

## Section Four: Core Issues in Adoption

In this section the resource family will learn:

- The core issues of adoption: Loss, Rejection, Guilt and Shame, Grief, Identity, Intimacy and Control.

### READINESS TO ADOPT

Knowledge is a very important powerful tool. It is essential that adoptive families learn and know as much about adoption and themselves as possible before they make the commitment to adopt. Educated families who (1) understand the risks, and accept the lack of any “guarantees”, and who (2) view the agency or social worker as an ally instead of an adversary, are more likely to be satisfied with the foster and/or adoption experience, than those who are ill informed or who feel alienated from the systems.



Like preparing for a baby, adoptive parents need to prepare for the child who is coming into their lives. The following is a list put together by the International Adoption Services Center as guidelines for prospective adoptive parents to consider when assessing their own readiness.

How many of these can you say yes to? (NOTE: If you are single, read the comments with “I” instead of “We.”). As you read through this list think about each one slowly and ask yourself questions like, “Have I thought about this?”

- We have grieved for the biological child we may not have, if applicable.
- Both spouses are ready to explore the adoption process.
- We see adoption as an alternative, not “second best.”
- We would not feel ashamed to tell our child he or she was adopted.

- We are ready to commit ourselves to parenting and forming a family with a child born to others.
- We understand the risks involved in considering “legal risk adoption” and feel capable of handling it.
- We realize that adoptive and birth parenting is not the same, that there are losses for everyone and gains for everyone, and we are prepared to accept the extra challenges involved in this role.
- We will be appropriate role models for a child.
- We have support systems in place.
- We want to make time in our lives for a child. Our lifestyle accommodates children.
- We have talked to families who have been through the adoption process.
- We realize that our parenting roles will last a lifetime.

By completing this self-study training regarding adoption, you are taking a first step in becoming fully informed and educated about the adoption process. Be sure that you spend time also exploring adoption by meeting others who have already adopted, attending adoption support groups. If you have identified a child you wish to bring into your home, it is very important that you talk to the child’s social worker about any special needs or potential problems a specific child might face. Once you’ve gathered all of the information you can, talk to your spouse (if applicable) and to close friends about your decision. Most of all, know thy self!

## The Triad



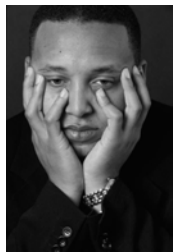
When we think about adoption we need to look at the three relationships involved in any adoption. This “triad” consists of the child, the adoptive parent(s) and the birth mother or birth parents. All three members of the adoption triad experience core issues as apart of the process. Adoption issues span not only the adoption itself, but transcend time and space over generations, as well.

***It is important that we explore these issues and look at how they impact each member of the triad.***

## **LOSS**

Few realize that adoption is created through loss. The birthmother (or birth parents) loses the child either by choice or through the judicial process. The child loses the experience of the birth family and the adoptive parents may have experienced all kinds of losses associated with infertility. All birth parents, adoptees and adoptive parents have experienced at least one major loss before becoming involved in adoption. These losses and the way they are resolved significantly shape the lives of those involved in adoption.

Loss is part of the human experience. Everyone experiences loss at sometime in their life How we deal with loss and learn from loss creates who we are and builds new



experiences and resiliency for all of us. We experience loss when we move from one home to another, change jobs or watch our birth children grow to independent adults. Loss is necessary in gaining new relationships and allowing others to find their place in the world. While losses are painful they contribute to who we are as humans and ultimately loss has the potential to enrich our lives.

It is important as you think about becoming an adoptive parent that you think about the losses in your specific adoptive experience. Are you able to identify your thoughts and feelings about your loss, the adopted child's loss or the birth parent's loss? Before losses can enrich our lives we must identify what they are and allow ourselves to mourn them. Mourning loss involves the grief process.

Children adopted through the involuntary child welfare system bring to adoption their own unique history which involves the loss of a birth parent. Some children are infants and some are older. Some have had visitations over a long period of time and are connected to their birth parents, regardless of the abuse they have suffered. Every child will deal with their grief and loss differently.

Children moving from one culture to another grieve the loss of their familiar culture, food, and language. They grieve the loss of growing up uninterrupted within their culture. Children who are ethnically dissimilar to their parents grieve the natural way that racial competence is transmitted to them by parents of the same race. Even adopted children that have not been maltreated or placed past infancy, still grieve at intervals throughout their lives for the loss of the opportunity to live with their birth parents.

**What are losses that members of the adoption triad suffer? Many are obvious, but others are not quite so apparent.**

**Losses Adoptees May Suffer Include:**

- Loss of genetic, cultural, racial and medical history.
- Loss of the environment in which they could have been raised in.
- Geographical losses, particularly with international adoptions
- Loss of birthparents and extended birth family
- Siblings
- Shared times and experiences
- Folklore of birth family – stories of and about the family
- Knowledge of whom in the birth family they look like and physically resemble.
- Place them on the family tree
- Stories about conception, delivery, and birth
- Original place on the human continuum, i.e., they may have been born into the Jones family and are now a part of the Smith family. Placement is often happenstance and random
- Religion
- Family traditions

- With older children, there is the potential for miscellaneous losses such as homes, toys, clothes, pets, and teachers
- Time periods in their lives. Gaps due to lack of records regarding hospitalizations, moves between foster homes, etc.
- Birth name and knowing who gave the birth name and the significance it had.
- Original birth certificate
- Sense of belonging
- Opportunity to grow up in a traditional family. Adoption makes them different.
- Racial identification and role models, particularly in transracial adoptions
- Continuity in care-taking
- Sense of values, morals and ethics
- Being part of the majority – adoptees are in the minority
- Birth order

### **Losses A Birthparent May Suffer Include:**

- Loss of the baby itself
- Pleasure of caring for their baby
- Attention that goes with motherhood
- Approval of some family and friends
- Status of being a mother
- Knowledge of child's specialness
- Loss of future grandchildren
- Loss of sibling for later child(ren)
- Loss of impact and influence of their family on the child

- Loss of self-esteem

### **Losses the Adoptive Parent May Suffer Include:**

- Loss of immortality (through heredity)
- Loss of confidence in the body's ability to function
- Loss of control
- Loss of privacy
- Loss of identity or self-esteem
- Loss of fantasy child – the child they expected to have
- Loss of making a genetic contribution to a child
- Loss of sharing the child's early years, months, weeks, days, or prenatal period
- Loss of the opportunity to nurture the child; keep the child safe during the early years, months, weeks, days, or prenatal period
- Loss of status as a “normal” family
- Loss of the myth that love is enough

To further explore feelings associate with the triad experiences, lets look at information taken from **Making Sense of Adoption**, by Lois Ruskai Melina 1994

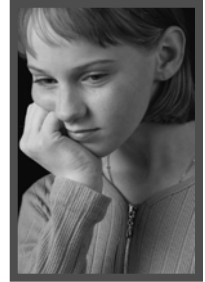
Children express grief and loss in many ways, including through anger and sadness.

**Anger** at separation from birthparents may be directed toward the birthparent or toward the adoptive parent. If your child is angry with you, try not to take it personally as a sign of rejection. Your child may be angry at the separation from the birth parent, but may also be quite happy to be part of your family.

- 1) Allow them appropriate ways to express their anger:
  - Let your child know that it is alright to feel angry and to express anger – as long as he/she doesn't hurt himself or other people

- Scream in the shower, punch a pillow, hit a tree with a stick. Some children enjoy playing a musical instrument or creating art as a way of expressing emotions
- 2) Give him an opportunity to express what he is angry about and to mourn the losses he may feel.

**Sad and Conflicted:** “I’m angry, sad, confused about not being with my birth mother, but if I were with her, I wouldn’t be with you.”



- 1) Unless children remember their birth parent, they probably are not grieving the loss of a particular person, but are saddened by what we might call a “missed opportunity.”
- 2) The thought of not being with their adoptive parents makes them sad as well.
- 3) Statements like: “Aren’t you happy to be with us?” or “If you lived in India, your life would be very hard” sends a message that they must choose which parents they’d rather be with: Children who feel they have to decide whether they would rather be with one parent or the other are faced with what can only leave them with a sense of loss for one or the other parent.
- 4) Expressions of understanding give the child permission to express his feelings: “It must be hard to understand why you were adopted” or “It must be sad to not know your birthparents”
- 5) Share your own feelings of sadness if infertility is an issue: “We wanted so much to get pregnant, but were unable to. We were so sad. But now I realize that if we had gotten pregnant, we wouldn’t have adopted you. That makes me so sad now to think that I would never have known you or been your mother because I love you so much.”

## **Moving On from Loss:**

Moving on from loss involves recognizing loss and then taking steps to overcome it. In order to be able to move on from loss you need to understand the key components of loss.

Key components of loss include: (1) the significance of the loss, whether the loss is temporary or permanent, (2) inherent coping abilities of the child or adult, (3) availability

of supports; age and cognitive abilities of the child at the time of the loss and at the present time. Consequently, while some children or adults may react in extreme ways (withdrawal, depression, anger, and rage) others may respond mildly or not at all.

Different children have different reactions to loss, both internal and external reactions:

- 1) Some move through the grief stages quickly and with seeming grace
- 2) Some may experience a more intense kind of grief
- 3) A few may need professional help
- 4) If they don't grieve now they will have to do it at a later time, and later the issues will be much more complex because they have not been resolved throughout the development of the child.

Adoptive parents are usually normally the first committed person who is capable of helping their child through grief and loss associated with adoption. To fully understand



separation, grief and loss, the staff at ACRF recommends that you research our library regarding this important topic. For the purpose of this course, it is important that you understand that loss is a component of the adoptive relationship between all triad members.

*If you think that your family or adoptee may be experiencing aspects associated with loss, we recommend that you consult counseling professionals or the Alaska Adoption Support center staff for further resources.*

## **REJECTION**

The second core issue for all triad members is rejection. Most triad members (the child, adoptive parents and birth parents) fear rejection and do everything they can to prevent it. In an effort to avoid painful feelings or having other losses, people may become overly compliant to fend off fears of further rejection. They can become “absolute people pleasers”, to counter feelings of worthlessness or they may even reject others before they are again rejected.

Adoptees often feel they were placed for adoption because they were worthless or defective. They may think of their placement in an adoptive home as a rejection from a

birth parent, even if that parent involuntarily lost legal rights. To further complicate the adoptee's feelings, even if they were chosen by a family to be adopted, they sometimes feel they must first be rejected by a birth parent to be chosen. Children who are adopted from other cultures or countries may feel they were rejected by their culture, race or religion.

Regardless of the actual circumstances surrounding the child's adoption, the child's self-perception is frequently one in which he or she was rejected and subsequently abandoned by the birth family. Consequently, some adopted children or youth may feel hurt or angry toward their birth parents. Some adopted children feel they are unlovable and unkeepable and may "act out" in an effort to test the commitment of the adoptive family. To avoid rejection, some adopted persons may not allow themselves to get close to others or they may reject others before they can be rejected. Some adopted persons react by continually seeking acceptance and approval from those around them, being almost "too good" It is not surprising that developing and maintaining relationships is a difficult task for some.

Not only do feelings of rejection lead to impaired self-esteem, adoptees may anticipate rejection and either set themselves up for it in their relationships or try to please others so they are not rejected. Birth parents may reject themselves for being irresponsible as or an unworthy parent. They often keep the fact that they placed a child for adoption or lost legal rights to a child a secret because they fear people would reject them if they knew the truth. Adoptive parents who deal with infertility may feel their bodies have rejected them or that some greater power has rejected them. They may worry that birth parents won't approve of the way they are raising their child or that their social worker is critical of them. Largely, they feel that their child will someday reject them.

It is vital that as adoptive parents, you look at feelings you may have regarding rejection and again openly discuss these feelings in a safe environment. Furthermore, as your adopted child travels through developmental stages, feelings of rejection may surface in different ways at different times. Again it is important for you to recognize this is a normal part of adoption.

## GUILT AND SHAME

The third core issue involving the adoptive triad is guilt and shame. When people personalize a loss to the extent that they feel there is something intrinsically wrong with themselves, and that they somehow caused the loss, they often feel guilt that they did something wrong or feel shame that others may know about their history. Adoptive parents may feel that others look upon them as being inadequate somehow, particularly if they are childless. Birth parents feel immense guilt and shame for being unable to care for their newborn or having the State intervene in their lives.

Many times adoptive parents can give positive affirmations to an adopted child, and the child may feel inside that the adoptive parent is deluded because the child feels a great deal of shame for his/her life circumstance. Parents who ignore a child's past history and child abuse history that are shame-producing, are ignoring part of the child that may explode at any given time. At some point in the child's life, parents will need to find ways to explore if or why their child feels shame. Otherwise, over time children will seek out situations that seem to match their authentic selves.

Events that cause out-of-home placement often occur during the toddler or preschool years. At that age it is normal for children to believe that they are the cause of life's events. Children can be shamed by the meaning they attribute to the maltreatment or loss they have experienced.

*Several years ago when working with an amazing adoptive family, I asked them how they explain 'what happened' to their adopted son, who was obviously flourishing. The family took me to the fireplace where they had pictures of their family, including the adopted child's birth mother, who had died several years earlier from a drug overdose. The adoptive family said, "We have a place for her, and we honor her and include her in all of our celebrations by lighting candles, making gifts, and most importantly, never ever forgetting her. We talk about her openly; we acknowledge her strengths and weaknesses as part of being human*

*And, in front of him, we thank her for our son".*

*-- Deborah Hayes*

Shame can be much deeper than guilt because shame is usually connected to some deficit that can never be fixed in the eyes of the person feeling it. Unresolved shame can lead to a sense of being inadequate, unworthy, or “bad”. Guilt is usually related to misconduct and sometimes adoptees feel guilt that they were adopted and somehow responsible for their condition. Adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents may be filled with shame for the person or family that they will never quite become.

## **GRIEF**

Recognizing and acknowledging grief is part of the adoption process. Because adoption is seen as a problem solving event, in which everyone gains, rather than an event to which loss is integral, it is difficult for adoptees, adopted parents, and birth parents to grieve. Grief can be described as sadness and pain that we feel when we have lost something or someone we care about. It is essential to remember that there are a variety of feelings children and adults have when they lose someone or something that is important to them. Even children who have been adopted at birth may experience grief regarding the loss of a birth parent or about the unknowns surrounding the reason the child was placed for adoption. Every person involved in the triad will experience grief differently, depending upon their specific situation.

Remember, everyone experiences grief differently but there are some basic stages to grief. These stages are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Adoptive parents may experience grief due to the loss of a “fantasy” child and their unresolved grief may block attachment to an adopted child. A parent also walks through a summary of his own childhood while parenting. In the process of determining how to parent, parents reference what and how their parents did things. Parents who have not adequately dealt with their own grief may have difficulty in assisting their adopted child work through his or hers. Instead, they find their own unresolved grief facing them.

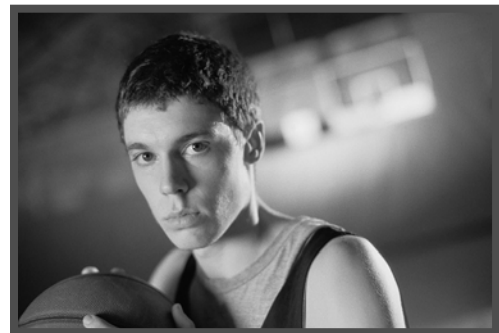
Children do not grieve the way adults do. Although their grief process tends to either flow or sprint it can slip past a parent’s attention that the child is grieving. Children who are permanently separated from their birth parents face a mourning process that can be similar to a child’s reactions to parental death. This process will vary somewhat from

age to age. Sorting out information that is part of healthy grief work provides a parent model for children that is realistic about negatives but includes good wishes for children for the future. It is very important for children to have accurate, reliable and consistent information about their birth parents, their family history and any abuse they may have suffered. Grief work through a therapeutic process may be very important for you and your adopted child and it is important to understand that grief is a normal part of adoption.

It is important for all members in a triad to understand grief as a normal process in the adoptive family. Out of the stages of grief comes the ability to make sense of what has happened. It doesn't mean that the child understands and accepts everything, but for the time being he has organized what he knows about his adoption into his life in a meaningful way. It does not mean that a parent fully comprehends loss and sadness, but that the parts of grief are recognized so the person is able to move forward in life in a positive way.

## **IDENTITY**

Identity is another core issue surrounding the adoptive relationship. Children who are adopted may have deficits in information which may impede the integration of their identity. Adopted people may search for their own identity as they are asked in school to complete a family tree or with the birth of their own children. Adopted teens may resort to extreme behaviors and styles in order to create a sense of belonging. Both birth parents and adoptive parents can have a sense of confusion of identity because they "are parents, yet aren't parents". Birth parents may not know how to answer when asked how many children they have had. Adoptive parents may feel deeply inside that they experience a diminished sense of continuity and are not really parents.



## **INTIMACY**

It is human nature to attempt to avoid emotional pain whenever possible. Fear of intimacy and of getting hurt if one gets too close to another person is another possible core issue in adoption. For birth parents, an intimate encounter may connect the parent

to the loss of their child and the parent may fear intimacy because of the intensity of these painful memories. Adoptive parents may resist intimacy with an adoptee in order to avoid the pain that comes from potential loss. For an adopted child, especially one that is adopted after attaching to a birth parent or other placement, fear of intimacy may be seen in as an inability to get too close because of the earlier loss of that caregiver.

## **CONTROL**

Control is the last core issue in adoption. For the adoptee, a sense of powerlessness may prevail because the child may feel that about the separation from his birth family or his placement with his adoptive family. For those children who were adopted when older – and may have consented to the adoption – there may still be feelings associated with a lack of control. For instance, these older adoptees may feel powerless to help their birth parents, or powerless to “fit into” their new lives. Parents who surrender their children to the care of another, either voluntarily or involuntarily, also feel a loss of control. If the relationship was involuntary, such as termination of parental rights, the parent has lost control of their child. The parent has lost all legal rights to this child. For parents who voluntarily surrender their child, they may feel a sense of loss of control because of the circumstances they experienced which influenced the surrendering of the child. The adoptive parent can feel a lack of control with infertility issues, or with the long legal process inherent in adoption.

## **ADOPTION LANGUAGE**

As you begin to consider adoption and learn more about it, you will find that the words you choose to use with your children and with others can be very powerful. There have been many negative connotations around adoption, as being second best or not as good as giving birth to your children. This sometimes is still reflected in the language people choose to use. Using accurate language instead of inaccurate or negative language reflects the positive value we place on adoption. Some are small changes that emphasize that adopting a child means you are the rightful parent of that child. Notice the difference in the following phrases.



## ACCURATE LANGUAGE

*Birth parent*

*Birth child, child born to us*

*My child*

*Choosing adoption*

*Deciding to parent the child*

*Parent*

*International Adoption*

*Child with special needs*

*Born to unmarried parents*

*Was adopted*

## INACCURATE OR NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

*Real or natural parent*

*Real child, natural child, my own child*

*My adopted child*

*Giving away; putting up for adoption*

*Keeping your baby*

*Adoptive parent*

*Foreign Adoption*

*Handicapped child; problem child; special needs child*

*Illegitimate*

*Is adopted*

And one final word about language: Adopted children often change their names at the time of adoption; however, a change of name should be carefully considered and should depend on the child's age, the child's preferences and what the adoptive family can accept. Some children who are older desire a brand new name which is sometimes symbolic of a new beginning. Other children prefer to keep their birth names or to hyphenate their name adding the adoptive parent's last name.

## **Chapter Summary**

As families prepare for adoption it is vital that they have as much information as possible about adoption and the child they are considering. Parents must explore their readiness for adoption and be willing to accept that there are no "guarantees". When we talk or think about adoption, we want to include the triad members (adopted child, adoptive parents, birth parents). All members experience loss, anger, sadness, confusion, rejection, guilt and shame, grief, identity and intimacy elements, and control issues, as a natural part of adoption. Each of these different feelings are normal and require acknowledgment. When talking to children and others about adoption it is also important to use language that shows sensitivity and compassion for the adoption experience.