

Ensuring that Adoptions Succeed Is in Everyone's Best Interest

By Raymond L. Torres (*Hartford Courant*, 12/8/98)
Originally published in the Hartford Courant.

Nearly 130,000 children were adopted in the United States in 1992 (the last year that U.S. statistics were available). Many are growing up happily in stable, supportive homes.

Unfortunately, however, not all of the nation's adopted children have been as lucky. In what experts are saying may be an increasing trend, a significant number of adoptions are failing. Good will and love alone are not always enough to make an adoption work.

Adopting a child is a caring, optimistic act. Today, it is becoming a relatively open process that often allows adopted children to understand and accept who they are, while growing up in a safe, stable and nurturing environment.

In some cases, the adoption process also allows birth parents to know what has become of their biological children and, in most cases, it provides couples with a wonderful and rewarding way to have a family.

Yet each year many adoptions do not work. For example, in Illinois, one state that makes a strong effort to prepare parents for adoption--and track how well these children fare--12 percent of adoptions, nevertheless, are ended legally months, even years, after being completed.

An additional 2 percent of families are backing out even before the adoption papers are signed.

Many professionals believe that on a national scale, the number of failed adoptions is much higher than recorded statistics suggest. Few states are doing as well as Illinois in keeping records.

When adoptions fail, children are returned to their state's system of care, and enter what too often becomes a repeated cycle of foster homes.

Large numbers of children enter the foster and adoption systems as the result of their parents' economic, social, emotional and psychological crises. Many children experience disruptions and hardships that lead to emotional and psychological problems, which in turn present serious challenges to their healthy adjustment.

Raising an adopted child, especially one with special needs, can be difficult. Yet support for parents and children often stops when the child is legally adopted. Rather than the end of the process, the legal adoption is actually the beginning.

In fact, adoption is an ongoing process that complicates the core issues all children struggle with, including identity, sexuality, trust and self-esteem.

While children are resilient, a loving family alone cannot remove the effects of abuse, neglect and other disadvantages. And when an adoption fails, all the problems and disadvantages the child has experienced are compounded.

The trauma to these children is obvious. Failed adoption is especially tragic because it happens just when the child's chances for happiness and success seem to be greatest.

In my years as a social worker and administrator of human services in public and private agencies, I have seen this disastrous cycle and the toll it takes on individual children, families and communities alike.

The good news is that providing services to adoptive parents and children before and after adoption helps make the process work for everyone. Through an amendment to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the federal government has begun to make funds available to states to develop and deliver the services-- support groups, counseling, appropriate resources--that children and families need after adoption.

Casey Family Services formalized post-adoption services seven years ago, when we began to get a steady stream of questions and problems from adoptive families.

When families and children are isolated and overwhelmed by a crisis they were unprepared for, the dissolution of the adoptive family can seem almost inevitable. We realized, as did other private and public agencies, that providing information and services before problems accelerate into crises results in stronger family relationships.

Pre- and post-adoption services are essential to help children and families address their problems and build healthy relationships. In Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont, we have made it a top priority to provide help to families struggling because they have adopted children with special needs.

We are tracking which services to families and children are the most effective so we can begin to better understand the differences between failed and successful adoptions. Our intention is to share our results.

The alliances that have existed among mental health practitioners, social service providers and other stakeholders have been too fragile. The lack of communication and strong partnerships has exacerbated post-adoption issues and hindered the development of pre- and post-adoption services.

Solutions require a systemic, collaborative approach. Practitioners, program administrators and policy-makers must all contribute to services for adoptive families.

The federal government has taken the first critical step to meet the challenges head on, by making funds available to states for activities related to strengthening adoptive families. More is needed, of course, but now the ball is in our court.

As a principal partner and leading private agency in Connecticut and Vermont, two of fewer than a dozen states to receive federal grants, Casey Family Services will work with state and private partners to develop curricula and train child welfare agencies to better understand and respond to the needs of adoptive families, before and after the child enters their homes. It's a start.

We must all work together to acknowledge, understand and solve the often-complex issues that accompany adoption.

The children--too often victims of past abuse and neglect--need our continued help in making what for many will be the most important transition of their lives. The families who have opened their hearts and homes to them deserve more than our admiration. They need our support.

Raymond L. Torres is Executive Director of Casey Family Services, the Shelton-based direct service arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It operates divisions in Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.