

Effects of Adoption on Family Relationships

Research Synthesis Paper: [Adoption Works Well: A Synthesis of the Literature](#)

1. Attachment

Problems with attachment to parents are frequently related to the age at adoption: Children adopted before they are 12 months old form secure attachments just as often as non-adopted children, but the attachments of those adopted after 12 months were significantly less secure. However, for these children adopted later, adoption is much better than being fostered as foster children tend to have more disorganized attachments than adoptees.¹⁾ Furthermore, for adoptees who enter their families with disorganized attachments arising from earlier deprivation and neglect, most catch up remarkably, though incompletely, after some time in their adoptive homes.²⁾

In one survey, 46 percent of adoptees reported feeling different from their adoptive families growing up.³⁾ In another, 68 percent of adoptees reported such feelings.⁴⁾ Adopted teenagers frequently express curiosity about why they were put up for adoption by their biological parents, and want to learn about their birth families. This feeling, however, was not necessarily negative, nor did it indicate that the child felt that he or she did not belong to the family.⁵⁾ In the vast majority of these cases, solid attachment is present, even if accompanied by feelings of difference. It is worth noting that, though this difference is a reality, for these children it is not always a negative reality.

2. Parental and Family Adjustment

A study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that about 87 percent of parents view adoption positively and would make the same decision to adopt their child again. Only 3 percent of adopting parents say they would probably or definitely not make the decision to adopt again.⁶⁾ The stresses and negative experiences associated with adoption are proportionally lessened the younger the child is at the time of placement, and, interestingly, the more densely populated is the area in which the adoptive family resides.⁷⁾ Married adoptive parents more frequently make a positive adjustment than unmarried adoptive parents do.⁸⁾ Most parents feel deeply grateful for and enriched by the experience of adopting a child.⁹⁾

Parent-child communication gives further evidence of adoption's benefits. A study of 450 adolescents found that adoptees communicate more positively and have more positive relationships with their parents than do even biological children. In the United States, it is estimated that over 90 percent of adopted children ages 5 and up display positive feelings about their adoption and are raised by loving adoptive parents.¹⁰⁾ There are, however, exceptions to this high level of communication, due mainly to parent-child conflict during adolescence.¹¹⁾

Parents who did not feel close to their adopted children cited such reasons as the child's learning difficulties, emotional insincerity, and behavioral problems, and their own feelings of being rejected by the child.¹²⁾ These difficulties more frequently arise when the adoption takes place, not in infancy, but later in childhood, as later-adopted children tend to have difficulty adjusting to their new homes.¹³⁾ Special needs adoptees (including those who experienced neglect, abuse, or multiple caretakers

before being adopted) are also significantly more likely to have difficulty adjusting to their new home or more frequently experience the dissolution of their adoption than do adoptees without special needs.¹⁴⁾

In general, the older the child is at adoption the greater are his special needs, and the greater in turn is the need for parental constancy, flexibility, and engagement.¹⁵⁾ Parenthetically, it is worth noting—though not surprising, given that they tend to possess these attributes and capacities—that adoptive parents are less likely to divorce.¹⁶⁾

Furthermore, the more adopted children there are in a home, the more likely is the adoption to be positive and stable, though too large a number of children in the home decreases this somewhat.¹⁷⁾ However, neither the presence of biological children in the adoptive family, nor the order of adoption has much—if any—influence on the adoptee or the adoptive parents, particularly in early adoptions.¹⁸⁾

3. The Adoptive Mother

According to attachment theory, children form secure attachments to caregivers who are sensitive, responsive, and predictable. This holds true in adoption. An adoptee's attachment security as an adult depends heavily upon his perceptions of his adoptive parents' love and care for him.¹⁹⁾ Not surprisingly, the sensitivity of the adoptive mother strongly influences adoptee development.²⁰⁾

Having a secure attachment history contributes to a child's social competence and ability to relate to others. The self-perception of secure (or insecure) children will enhance or diminish their ability to function psychologically.²¹⁾ Though this is the normal attachment pattern for children with their biological mothers, the process is equally critical for successful adoption outcomes, as the following results will show.

While still in infancy, children develop the capacity to form attachments and recognize different people. Most have developed a preference for one particular person by six months; by nine months, the attachment has deepened and they can distinguish between strangers and familiar faces. Once they reach 12 to 14 months of age they develop strong connections to their "primary attachment figures"—usually their birth mothers.²²⁾

When children are adopted later than infancy some level of strain between mother and adopted child will occur. Despite such difficulties, having an adoptive mother is of great benefit to these children, because adoptive mothers spend more time with their children than do mothers in any other family structure, including mothers in intact families.²³⁾ The more time a mother spends with her child, the more sensitive she tends to be, resulting in the finding that increased time spent with the child is associated with a higher HOME score (a score which indicates an enriched and positive home environment).²⁴⁾ The sensitivity that a mother displays as she interacts with her child from infancy until the child finishes pre-school was found to be the single greatest predictor of children's social skills and behaviors throughout childhood. The greater the mother's sensitivity, the better the child's outcome. All other predictors including family environment, socioeconomic status, maternal education, and child care quality were less consistent predictors.²⁵⁾

Chedgzey Smith-McKeever, professor of social work at the University of Illinois at Chicago, identified the frequency with which the adoptive parent thinks of the child when they are apart as a significant variable in family satisfaction with an adoption.²⁶⁾ In other words, the more the parent thinks about

their child—a form of attachment to the child—the more likely the adoption will be satisfying for all.

A different study illustrates this in a different way. Martha A. Reuter, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, along with her colleagues found that whenever there was evidence of “less warm, supportive communication in adoptive families compared to non-adoptive families,” the only statistically significant difference in family interactions between the two family structures was the adolescent adoptee’s perception of his communication with his adopted mother.²⁷⁾

4. Outcomes for the Birth Mother

Not only do the adopted children do better; so, too, do their birth mothers who give them up for adoption. They have higher educational aspirations, are more likely to finish school, and are less likely to live in poverty or to receive public assistance, are less likely to get a divorce, and are less likely to get pregnant again out-of-wedlock.(Christine A. Bachrach, “Adoption Plans, Adopted Children, and Adoptive Mothers,” *National Council on Family Relations*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1986): 243, 251; Christine A. Bachrach, “Children in Families: Characteristics of Biological, Step-, and Adopted Children,” *National Council on Family Relations*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1983): 177; Christine A. Bachrach, K.S. Stolley and K.A. London, “Relinquishment of premarital births: evidence from the national survey data,” *Family Planning Perspectives*, (1992). Adoption Choice, Inc., “Benefits of Adoption” available at <http://adoptionchoiceinc.org/are-you-expecting/benefits-of-adoption/>.)

One study found that adolescent mothers who relinquish their children for adoption are more likely to be employed 12 months after the birth. The same study found that adolescent mothers who keep and rear children conceived out of wedlock are more likely to conceive again within three years after their first birth, but are not significantly more likely to give birth a second time, suggesting they are more likely to abort the second child than are those adolescents who relinquish their children. Furthermore, the mothers who gave their children up for adoption did not suffer any extra social or psychological problems.²⁸⁾

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²⁾ L. van den Dries, Femmie Juffer, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn and M.J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, “Fostering Security? A Meta-analysis of Attachment in Adopted Children,” *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31 (2009): 417.

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⁴⁾ D. Howe and J. Feast, “The Long-term Outcome of Reunions between Adult Adopted People and their Birth Mothers,” *British Journal of Social Work*, 31 (2001): 355.

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⁸⁾ T. McDonald, J. Propp and K. Murphy, “The Postadoption Experience: Child, Parent, and Family Predictors of Family Adjustment to Adoption,” *Child Welfare League of America*, 80(1) (2001): 86-88.

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¹⁰⁾ American Adoptions, "Adoption Statistics," available at https://www.americanadoptions.com/pregnant/adoption_stats.

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¹¹⁾ M.A. Rueter, M.A. Keyes, W.G. Iacono and M. McGue, "Family Interactions in Adoptive Compared to Nonadoptive Families," *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23(1) (2009): 62-63.

¹²⁾ C.A. Rees and J. Selwyn, "Non-Infant Adoption from Care: Lessons for Safeguarding Children," *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 35 (2009): 563.

¹³⁾ T. McDonald, J. Propp and K. Murphy, "The Postadoption Experience: Child, Parent, and Family Predictors of Family Adjustment to Adoption," *Child Welfare League of America*, 80(1) (2001): 86.

¹⁴⁾ Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Post-Legal Adoption Services for Children With Special Needs and Their Families: Challenges and Lessons Learned," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2005), 1.

D.M. Brodzinsky, "Long-Term Outcomes in Adoption," *The Future of Children. Adoption*, 3(1) (1993): 159.

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