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## Adoption Support for the Life of Your Family

by Gina Hagler

Mention adoption, and most people envision the moment a child first meets her "forever" family. In the case of a domestic adoption, they may picture that moment taking place in a hospital. For a foreign adoption they may envision that moment occurring overseas or at the international arrivals gate here at home. Either way, it's generally the first moment in the history of a family that is brought to mind. But adoption is about more than that first joyful moment. It's about the lifelong process of making the adoption experience one more aspect of what it means to each person to be a part of that adoptive family. To facilitate that process, many adoptive families seek post-adoption support ranging from playgroups to counseling.

Post-adoption support is important to adoptive families because, "Adoption is a significant emotional event in the adoptee's life. It cannot be ignored," says Debbie Riley, executive director of the Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc. (C.A.S.E.) in Burtonsville, Md. Because of this, "Adoptive parenting is different from biological parenting. There are things that adoptive parents are going to have to do that biological parents don't." For one thing, it's not unusual for adoptive parents to have to share information that's hurtful to their child or help their child deal with some difficult issues from the years before she arrived at their adoptive homes.

Some of the support families seek is as simple as a class designed for adoptive parents and their child. Often it's as casual as a group of families who meet on a regular basis. In our area there are many girls from China who've joined their families through adoption. Because these parents often traveled as a group to China to meet their daughters, they have literally known one another from the first moment their family was formed. These groups provide a way for the new parents to support one another in their new roles. They also provide a way for the girls to see that there are many other girls with families like their own.

Many times these groups meet weekly when the girls are young. As the girls start school, they continue to meet to celebrate the Chinese New Year and other significant holidays on the Chinese calendar. They may also study the language or culture together or meet monthly to celebrate birthdays.

"Homogeneous groups like this are fine," says Riley, "because these families share an experience and an important connection. Meeting [after they return to the United States] makes the experience present by bringing it home where the children have the opportunity to fall back on it as they want to in their lives. There are also benefits to heterogeneous groups where kids can see the broader spectrum of adoption. This normalizes the adoption experience because they can see how broad the scope of adoption is."

Whatever the mechanism, it's important for adoptive parents to include some adoption-related activities for the family. Part of that is because kids who are adopted need to see that there are many other kids who are also adopted. They need to see that all sorts of kids - with all sorts of histories, from all sorts of places - make up the population of adoptees in the United States. "What we know from working with so many adopted children [here at C.A.S.E.]," says Riley, "is the issue of 'differentness' plays out in many ways in adoption." Involvement in activities with other kids

who are adopted affords them the opportunity to normalize that sense of being different.

C.A.S.E. is one place where parents can access a range of post-adoption services in our area. It was created in May 1998 to provide post-adoption counseling and educational services to families, educators, child welfare staff and mental health providers in Maryland, Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C. It also serves as a national resource for families and professionals through its training, publications and consultations. C.A.S.E. offers a variety of classes and seminars for members of adoptive families. They also have their annual Kids' Adoption Network Carnival in November each year.

Most adoption agencies also provide post-adoption support to their families. As director of post-adoption and social services at Children's Home Society and Family Services (CHSFS) in Silver Spring, it's Abbe Levine's job to be sure CHSFS has services available "for anybody in the adoption triad. Birth parents seek services, as do adopted persons, adoptive parents and family members. There are groups for children and other services that are developmentally appropriate like teen weekends and workshops on how to answer questions about being adopted." There's also support for later in life when an adopted person might want to initiate a birth parent search or a family might choose to take a homeland tour.

Any way you look at it, adoption plays a lifelong part in an adoptee's experience of the world. Riley says that they need to rework the underpinnings of their understanding "at deeper levels than they ever have before" when they enter adolescence. The more comfortable a child is with the circumstances of her adoption experience, the more able that child will be to seek the support she needs as she enters this transitional time in her life.

For adoptive parents, programs that facilitate the normalization, education and support of adopted people and their families serve as a useful backdrop to daily life. Not every kid is going to need counseling to work through her experience, but every adopted person is going to have stages in her knowledge and understanding of her adoption. Says Levine, "Different services are appropriate at different times. In the earlier years, it is parents who seek assistance. It may be playgroups, parenting workshops, consultations with a professional, culture camps. As children are in the teen years and beyond, it is often the adopted person seeking services. Again, this might be a teen weekend, volunteering for an adoption agency to feel connected to others in the adoption arena, going on a homeland tour, studying in their country of origin or initiating a birth search."

Either way, the goal is to form strong family ties where the adoption experience is an integral part of the fabric of the family.

Gina Hagler is a frequent contributor to *Washington Parent*.

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## Resources:

### Agencies

The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) in Burtonsville, Md. 301-476-8525.  
[www.adoptionssupport.org](http://www.adoptionssupport.org)

The Barker Foundation. [www.barkerfoundation.org](http://www.barkerfoundation.org) (Local agency with post-adoption services)

A.S.I.A./CHSFS. [www.childrenshomeadopt.org/asia-adopt\\_org.html](http://www.childrenshomeadopt.org/asia-adopt_org.html) (Local agency with post-adoption services)

### Organizations

Our Chinese Daughters Foundation. [www.ocdf.org](http://www.ocdf.org) (Support for families with children adopted from China)

Stars of David. [www.starsofdavid.org](http://www.starsofdavid.org) (Jewish adoption support)

## **Periodicals**

*Adoptive Families*. [www.adoptivefamilies.com](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com) (All aspects/phases of adoption)

*Adoption Today*. [www.adoptinfo.net](http://www.adoptinfo.net) (International, domestic and transracial adoption topics)

## **Books**

*Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution Is Transforming America* by Adam Pertman (2001)

Tapestry Books. [www.tapestrybooks.com](http://www.tapestrybooks.com) (Specializing in books about adoption for children, parents and professionals)

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