

Adoptive Parents' Responses Related to Qualities of Therapists

Unhelpful Help

Failed to believe, understand, or validate their experiences

The person we saw did not listen or seem to understand our family as a unique entity, rather he lumped "adopted kids" together.

International adoption is not easy and these children come hurt and with special needs. I needed someone who understood this and didn't think that I was crazy.

The therapist we saw kept telling us that other families would love to trade kids with us. It wasn't helpful to hear how awful other kids behaved.

Seemed blaming of parents for their children's problems

Often, the person did not have a clue to the dynamics of adoption and were quick to blame the parents for the child's presenting issues.

As an adoptive parent, I have been shocked and humiliated by professionals enough ... In our first 18 months as a family, due to attachment disorder, many special health and dietary needs, and trauma on our child's part, I survived on approximately 3 hours sleep every night for all that time. I was exhausted, mentally and physically. After dissolving into tears when our child was hospitalized after I fell asleep during the day and she scratched the skin off her entire face and neck, the doctor said it was my fault, I was a bad parent and I should pull myself together!

I am tired of being blamed for his trauma, which I did not do. And not being given support for his adoption, which I did do. This includes adoption of both him and his trauma history and getting him through it. Not that I am a perfect parent or that I don't receive value from advice, but sheesh! I didn't cause the "train wreck" I am the person trying to pull him out of it!

Not knowledgeable about adoption issues

Adoption was not addressed as a component of the child's distress; only standard adolescent/ biochemical issues.

Some were aware that there are specific adoption issues, but not on a competent level. Big issue with language used such as "your birth mom gave you away".

Without an awareness of the deep trauma, loss and grief that is part of an adopted child's life, a professional tries to address surface symptoms, behaviors without any clue to the huge abyss that actually exists.

They did not understand that the underlying issue was adoption and therefore did not treat the problem as such.

We have wasted numerous months if not years with therapists who have no knowledge of RAD or no understanding of adoption.

Since she was adopted at 3 days old, adoption was discounted.

Had to search for 30 years to find a therapist who finally realized the presenting problems were based in adoption loss.

The therapist we work with now is competent, but we've worked with some stunningly incompetent people. They set us back years in terms of getting the appropriate therapy that we needed. The biggest issues were lack of empathy and understanding adoption.

Some understood the attachment part but not the adoption as loss part. It's a multi-faceted understanding a therapist needs across the areas of cultural competency, understanding grief, loss, attachment; strengths-based & evidence-based practice.

It was a waste of time for us to take our daughter to professionals who did not have experience with adoption and the unique issues.

We spent TOO many years with therapists who discounted adoption as insignificant because my daughter was 2 days old when she came home to us.

Inadequate assessment or lack of understanding of other important issues

They didn't diagnose the problem properly. They didn't see her manipulation.

Never took into account what my child had experienced in her past with birth family.

Incompetent therapists and psychiatrists nearly tore our family apart and destroyed our daughter's life. She was not depressed, yet was put on anti-depressants. She was not ADHD, but was put on ADHD meds. We searched and searched until we found competent professionals. Our daughter is doing well now, family dynamics have improved, and we are receiving help.

Had to search and research to prevent the "just love them and give them time" mentality.

More mainstream adolescent therapists were not familiar with how therapy has to be different with kids who have attachment disorder.

Advice "sounded" helpful, but in reality, just didn't work because it did not fully take into account the significant attachment issues.

We see a family counselor, I see a personal counselor, and my daughter sees a counselor. They have done their best with the training they have--but they fail to understand some important elements of my daughter's history and needs and our needs as a family.

The head psychiatrist for ____ Hospitals in ____ said...after 2 visits @ \$400/hour, out of pocket, not covered, "oh, she has ADHD". What???? Yes, I knew this. Ever hear of fetal alcohol, PTSD, attachment disorder, ODD, post-institutional effects??? How about early childhood deprivation as in Russian orphanage until age 8? Thanks for that Adderal that made her even more crazy. (signed, sarcastic & at wits end for REAL post-adoption support).

Failure to include parents in treatment

My son's therapist works with dozens of foster kids, but she refused to do joint sessions with both me and my son to assist with his transition to my home. She stated at age 10 she would only see him alone, not with a parent.

One refused to do family therapy or discuss issues with me (the mom.)

Sometimes I felt that we were left out of the healing process. At the time I felt the focus should have been on my son, but now I realize we needed to do it as a family.

Last therapist worked only with the child and had no idea what the issues really were – never consulted me.

Failure to address family issues

The mental health professionals were not able to see the family as a holistic unit and were not able to bring siblings into the counseling sessions as participants.

Many didn't take in the whole family dynamic and involve parents in the therapy process, which did not work well.

Some were very good in certain areas but all seemed to lack the ability to work with or embrace our family as a whole.

Need to address the parent not bonding, not just the child. Depression in the parent. We adopted one as an infant and one at 5 years of age and 3.5 years later the one adopted as an older child is still hard and the necessary bonding on both sides is not there and probably never will be.

Pathologizing child or family

Lumped all "foster children" into same category – messed up.

Questioning the parents' motives for adoption

After explaining the behaviors that we were dealing with as parents I actually had one therapist shake her head and ask me why we would ever have considered adopting children like these. Not exactly the support that we were looking for.

Telling parents to just give their child back to the State

One therapist, on our second visit, suggested that we cancel our pending adoption, without even suggesting any interventions. We changed therapists.

Lack good clinical skills

One 'adoption competent' therapist had poor clinical skills.

Mental health professionals who are members of the adoption triad must be especially careful not to project their own issues on the client.

Helpful Help

Accepting, non-blaming approach

The therapist's first words were, 'It's not your fault. It's not something you're doing or not doing'... Finally, there was someone who understood and didn't see me as a bad mother!

This was the first agency to not make us feel like it was our fault.

We were to the point that we thought there was something wrong with us, that we were somehow bad parents ... I couldn't understand what kind of mother I must be to have this child attacking me, and that angry. After being here the very first time, I went home crying realizing that it wasn't all my fault ... It helped me accept the fact that it's a problem my son's got that he can't deal with and that his anger, even though it's directed at me, it's not because of anything I've done.

Listen empathically, validate and understand experiences

The fact that the counselor just listened when I needed her to helped me the most. From the start, she understood our situation exactly. Her guidance and advice was right on target and helped us so much. After talking with teachers, day care instructors, doctors, therapists, family members and friends about our son, finally someone understood and sympathized.

I felt as if there was finally someone who understood, who could help, finally. We were lost, sinking, destroying our family rapidly before these services. We spent thousands upon thousands of dollars, not counting the time involved in seeking help.

Having somebody who understood what we were going through was great! My family and friends didn't understand. They all thought I was exaggerating.

We were desperate to find a therapist who would take the time to listen, to see all the facets of our family life and do it with respect and kindness.

We feel so fortunate to have a therapist who understands RAD and supports us, because everywhere else we go, we get blamed for her behavior.

Knowledgeable about adoption and related issues

I want a therapist who doesn't refer to the child's bio mom and dad as "Mom and Dad"; who honors my role as my child's mother; who deeply understands issues related to attachment, bonding, and trauma; who does not negatively stereotype children adopted from foster care; who understands the neurological impact of trauma, loss, and prenatal substance use; who fully absorbs why adoption may not be a joyous event for the child - and more.

At certain times, a person with this expertise has been incredibly helpful where others couldn't be.

If the person knew about developmental delays due to institutionalization and the impact of trauma, as well as other aspects of adoption, they were far easier to work with.

[Understands] the importance of information and contact with birth family members.

Our family has 4 generations of adopted children – open, closed, private, state, partially open, guardianship, interracial, etc. Each circumstance of a person's adoption is unique – an adoption therapist really needs to be well versed in all areas of adoption and free from a personal agenda.

Adoption is a complex part of an individual's story and that of an adoptive family. In most situations, a therapist needs to have knowledge, an understanding of those complexities in order to be successful.

She really understood the dynamics occurring and the initial manipulation by our daughter who was adopted successfully as a 14 year old.

Involve parents throughout child's treatment

We have a wonderful counselor who always has one parent in with the therapy of our children. It is helpful to understand what is 'going on in the child's mind', usually something that I as a mother would never guess.

Address issues throughout the family

[Our therapist] helped with individual counseling for our daughter...family counseling for our whole family...met with my husband and I individually. She had a session with my younger daughter and I because she could see that there were some things that we needed to address. And then, she worked with ___ and ___ [siblings] because their relationship was really pretty conflictual. And I really do believe it was the comprehensive nature of the whole program that helped us the most.

I don't think there is enough help for a biological child to adjust to having an adoptive brother/ sister (our son is from Russia), specifically adjusting to an adoptive sibling with sensory and attachment issues and how it affects the family as a whole and the individual.

Therapists working with any adoption families MUST work with the whole family. Child could use the therapist as a "whining board" and reality would not be known unless parents and other siblings were included. Balance must be valued among all family members.

Current therapist is helping the family as a whole to work together – helping parents with better parenting strategies and helping siblings.

Help parents to understand their child in light of the child's history

This was the only place we could find help ... an understanding of how these troubled kids work and how to try and cope with their behaviors. How to deal with the emotions these kids stir up in us. How to still love them.

It helped us understand more about her past, and why she has a fear of things.

Counseling really helped us to normalize the adoption. We were baffled by what was happening to our family. We had no idea about normal behaviors for adopted children. We couldn't understand why he was acting out.

We should have known more about attachment therapy and strongly counseled in that direction from day 1. Years have been wasted and our family has paid a very heavy price ... I didn't realize that my kid really does have an attachment disorder and fought it. It wasn't until a therapist clearly explained the nature of the disorder and how it makes sense given his history that I embraced it and found help. People need to understand gradations in attachment disorders and not be afraid of the diagnosis.

Help child address adoption issues

Our counselor was fantastic. She was able to help break down a barrier that one of my sons has developed in dealing with his issues about adoption. This has helped him greatly, and the whole family.

She was able to reach the inner child that was tormented, bewildered, and self-tortured.

She helped our daughter get things off her mind that bothered her about her past.

Our daughter could talk with the worker about her birthmother. I think that helped her an awful lot.

Provide strategies to address problems

I never would have thought of the ideas our counselor gave us. We were shocked that the ideas worked.

She just told us that you just can't negotiate with a child like this and also gave us ways to have her obey without getting into piles of trouble (power struggles).

Peter was our worker through this turbulent experience ... he made a very definite difference in our lives – all positive. He guided us towards positive ways of doing things.

I had struggled by myself for 3 years with no one caring about us at all, but the counselor identified specific problems to work on – major problems – and what to do next.

Works collaboratively with others to assist family, and advocates on behalf of clients

Our counselor supported us through getting outside help and court appearances.

She went with us when we had IEP meeting.

We received help and support planning services appropriate for my son...drug screening, psych. evaluation, dealing with the legal system.

The therapist should definitely understand the workings of the school system -- the different types of meetings (parent conferences, EMTs, IEP meetings). The therapist also needs to know the kinds of services and protections available to children (IEPs, 504 plans) so that they can help the family advocate for appropriate school support for their child.

Good clinical skills

A therapist with solid clinical skills and a growth mindset was able to effectively provide needed treatment while gaining an understanding of adoption issues.

Culturally competent

As a single, gay male, adoptive parent of a child of a different race/born in a different country, the thing I run into with mental health professionals is the need for multiple competencies. It's a tough thing to provide -- I know because we "provide" it in our own family just by virtue of being who we are. However, the issue of multiple competencies is becoming more and more important as families become more diverse and in more ways.

In cultural competence ... add religious competence. Parents with deep religious convictions often tell me that therapists come from a much different world-view and have trouble relating to their family's spiritual background, sometimes injecting their own religious biases. I know our family's therapists have different religious views than ours, but they strive to understand and are respectful.

Accessible and dependable in supporting the family, particularly in times of crisis

When something would happen, I'd call, and she would talk me through it. Often in the past, we'd made mistakes because there was no one available to help. We'd hear, 'Do you have an appointment?' or 'The doctor is with someone and will call you back', but he never would.