



Working with Adoptive Parents

Research, Theory, and
Therapeutic Interventions

Edited by

Virginia M. Brabender

April E. Fallon

WILEY

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Praise for Working With Adoptive Parents: Research, Theory, and Therapeutic Interventions

“With adoption, including those that across international boundaries, on the rise, the salutary impact of human kindness as well the tragic potential for developmental complications has greatly increased. Brabender and Fallon, the editors of this well-organized volume, are keenly aware of this. They have cast their net wide and brought together the perspectives of attachment theory, empirical research, and clinical experiences to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by adoptive parents. Conceptually rich and yet unabashedly pragmatic, their book addresses the issues of parent-child bonding, the subjective dilemmas of adoptive mothers, the role of adoptive fathers, and parenting children with special health care needs. Attention is also given to the specific tasks involving the adoption of very young children as well as to the resurgence of difficulties during adopted children’s adolescence. This wide-ranging discourse consistently maintains a tone of respect, concern, and shared humanity of all of us. A most impressive contribution to the adoption literature indeed!”

Salman Akhtar, MD, Professor of Psychiatry, Jefferson
Medical College, Training and Supervising Analyst,
Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia

“This book is a tour de force, a must read for all involved in the world of adoption. A comprehensive history of adoption, including current controversies, sets the stage.

Every chapter is a gem, but contributions on research to inform best practices, the role of the adoptive father, diversity, and adoption of children with special health care needs, help fill significant gaps in the adoption literature. Rich clinical material and the practical points summarized throughout, demonstrate the wisdom of seasoned practitioners.”

Jennifer Bonovitz, PhD, Supervising and Training Analyst,
Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia

“This volume is a major contribution to our understanding of adoptive parenting. The book is thorough, full of helpful insights, case studies, and perspectives on the complicated dance involved for adoptive parents and their children. The portrait of adoptive parenting is both hopeful and realistic, and is framed with thoughtful attention to what we actually know from careful research. This book should be a helpful guide and resource for both mental health professionals and adoptive parents.”

Sam Osherson, PhD, Professor of Psychology, Fielding
Graduate University, Cambridge, MA

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Virginia dedicates the book to two of her favorite adoptive parents, John and Rebecca Brabender, and to a very loving foster mother, Dona Aida Barrientos.

April dedicates the book to Hafeez and Theo Shaikh, whose generosity were instrumental in our adoptive process.

Foreword

Adoption, a gift to humanity, is the rescuing of humans, most commonly very young ones, who would otherwise be destined to a state of being unwanted or at risk in their environment unable to provide the basics needed for health and self-fulfillment. The complexity of adoption, its challenges, its rewards, and its heartbreaks, needs more attention than mental health has given to it to date. Those among us who have been drawn to adoption must record our findings, thereby opening them to further exploration, study, and dissemination among mental health professionals. In addition, and perhaps of greater importance, putting forward what we mental health professionals learn about the subject is a service that for many can and may be enormously helpful—for both other professionals who deal with the issue of adoption (such as pediatricians or those in the legal system) and the public at large, with its many adoptive parents, and I would add its adopted no-longer kids, as well as those who willingly or not give up their child for adoption. This book makes a significant contribution to both a greater understanding of adoption and its complex dynamic constellations as well as to serving those who are or come across adoption families, many of whom count on us adoption-informed mental health professionals to clarify and facilitate the challenges they face.

Multiple real-life characters play their part: the family of adoption, including especially the adoptive parent(s), the adopted child, and the birth parents, and the surround of each of these real-life characters.

The need to progressively learn as much as our clinical experiences with adoption constellations afford us has

become increasingly recognized as we see the specific dynamics that adoption produces and as more and more adoptions seem to be taking place. Foremost, an unhappy percentage of women are unable to conceive; their experience of it is laden with pain—and more. Then, more teenagers than we like to think conceive due to compelling intrapsychic and external pressures, carelessness, or even against their will; for them, being pregnant causes them painful embarrassment, and giving up their infant can cause them great distress, both tending to lead to much uncertainty about what they should do, much self-doubt and internal conflict that may last a lifetime. In addition, as our world has evolved, lengthy education, the women's liberation movement, and the march toward human rights progresses, given the added years needed by many to achieve yearned for goals of self-development and life-work, resulting in increasing numbers of women delaying their procreation plans. As mental health professionals have witnessed in and outside of the clinical situation, some among us believe that such delay has often led to failure in the ability to conceive among many an accomplished woman, now a professional who decides the time has come to have a child. Such failure to conceive, like with those who have tried and failed to conceive in their twenties, brings with it reactions ranging from anxiety and depression to distress and heartbreak. But like their young cohorts, for the now-professionals, whatever their field, commonly after years of trying, the self-disappointment, the shame, and the guilt experienced by many, the self-blame experienced by the failure to conceive gets slowly worked through and after debates between many a couple for or against the question, adoption is considered. The idea of adoption is met with a wide range of reactivities from trepidation and uncertainty to dedicated pursuit and hopefulness.

The decision to adopt brings with it a number of questions: How to proceed? What options do we have? Which channels to follow? From where? What age? A child in what kind of circumstance: A teenage mother's newborn? A child in physical distress? A traumatized, abused child? Often, all this without, except in general terms, knowing critical characteristics and conditions of the circumstances of the birth mother and her environment.

And that is only the beginning of their labors.

This thoughtfully conceived and illuminating volume takes us into some of the many areas of concern and factors at play once the adoption is set in motion. It is fortunate that, as is the case with most innovations, research, and study, we come to issues that interest us vigorously, determined in large measure by our own formative experiences. What we experience gives us direct insight. We gather our own reactions and meanings of it, we find the key factors in the experience that make us feel as we do, and when we add formal study, research, and thought-laden consideration to the entire experience, we come away with experience-based plus acquired knowledge that qualifies us with down-to-earth expertise. This then we can offer to others similarly impacted by life. Driven by their own experience as adoptive parents and their clinical work with adoption constellations, the editors and contributors to this volume have produced a volume with real-life value: They have put down what they have learned and conceptualized, and have molded it to make it available to the many who treat real-life adoption characters, as well as those living with adoption in the hope that they can be better informed and that the challenges they face can be made more clear and their efforts at coping with the experience optimized.

It is especially important for those among us who work with adoption constellations as well as for adoptive parents to know that adoptive parents can truly rescue a child (not

just a young one) not only from continuing trauma and/or neglect, but also that they can in good measure bring about the lessening of the effects of their adopted child's past trauma, indeed foster healing from it, and prevent adverse consequences that can otherwise burden them for a lifetime.

Henri Parens, MD

Professor of Psychiatry, Thomas Jefferson University;
Training and Supervising Analyst, Psychoanalytic Center of
Philadelphia

Preface

Adoption touches many lives. Most obviously, it profoundly influences the adopted child. According to some estimates, 2% of children are adopted within the United States each year, and 2% to 4% of all families have an adopted child (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2005). Yet, these statistics apply only to formal adoptions. Informal adoptions exist in the absence of any legal process or in absence of recognition by any regulatory group, and are by no means uncommon. Adoption engages the parents, birth parents, and adoptive parents, as well as siblings and extended family members. Participants in the adoption situation are a range of human service professionals: social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists who both evaluate prospective adoptive parents and monitor the family postadoptively; teachers who may witness the adoptive child's efforts to master particular elements of the adoptive experience; therapists who provide assistance to different members of the adoptive family; and physicians who treat any special medical problems of the adoptive child. Hence, any strides made to understand more fully, or help more completely, any member of the adoptive family is likely to have positive reverberations far beyond the initial targets of such efforts.

OUR OWN JOURNEY

We became interested in adoption in the context of our own experiences as adoptive parents. Virginia and her husband adopted a baby girl from Honduras (now almost 18 years old), and April and her husband adopted a 4-year-old girl from Pakistan (now 14 years old). Prospective adoptive

parents tend to consult the adoption literature, even the professional literature, on what to expect and we were no exception. For both of our families, the wait until a child was assigned to us was painfully long. In Virginia's case, it took 3 years, and for April, 2. We struggled with a great variety of uncertainties, such as for example, having the host country close its doors to adoption. During this period, we found our immersion in the literature to be helpful in enabling us to summon patience. The literature ranged from professional books on attachment theory to our adoption agencies' newsletters featuring stories of adoptive families to adoption blog posts. This material enabled us to form accurate anticipations about what we were likely to encounter and experience once our child entered our family. Our grade-school-aged sons, both nonadopted children, did not have the advantage of that resource, but relied on us and our spouses—both human service professionals—to contain their yearnings to get to know their new sisters.

During this period of waiting, each of us realized that over our years of practice as therapists, we had treated a number of adoptive parents and adults who had been adopted. It hit us like that proverbial ton of bricks that had we taken advantage of this literature at the time we were seeing patients or supervising our students' treatment of patients, our work would have been deeper and richer. Since we have been acquainted with this literature, we have found that the valuable insights we derived have played a key role in informing the treatment of adoptive parents. Furthermore, we now had our own direct experience on which to draw in understanding our clients. A kind of synergy developed among the three elements: our clinical experiences, our reading, and our personal involvement in adoption.

At the same time that in our personal lives we were becoming interested in adoption, in our professional lives

we were writing a book on the therapist's pregnancy (Fallon & Brabender, *Awaiting the Therapist's Baby: A Guide for Expectant Parent-Practitioners*, 2003). As part of that book, we interviewed a small group of individuals who were therapists and adoptive parents. From that sample, we learned a great deal about the experiences of being an adoptive parent. For example, we learned firsthand that adoptive parents are often unsupported by the systems in which they function. Our interviewees told us that their families questioned them about the decision to adopt far more than they would ever have felt entitled to do in regard to the decision to have a biological child ("Why would you want to have someone else's baby?"). To learn more about adoptive families, but in particular, adoptive parents, we organized a group of mental health professionals and students from our two doctoral programs. Over the past 8 years, this group has collected data on adoptive and foster families, some of which is cited in the chapters of this book.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

Our work in this area has led us to believe that to achieve a complete understanding of adoption, the perspectives of all of the members of the kinship network but particularly the adoptive triad—the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the child—must be taken into account. The adoption literature has addressed some aspects of the adoption situation intensively, such as the comparisons of the outcomes of adopted versus nonadopted children (Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005). Yet, much remains to be done in achieving a comprehensive understanding of the viewpoints and psychologies of each of the major stakeholders. In many textbooks on adoption, often a

chapter will be devoted to each of the members of the adoptive triad. A single chapter can provide the big picture, but it cannot offer an in-depth treatment of the distinctive needs, thoughts, feelings, impulses, fantasies, and conflicts that each of these triad members experiences through the stages of adoption and beyond. We believe that each member of the triad merits his or her own concentrated focus, but never to the neglect of a consideration of the other members. This volume seeks to contribute to the construction of a comprehensive picture of the adoption triad through a thoroughgoing exploration of the experiences and developmental processes of the adoptive parent.

The Influence of the Parent on the Child

An effort to illumine the behavior and internal life of the adoptive parent is important for three broad reasons. First, the parent has a crucial influence on the development of his or her child. Although this view may seem self-evident, it cannot be legitimately and fully accepted without empirical support. Furthermore, in some instances early trauma may be so great that the question of whether the best subsequent parenting could make a difference to the child is a reasonable one. In the past decade or so, researchers have demonstrated the importance of the quality of adoptive parenting in the well-being of the child.

For example, Simmel (2007) examined pre-adoptive risk factors and postadoption factors in the behavioral outcomes of adopted children in the child welfare system. In all, 293 families were studied. Simmel found that the parents' self-perceived readiness was a more powerful factor in mediating short-term and long-term outcomes than most of the pre-adoption risk factors such as prenatal drug or

nicotine exposure. In another study of children who were adopted at an older age, children's adjustment levels were more affected by parental perceptions (for example, the capacity to see strengths in the child that others might ignore) than by child pre-adoptive behaviors (Clark, Thigpen, & Yates, 2006). Similarly, Smith-McKeever (2005) in a study of 83 African American adoptive families found that the child's adjustment is more affected by the facets of the parent-child relationship (for example, how often the parent thinks of the child when separated) than pre-adoptive aspects of either the parent or the child. This trio of studies represents a small sample of the research showing the importance of the adoptive parent in the life of the adopted child. Kriebel and Wentzel (2011) found that highly responsive parenting can counter significant factors such as a pre-adoptive history of maltreatment in predicting adjustment in adopted children.

The Adoptive Parent's Relational Context

The adoptive parent affects other individuals besides his or her child. Certainly, the adoptive parents' happiness or misery influences the psychological status of all those close to him or her—spouses, other children, parents. What might be less obvious is that the well-being of the adoptive parents can also bear on the quality of the other important member of the adoption triad, the birth parent. A variety of factors shape the adoptive parent's stance toward the birth parent. One factor is the adoptive parent's sense of security in his or her parental role. To the extent that the parent feels insecure or vulnerable or lacks a sense of entitlement to embrace fully the parental role, he or she is likely to view any interest in or contact between the

adoptive child and his or her birth parent as a threat rather than a potentially enriching tie for all parties.

The Well-Being of the Adoptive Parent

A third reason is that the adoptive parent is a human being with his or her own psychological needs, a person entitled to the achievement and sustenance of a sense of well-being. Although adoptive parents are likely to have the range of problems that afflict all human beings, related to adoption are a particular set of problems. In contemporary society, many couples pursue adoption as an alternate means of building a family subsequent to difficulties with fertility. For some, a definitive diagnosis of infertility precedes their embarking on a course toward adoption. Fertility challenges and infertility are states known to induce a range of painful reactions and even psychological problems (Fassino, Pierò, Boggio, Piccioni, & Garzaro, 2002). Individuals may struggle with the psychological effects of infertility at the same time that they are considering adoption as a possible route to creating a family. In fact, for many, reactions associated with the loss of the dream of having a biological child continue to occur during the various stages of adoption and beyond (Bonovitz, 2006). As the adopted child develops, problems arise that evoke a range of internal reactions and behaviors in the adoptive parent. These reactions are often intensified by a social context that continues to see blood relations as pre-eminent, thereby attaching stigma to adoption (Carp, 2002). All of the aforementioned factors can affect the adjustment and life satisfaction of the adoptive parent.

Although in this book we talk about some of the challenges adoptive parents face, several points must be made in this regard. First, despite whatever difficulties surface, the

pleasures and gratifications of adopting a child are enormous. Speaking as adoptive parents, we can say that having made the decision to bring a child into our families via adoption has been among the best in our lives. We simply cannot imagine our lives without our cherished daughters. From our professional and personal travels, we know that most other adoptive parents feel as positively as we do. Second, in describing the issues faced by adoptive families, we are not assuming that somehow such issues are greater in number or severity than other types of families. We do believe that within adoptive families, common challenges exist so that a family currently struggling with a problem may use strategies others have developed. Third, in identifying adoptive parents as having particular difficulties, we are not viewing the problems as residing within the adoptive parent. Rather, like many other writers in this area, we hold that the circumstances faced by the adoptive parent are inherently challenging. The adoptive parent's particular psychological issues may intensify problems that erupt in the parenting of any child. Yet, the evidence suggests that adoptive parents are no more likely to have psychological difficulties than parents in other family structures. Moreover, adoptive parents appear to have a host of strengths that they bring to caregiving, and some of these we discuss in the first chapter.

INTENDED AUDIENCE OF THIS BOOK

Relative to the population at large, adoptive parents tend to use mental health resources when problems arise. The inclination to use available supports is one of the strengths adoptive parents have. Yet, do they get the help that they need? The answer to this question is a qualified "only

sometimes.” As Pertman (2011) noted, at some point every adoptive family needs postadoption counseling. Only within the child welfare system are postadoption services consistently supported and even there, coverage falls far short of needs. In pre-adoption counseling, which also is under-supported, prospective parents are often not given the necessary education on what might signal the need for treatment. Hence, even though adoptive parents do seek treatment, they may not always know when treatment or consultation for one or more members of the family might be helpful.

Another significant obstacle to adoptive parents’ obtaining effective assistance is the serious lack of professionals who can competently address adoption issues. Certainly, an adoption specialist, a professional whose training and experience emphasize adoption, could treat such problems effectively (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006). Yet, for many reasons, adoptive parents may not seek the services of an adoption specialist in pursuing solutions to problems. The number of adoption specialists simply is not large enough to accommodate the needs of adoptive parents. In particular geographic areas, few or no adoption specialists may be present. Adoptive parents may pursue help for a problem that they believe is not related to adoption, but actually is. Adoptive parents may have an existing relationship with a mental health professional, and feel comfortable seeking help from that person. For example, a woman may have begun treatment with a therapist at the point when she was trying to cope with possible infertility. Now that she is experiencing some concerns in the context of parenting her adoptive child, her first instinct is to return to that trusted therapist.

The problem that we see is the lack of knowledge that the general mental health practitioner is likely to have in relation to adoption. Few graduate programs provide

training in adoption, even as part of an elective curriculum. Furthermore, in the absence of training, this practitioner is likely to be vulnerable to some of the biases of the culture in relation to adoption. These biases are many, and this book identifies a good number of them. One bias is that adoption is a second-best way of building a family. Another bias is that adopted children have irremediable problems. Still another bias, which logically conflicts with the prior one, is that when adoptive children are having difficulties, it's the fault of the parents. Those therapists who take any of these unrecognized prejudices into their work with the client may not merely fail to help him or her, but may exacerbate that individual's difficulties. In Chapter 1, we illustrate how these therapist/societal prejudices may play out in treatment.

Our primary intended audience, then, is the generalist mental health practitioner. We believe that by a greater exposure to the array of issues with which adoptive parents grapple, the practitioner will be able to work with those parents more fruitfully. Part of competence involves recognizing its limits. An immersion in this material can help the generalist mental health practitioner to recognize that in some instances, securing the services of an adoption specialist is crucial. Finally, we would also like to believe that the book would stimulate interest in adoption and inspire the reader to delve into writings concerning the other members of the triad. We also expect that adoption specialists and child welfare workers will derive benefit from this book. We have synthesized fairly new research in the area of the adoptive parent (ours and others) and we believe that it is useful for professionals working in this area.

A secondary audience is adoptive parents themselves whom we know through our own research to be a highly literate group and who make frequent forays into the professional literature. For example, adoptive parents

frequently read books on attachment written for a professional audience. We believe that prospective adoptive parents could be assisted in forming accurate expectations about their likely experiences, and that by doing so, their ability to adjust to the changing circumstances of adoption will be enhanced. One repeated finding in the literature is that correct parental anticipations contribute to the adjustment of all members of the adoptive family.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In organizing the chapters of this book, we as editors work from the premise that no professional can make a helpful intervention in the absence of understanding. In consonance with this view, our next five chapters offer the reader the knowledge base to understand the adoptive parent fully. Chapter 1 looks at the literature to synthesize what we know about adoptive parents. It also offers a thumbnail history of adoption with an emphasis on societal changes in perceptions of the adoptive parent and his or her rights and responsibilities. The history leads to the current situation, which is defined by a set of controversies, the resolution of which will have great importance for many specific aspects of adoption such as who can adopt and access to information by members of the adoptive triad (adoptive parents, birth parents, and adopted child).

Chapters 2 and 3 respectively cover the theory and research related to adoption and the relationship between parent and child. We hope to convince our reader that each of the psychoanalytic theories covered provides a kind prism through which new facets of adoption can be illuminated. Although research is being done on many fronts, we home in most especially on the research in the

area of attachment because it has such relevance for parent-child adjustment. Chapter 4 introduces the reader to the adoptive mother and her changing psychological states as she moves through the stages of preparenting and parenting. Chapter 5 focuses on the adoptive father, a topic far less covered in the literature. Both of these chapters feature some of our qualitative work.

The next seven chapters provide a more practical focus. Chapter 6 focuses on the amazing variability among and within adoptive families, particularly on those dimensions that reflect core elements of individuals' identities. We attempt to give parents assistance in responding not merely constructively, but joyfully, to the differences within the family, such as differences in race between parent and child. Chapter 7 provides critically important information to the many families of adoptive children who have special needs, and their therapists. Readers within these families will, we believe, identify with the case material presented. They will also see that fostering connections with the broader special needs community—adoptive and nonadoptive—may be helpful.

The next two chapters form a couplet: Together, they cover the years of active parenting. Two contributors who have spent their professional lives working with families within the child welfare system wrote Chapter 8 on parenting the young child. They talk about the different stages of development and how these require a different pattern of response from the adoptive parent. They assist the therapist in seeing the kinds of supports parents need as they react to their child's changing experiences and behaviors. For example, at some points the parent may feel that the child is rejecting him or her and be inclined to recoil. Our authors talk about the obstacle this parental behavior creates in the parent's goal for an attachment to be formed between child and parent. Chapter 9 finds the

adoptive child in adolescence and offers the adoptive parent wise counsel on how to assist the teenager through the developmental struggles of identity formation and separation, tasks that are somewhat different for the adoptive child.

Chapter 10 provides a framework for therapists to conceptualize their work with adoptive parents and recognizes that while many of the developmental tasks faced by both child and adult are universal, in adoptive families these tasks have unique facets. Chapter 11 recognizes that adoptive parents are called on to serve a range of roles on behalf of their own adopted child, and all adopted children. The chapter discusses the common situations that signal the need for the parent to engage in advocacy on the part of his or her child, and discusses some of the obstacles that the parent may have in successfully filling that role. This chapter is relevant to therapists in that it helps therapists to see that what may appear to the therapist as sensitivity is often a response justified by subtle biases in others, reflecting societal values, that parents discern.

Chapter 12 highlights some of the broad themes in the book. One section of this chapter looks at practice through a developmental lens by following an adoptive couple through the phase of contemplating adoption to that of having grown adopted children. This section shows the range of modalities and types of interventions that can assist the adoptive parent in achieving well-being and a high level of parental functioning. Another section addresses education. It recognizes that no one book—even ours—can do it all, and identifies the areas that therapists may wish to pursue to deepen their knowledge in this area. We encourage our readers to advocate for more adequate graduate and postgraduate training in the area of adoption. Finally, because we believe that some of the readers of our book