 3, 2008. During the course of the webinar, we received more questions than we were able to answer. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is a follow-up to many of the questions posted during the webinar.

1. What issues do parents of adopted children face that biological ones don't?

All parents experience many of the same successes and struggles associated with starting and raising a family. Despite the many similarities between the experiences of parents of families formed through adoption or through birth, parents who adopt sometimes face unique issues and challenges. Many adoptive parents were unable to have biological children and have had to deal with infertility and the loss and grief sometimes associated with infertility. Additionally, the process of adoption can be expensive, long, tiring and unpredictable. Sometimes parents have little warning that a prospective baby is on her way and other times a birth mother may decide to keep her baby after all. Not all adoptive parents get their children at birth. Adopting older children can be difficult as well. Older children may be more likely to have been abused or neglected and may have spent time in other foster families or temporary housing. They may question why they can't be with their biological parents and have trouble adapting to and bonding with their adoptive parents.

Living with adopted children poses some unique challenges as well. All children say things to hurt their

parents from time to time, but comments like “I wish you had never adopted me” or “My real dad would let me” may especially hurt adoptive parents. Some children are given up for adoption because they have special needs and others may have been exposed to toxins in utero. Parenting children with special needs can be stressful (and rewarding). Finally, adoptive parents need to decide how they will address their child's concerns about adoption including how and when to tell children too young to remember, feeling abandoned by their birth parents or wanting to find them, and possibly navigating relationships with birth parents.

2. How can we identify and recruit adoptive couples – especially those not already connected to support groups?

Sometimes it can be hard to find adoptive families; they aren't geographically grouped together. Although adoptive families can be harder to find to recruit, there are ways to connect with these families. One way is to call your state child welfare office. Many support post-adoptive families with newsletters; ask to advertise your program there. Do the same with local private and international adoption agencies. Many parents participate in online discussion boards. Ask local parents what boards are active in your area and post a message there. Additionally, many national parenting websites have “local” chat rooms. Although these online groups contain adoptive and biological parents, placing messages are free and may attract the attention of adoptive parents. Sometimes school systems are willing to send messages home about services available to their families. Of course, for smaller populations like adoptive families, some-

times the best way to meet people is through word of mouth. Encourage the parents you work with to talk to other families about the program and provide them business cards and program contact information.

3. What challenges do couples who adopted interracially or internationally face?

Couples who adopt children of different races or ethnicities may face more questions or inquiring looks about their family than adoptive families where biological differences are not as evident. The families will need to develop plans to deal with intrusive questions like “Is he adopted?” or “Is it weird/different/hard to parent a child that doesn’t look like you?” Families also need to talk about how much they would like to educate their child about his or her birth heritage, including the foods, customs, and holidays of the culture. Children of international or interracial adoption may need additional support to deal with the way society focuses on racial differences. Finally, international adoptions can be very expensive. Choose prospective parents who can accommodate lengthy stays in the country of adoption. Additionally, the children may not understand English and if they come from severely disadvantaged areas, may need time to adjust to a high-tech, fast-paced American way of life. The US State Department’s website on international adoption provides a lot of information (<http://adoption.state.gov>) on this topic.

4. What is an open adoption and how do the children, adoptive parents and birth parents manage those relationships?

In the past, some adoptions were conducted in secret; many adoptive families knew little about the birth parents, adopted children had no information about their birth parents, and in some cases, adopted chil-

dren were not told that they had been adopted. The open adoption aims to avoid some of the secrecy, guilt and shame associated with closed adoptions. Open adoption refers to some level of information sharing. Some open adoptions are characterized by the birth and adoptive parents meeting and sharing medical information and parenting philosophies. For other families, birth parents and children may communicate (via mail or in person) periodically. Still other families spend more time with the birth parents and may even see them as part of the adoptive family. Open adoptions are supposed to allow for the possibility that birth parents and adoptive children can form a relationship. Open adoptions aren’t perfect however. Birth and adoptive parents may disagree on what level and kinds of contact are appropriate. Additionally, if birth parent contact reduces or ceases, the child may feel rejected by his or her parents. It is important for prospective birth and adoptive parents to weigh the options and kinds of structure they would want from an open adoption.

5. What resources are available to help adoptive parents?

The Children’s Bureau within the Administration of Children and Families maintains the Child Welfare Information Gateway (www.childwelfare.gov). This website has information about the different types of adoption; how to start the adoption process; how to adopt through the foster care system; how to support foster, adoptive and birth parents; what kinds of post-adoptive services are available to families; and how adopted children and birth parents can search for each other. The Adoption Guide (www.theadoptionguide.com) is a comprehensive guide for prospective adoptive parents that offers tips from first thinking about adoption to parenting an adopted child. This guide also has step-by-step information for international, domestic and independent adoptions.