Support Groups for Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents need so much support during their adoption journey. Adoption can be a long and often frustrating process, and without support and proper guidance families may feel lost, overwhelmed, and confused. Joining a support group is the best way for a family to find the help they need on their journey. It is a way for adoptive families to connect with other adoptive families who have been through the process. These veteran adoptive families can offer valuable support, encouragement and guidance. Through these support groups families can get their questions answered, their frustrations validated, and learn the ins and outs of the foster care and adoption systems.

If you are currently seeking to adopt a child from foster care, I encourage you to look through the national support groups listed below, and to talk with your adoption worker about finding local support groups. If you have friends and family who have adopted before, reach out to them as well. And don't forget to mention your support group in your family biography and home study-caseworkers want to see that you are resourceful not only when it comes to the needs of the child you're seeking to adopt, but also your needs. You have to remember that as an adoptive parent, you will need other people to lean on when times are tough, and you will need to be surrounded by people physically or virtually that will be able to help you and provide guidance and answers.

If you have adopted a child before, I encourage you to join a support group as well, and offer your thoughts and suggestions to other adoptive families. I know that you have your own stories to share and have a lot of great advice to give to families.

Common Post-Adoption Issues

The following is a list of common issues and challenges that adoptive parents face post-adoption. It may be beneficial for you to seek out education, support, therapy or other resources to learn more about these challenges, and how to overcome them as a family:

- **Loss and grief**. Both adoptive children **and** adoptive parents experience loss and grief. Children may be mourning the loss of a parent, sibling, family member, or even a foster parent. This loss may be due to death, but more likely it is due to separation. Despite what a child's parent may put them through, they may still feel an attachment with them, and will be upset when they are taken away from their parent. They may also feel anger towards their birth parent, or may even worry about their parent's circumstances. Feelings of loss and grief may change over time, and appear during different stages in a child's life. These feelings may come out as hostility towards their adoptive parents. It is important that you seek out

whatever services your child needs to help them overcome their loss and grief. Research different types of therapies and find a local therapist that can work with your child and your family on this issue. As an adoptive parent, you may be feeling sadness over not being able to conceive a child, or stress from the entire adoption process. It is important for you to also seek out any services you may need, and to find a supportive group of people to help you.

- **Understanding adoption**. Children's understanding of adoption will change as they get older, and so will their comprehension of it social and emotional complexities. As a parent you need to be able to explain adoption and what it means to a child as they come to you with questions. A preschooler will have very different questions than an adolescent, so do some research on what common questions are and how to answer them. Keep in mind that you never want to lie to a child. Telling them the truth will help them process and understand the information better.
- **Trust and attachment**. Children who have been placed up for adoption in the foster care system have experienced a break in attachment-first when they were removed from their birth parent's home, and again every time they are moved around to multiple foster homes. As a result, it may be difficult for a child to establish an attachment, because disrupted attachments are all they have ever known. You need to convey to your child through words and actions that you will be there for them forever, and that you will love them no matter what. They may also have a difficult time learning to trust adults, so keeping consistent with your words and actions will allow them to heal and learn to trust again. These children need help coming to terms with what transpired and learn how to move forward.
- **School problems**. Children in foster care often bounce around from school to school during their many placements. As a result of these frequent changes,they may be facing social and academic challenges. As a parent, it is important for you to seek out services that will help your child succeed in school. Most foster children have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place to help them in the classroom. It is important that you make sure that their IEP will transfer to their new school, or you will have the ability to set one up for them. In addition, find out who your child's teacher(s) will be, and talk to them one-on-one about your child's needs. Subjects like genetics may bring up some negative feelings, so it is important to address these issues right away. Socially, foster children may have a difficult time making friends due to their learned behaviors, their status as a foster or adopted child, the fact that they are behind academically than their peers, and because they may have attended multiple schools. Seeking out a school psychologist or educational consultant may prove helpful to ensure that a child receives the services they need. Parents may find support groups helpful as well to point them in the right direction of other educational resources.
- **Identity formation**. Adolescents and teenagers who are adopted may experience some challenges when it comes to their identity. They may struggle with what their values are, who they are, and how they are different from the rest of the family and their peers. They may also have questions that relate to their birth parents that are unanswerable, contributing to their confusion. In addition, children of a different race or culture may also experience identity formation issues. Seeking out services and answers to help your child transition into your family will be very beneficial.
- **Birth relative contact**. This is a tricky subject for most families. Children may want to have some form of contact with their parents or relatives, which can be hard to understand for an adoptive parent, especially in cases of abuse or neglect. Adopted children will need to maintain some level of contact with their biological relatives, especially if they were separated from their siblings. They may also want to remain in contact with a former foster family if they were especially close. As an adoptive parent it is important that you understand this need and desire, and set up a plan that will ensure safe communication. There are many forms of contact-visits, phone calls, letters, to name a few-so you need to work together as a family

to decide what the best course of action is. Some families choose to allow contact with birth parents or biological relatives once the child turns 18, or they may allow contact if it is safe and in the best interest of the child. Your agency may be able to provide information about birth family contact information or be able to mediate.

- **Medical concerns**. Children in foster care may not receive the medical attention they need, especially if they are in multiple placements. The child's caseworker may not have complete medical records for the child either, or any records at all for their biological parents. It is important that you seek out a physician to give your child the medical attention they need, and provide as accurate as an assessment as they can about their medical history.
- **Racial concerns**. If you are seeking to adopt a child of another race, keep in mind the challenges they will face trying to blend into your family and also their new community. Talk to family members and friends and make sure they are on board with you adopting a child of another race, and make sure to address any issues before adoption. Seek out groups or activities in your area that a child could be part of that would make them feel comfortable. It can be as simple as finding a friend or mentor of the same race that your child could look up to, or locating a specialized service or group like a hair styling place that specializes in African-American hair, or a festival that celebrates Native American heritage. Seek out support groups, friends and family members that have experience in trans-racial adoption to best prepare yourself for the questions and challenges you and your child will face.

Types of Parent Support Groups

There are many different types of support groups available to adoptive parents. The following is a list compiled by Child Welfare Information Gateway that families have identified as the most helpful:

- **Adoptive Parent Support Groups.** In this type of group, adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents come together to ask questions, give advice, and provide support. These types of groups range from small intimate groups, to larger groups that may have hundreds of members. These groups may restrict their focus to families who have adopted children with certain characteristics, or they may include all adoptive families. National groups may be organized into local chapters. Programs and services offered by these groups often include:
    - Telephone warm lines
    - Buddy families
    - Respite care
    - Lending library
    - Workshops/conferences
    - Pre-adoption support
    - Social activities
    - Children's support groups
    - Ethnic heritage activities
    - Newsletter
    - Information and referral
- **Online Support Groups**. These groups are available 24 hours a day to families, and provide a level of convenience. There are thousands of online support groups that families may join, and like other support groups, they may find the answers they are looking for from people who have gone through the same experiences. It is important to exercise caution when using online support groups just like any other website, and not give out personal or identifying information.
- **Therapy.** There are many different types of therapy available. Families may seek

out counseling as problems or concerns arise. Some families will seek therapy for a long period of time, or use it to check in for help as they need it.

- **Respite care**. Respite care is available to families who need a break and a chance to relax and get away. This service gives parents a break from their parenting duties, and is meant for families who have children with needs that exceed the skills and training of a regular babysitter. Respite care can take place in the families home, or out of the home, with the parents bringing their child(ren) to a designated place. Respite care may be available on a crisis-based need, or on a regular schedule. Families may find more information on respite care through their local adoption agency or an adoption support group.
- **Seminars and conferences**. Many support groups and adoption agencies offer seminars and conferences that families may attend. These conferences offer adoption issues education, and may last anywhere from a few hours to a few days. At adoption conferences, parents may have their questions about specific adoption issues answered by experts in the field, get to know other adoptive families, and purchase additional adoption resources. You can locate a conference near you by going to this site.
- **Books and magazines**. There are many books and magazines available for adoptive parents to read and subscribe to. A Family for Every Child has established a large list of reading materials here. Books are an excellent resource for families to learn about different techniques to handle various adoption challenges or kids questions. They may also be used to explain adoption to young children. Magazines are another excellent resource, offering up-to-date research on current adoption issues and challenges. Families may subscribe for magazines in the mail or online.
- **Camps, recreational opportunities, and heritage camps**. Families may attend overnight camps or retreats to help them connect with themselves and other family members. These camps offer adoption and ethnic heritage education, combined with other camp activities. Ethnic heritage camps serve children of different ethnicities. At these camps, children may connect with older youth and teens, who serve as role models. These camps are a great way for children to connect with other children and youth, and form lifelong connections and support.

Finding Post-adoption Services

Families may find post-adoption services at any of the following locations:

- Public and private adoption agencies
- Specialized post-adoption services organizations
- Adoptive parent support groups
- State and county adoption offices and post-adoption specialists
- State post-adoption resource centers
- Public and private mental health service providers
- Community health organizations

You can find local resources like those listed above by clicking here.

There is also adoption assistance available for some post-adoption resources. To find adoption assistance in your state, click here.

You may find local support groups by clicking here.

Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2005). Postadoption Services: A Factsheet for Families. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The full article and additional links may be found here.

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