

Matching Child and Family Needs After Permanency with Effective Services

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals.

This module is: Family Stability and Wellness Post-Permanency. This lesson is: Matching Child and Family Needs After Permanency with Effective Services.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Recognize adoption as a life-long process, with ongoing elevated mental health needs often years after placement
- Identify and describe the continuum of post-adoption mental health needs and the services that help to sustain families and promote stability
- Understand the different types of adoption and guardianship instability and contributing factors present

2. Impact of Adoption Issues

2.1 Impact of Adoption Issues

Let's begin by looking at the impact of challenges related to adoption, foster care, and kinship care experiences.

2.2 Impact of Issues Over Time

As stated throughout this training, challenges are present throughout the course of one's life. If not addressed, these can impact and exacerbate mental health challenges, as well as the stability of the family. That is why it is so critical that families have access to adoption competent, post-permanency services.

Some families have sought help for years with unremitting chronic problems, partly due to their difficulty in finding an adoption-competent therapist who understands the big picture and can address a range of needs. Other families managed challenges while their child was young but encountered major crises and threats to stability during later childhood and the adolescent years.

Your role as a therapist is to understand that a majority of families, at some point in the family's life cycle, will need to access post-adoption services. Instead of pathologizing the underpinnings of these struggles, it will be important to normalize this based on what you have learned from this training.

2.3 Research Reveals Both Good News and Ongoing Challenges

Let's discuss a few conclusions from research that help us better understand the range of post-adoption needs in adoptive families.

The good news is:

- Surveys of adoptive parents whose children range up to age 18 find that over 90 percent of adoptive parents in any type of adoption are satisfied with their adoptions and would choose to adopt the youth again, given what they now know.
- Among all types of adopted children, even those coming from higher risk situations, the majority are in the normal range on standardized measures of behavioral and emotional functioning.

The challenge is indicated by longitudinal studies that reveal continuity in behavioral/emotional problems of adopted youth over time. Those who fall in the clinical range at a young age tend to stay in that range across childhood, and vice versa. While some youth show improvement, a larger number are likely to show worsening of symptoms.

2.4 Continuum of Needs

Based on many studies of the mental health needs of children adopted from child welfare, we can conclude that approximately half of them will have significant behavioral and emotional challenges, and a subset of these will have a very high level of problems and attachment difficulties that can threaten adoption stability. It is important to recognize that children may shift from one level of need to another at some point during their childhood.

This visual representation of the continuum of needs represents families' varying needs after adoption.

Families at the base of the pyramid may benefit from preventive and supportive services, training, and information and referral services. Children and families can also benefit from contact with other adopted youth and families.

Families in the middle of the pyramid may benefit from adoption competent mental health services, other specialized services, such as support groups, educational supports, or advocacy, may be needed.

Families at the top of the pyramid are at the highest risk of adoption instability. Adopted youth with severe challenges and their families need to receive intensive therapeutic services, as well as interventions on multiple levels. Youth may need residential treatment, during which family therapy helps to sustain the youth's emotional security and parents' commitment.

The pervasive, complex symptoms of some adopted youth require specialized treatment addressing many domains, particularly resolution of trauma and loss, developmental deficits, and self-regulation and attachment capacities. Adoptive parents need to learn how to interact empathically and effectively, facilitate developmental catch-up, and address children's emotional issues.

3. Adoption Instability

3.1 Adoption Instability

We will now turn to factors that lead to adoption instability. Let's start with a brief exercise to highlight a few factors linked with stability or instability in the body of research on foster care adoptions.

3.2 Stability and Instability Exercise

All of the characteristics on the screen are risk or protective factors associated with adoption stability. Please click the factors that represent protective factors. Some of these are intuitive, but a few are not. Then, we will look at those you chose correctly.

- Relative adoption
- Newly recruited adopter
- Strong attachment to birth mother
- Higher number of placements
- Child placed with siblings
- Sexual abuse history
- Neglect
- Private agency placement
- More experienced caseworker
- Parental social support
- Realistic expectations of the child
- Full disclosure of child's history
- Higher education of parents
- Sibling group of 4 or more
- Father figure with low involvement
- Higher intelligence of child

3.3 Stability and Instability Exercise

How did you do?

This exercise helps us recognize that characteristics of children and families, as well as environmental factors, including agency practices, can support or threaten child and family well-being and permanency.

The overall adjustment of adopted or guardianship children and their families is influenced by:

- Risk and protective factors impacting the child prior to separation from their birth family
- The quality and experience of care a child receives prior to entering their new family
- Adoption practices during the adoption process, such as preparation for both parents and children
- Risk and protective factors in the permanent placements
- Factors in their environmental systems (school, church, community, and others)
- Quality of postadoption services

A brief that summarizes current knowledge about adoption instability, *Discontinuity and Disruption in Adoptions and Guardianships*, is in the Resources tab.

3.4 Adoption Discontinuity and Dissolution

Now, let's look at some terminology.

Click on each topic to learn about adoption disruption, dissolution, and discontinuity.

1. Disruption refers to a process that ends after the child is placed in an adoptive home, but before the adoption is legally finalized.
2. Dissolution refers to an adoption in which the legal relationship between the parent and child is severed after the adoption is finalized.
3. Adoption discontinuity is a term used in recent studies to refer to adopted children who had to leave their adoptive and guardianship families, either temporarily or permanently, but parental rights were not dissolved. The relationship between parent and child may or may not remain intact.

3.5 Unregulated Custody Transfer

Unregulated custody transfer (or rehoming) of adopted children, primarily those who were adopted intercountry, has become a focus in the news in recent years. These cases involve parents placing their child with another family without the knowledge, supervision, and safeguards provided by Child Welfare Professionals.

Although the number of children who are rehomed is unknown, concerns have been raised about their well-being, because of inadequate screening and preparation of the new family, and support to cope with family disruption and re-integration into a new family.

3.6 Informal Separation

When the level of challenge and stressors exceed the child's and parents' ability to cope, negative outcomes usually result. These include various types of adoption instability, involving the child leaving the home, either formally or informally, temporarily or permanently, as well as chronic, intense family difficulty, or pronounced internal struggle, such as the child not feeling accepted or secure within their adoptive family.

As we have said throughout this training, for permanence to be meaningful youth need enduring, life-long connections, based on attachment, trust, and acceptance. We are going to look at a case example that illustrates this reality. Please click on the handout to read Ashley's story.

3.7 Ashley Reflection: Challenges

What were the challenges that arose in Ashley's case?

3.8 Ashley Reflection: Challenges

Click each shape to learn the challenges for Ashley and her family.

1. Ashley's trauma and loss issues did not appear to have been addressed prior to, or after, her adoption.
2. There was insufficient preparation of the child and her parents.
3. There was a significant lack of communicative openness, as the parents were not able to understand or talk to Ashley about her past experiences, her curiosity about her birth family, and her painful feelings.
4. The family never tried to seek help.
5. Relational permanence was never established between Ashley and her parents.

3.9 Ashley Reflection: Services

What services might have changed the poor outcome for Ashley?

3.10 Ashley Reflection: Services

Ashley and her family would have benefited from the following services:

- Both Ashley and her family needed extensive preparation, as well as early intervention by an adoption-competent mental health professional.
- The family would have benefited from post-adoption services to achieve better outcomes.
- The adoptive mother needed support herself to understand the feelings that Ashley triggered in her, and to learn how to connect with her daughter on a feeling level.

- Ashley also would likely have benefited from individual and family therapy to address her profound grief and loss issues, exposure to abuse, and lack of early consistent caretaking. Her family would likely benefit from an understanding of the importance of attachment-based parenting practices.

Ashley's experience demonstrates the long-term, severe consequences of this failure to achieve relational permanence, particularly for Ashley.

She lost her brother and two sets of parents. No one can know how the outcome might have been different with the provision of needed services along the way, but it is evident that their absence contributed to the breakdown of this adoption.

3.11 Parents' Experiences with Youth at Highest Risk for Instability

In Ashley's example, the family didn't utilize any services. Too often, adopted children in families that don't have access to the services they need end up in residential treatment - the highest, most restrictive, and most expensive level of care.

A qualitative study of 24 adoptive families whose mentally ill children were in residential treatment centers revealed the profound adverse impact of their experiences on the family, as well as the immense needs for changes in practices and policies.

Parents reported intense anguish, pain, chronic sadness, and feeling victimized both by their children and by the systems designed to help them - child welfare, mental health, health care, and education. The majority of the adopted children had been in 3 or more placements and represented private and intercountry adoptions.

Many of the parents reported classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress themselves. Some of their comments were:

- *It's all about keeping her from doing something horrible...It's an awful way to live.*
- *The treatment team would say, 'You know, that kid is screwed up. And the only way a kid gets screwed up is dads and moms...There wasn't any feeling for what we were going through with a kid that troubled.*
- *You're just panicked, and there's just no way out of this. I have no options here. There's no door, there's no window, there's no air to breathe in this situation. You're just stuck, and you know this kid needs help, and nobody will help you.*

Hanna, Boyce, & Mulligan, 2017, pp.203-205

3.12 Therapist's Role with Parents' Feelings

These statements from parents illustrate the isolation, shame, and blame associated with managing children and youth with high needs, many of which are the direct result of early compromised beginnings.

They also reflect the despair and hopelessness experienced by parents when they have not received the right kind of supports to meet their family's needs. When professionals are not providing adoption competent services, children will end up in higher levels of care.

As a therapist, you are in a unique position to shift your therapeutic approach and change the trajectory of these cases. As we have discussed many times throughout this training, there are effective evidence-based practices and tools to help stabilize families and preserve placements while helping children heal from early life adversity.

4. Improving Practice

4.1 Improving Practice

Next, we will explore clinical practices that improve practice and outcomes.

4.2 Parents' Recommendations for Improving Practice

In the Hanna, Boyce, and Mulligan study discussed earlier, parents made recommendations for improving practices.

Most had started seeking help when their children started school, often through their local mental health centers.

They went through multiple trips to the ER and short inpatient stays, prior to seeking residential treatment.

Click each shape to learn what they recommended.

1. More engagement and empowerment in their child's treatment. They wanted to "be seen as members of the treatment team and partners in the provision of services to their child" (p.205).
2. Flexibility in scheduling family therapy and visitation, particularly when they lived quite a distance away.
3. Training to understand their child's mental illness, diagnosis, and trauma. Most parents spent hours searching on the internet for information to help them understand their child.
4. Support groups and group therapy for parents.
5. Therapists with expertise in various therapeutic interventions.
6. Support navigating the systems to access and pay for the appropriate help.
7. Not using visitation as a reward or punishment.
8. Transition planning for discharge and extensive support when a child returns from an out-of-home placement.
9. Improved information sharing and allowing their child's records to follow them.

4.3 Key Tenets of Working with Adoptive or Guardianship Families

As you are matching child and family's needs with effective services, we encourage you to keep in mind the following tenets which, when integrated into your work, will enhance engagement and improve outcomes.

Click each button to learn key tenets of working with adoptive or guardianship families.

1. **Teach Parents What to Expect:** As we have stated many times, parents need to be educated at the earliest possible point to expect ongoing developmental challenges, and revisiting of trauma, loss, and other adoption issues. Therapists and adoption professionals both need to prepare parents to know where to seek help and keep an open door for future contacts.
2. **Identifying Risk Factors:** It is important to identify high-risk children and youth early in the adoption process, and to provide intensive early intervention and seamless support.
3. **Parents' Lack of Protective Factors:** Adoptive parents who lack key protective factors associated with positive adoption adjustment will need early intervention as well.
4. **Accessing Effective Interventions:** Families need to be helped to access effective interventions before negative patterns become entrenched. Therapists can help children and their families both before and after the adoption.
5. **Interventions Across Systems:** Intervention across multiple systems almost always is needed in severe and chronic problem situations.

5. Post-Permanency Services

5.1 Post-Permanency Services

In this last section, we will explore the types of post-permanency services that are available, and how you can help families to access them.

5.2 Types of Post-Adoption and Guardianship Services

It is important for you to become familiar with post-permanency services that are available in your community.

Some states offer services to all adoptive families, while others focus only on children adopted from child welfare. Some states may offer a full continuum of services while other states may offer a limited array of services.

Private adoption agencies may also offer post-adoption services.

The following represents a continuum of services that may be available. Click each service to learn more.

1. **Information and Referral:** A range of programs exist to provide brief assessment of needs and referral for adoptive families. Some also offer advocacy to assist families in getting services that are sometimes difficult to obtain. Some states have adoption or kinship navigator programs that are designed to provide information and help families navigate complicated service systems.
2. **Education and Training:** All parents can benefit from learning more about the impact of loss, trauma, identity, and other adoption issues. They also may need increased understanding of the particular needs of their own children and strategies for addressing these. Organizations may offer some of the following: a lending library with books and DVDs for youth and parents, classes, webinars, and adopted youth or parent conferences. There also are courses available on the Internet. Please refer to the Resources tab for more information.
3. **Advocacy and Service Coordination:** Many families need help in connecting to services and possibly advocacy to obtain a service that is not easily accessed, such as a therapeutic day school or equine therapy.
4. **Support:** Individuals in the extended family of adoption need social support, which, like education, may be provided informally or through formal services. The many different approaches to providing supportive services include support groups, mentor programs, organized social activities for adoptive parents and/or children, retreats and camps, and others. In evaluations of the helpfulness of post-adoption services, families usually rate support groups extremely helpful. These groups are a powerful source of information, social support, and validation for parents and children who may not be connected to other adoptive families.

To search for a support group, you can go to the National Foster Care and Adoption Directory at the link in the Resources tab. AdoptUSKids sponsors an Online Community for families and professionals through many social media sites. Please refer to the Resources tab to check it out.

Let's listen to adoptive parents and guardians describe the benefits of their support group.

[Video Transcript]

MALE-1: Being able to talk with a group of people who understood one hundred percent from the beginning: you didn't have to try to explain the situation because they were in the middle of it too. So you can verbalize whatever you wanted to say, or you could vent your frustrations or your feelings, and they knew exactly where you were coming from because they had been there.

FEMALE-1: And we get to talk about what's bothering us and where we could go from there and how to help each other. Sometimes we need help with everyday things.

FEMALE-2: They know the resources that are out there. They have been there. They can tell you just so much information that you could not get on your own. They have been there before you. They have gone through the school systems. They have gone through the government systems. They know everything. I got there, and I'm like, "These people know so much that we haven't even touched the surface of what's out there."

[END OF VIDEO]

5. **Respite:** Parents of children with significant challenges may need specialized childcare or formal respite services, which are often difficult to find or obtain. In addition to those programs developed specifically for adoptive families, there are services through organizations serving special needs populations.
6. **Search, Reunion, and Mediation:** For many youth, search and reunion becomes an integral part in one's solidification of their identity. Some states offer confidential intermediary services to assist with searches, where parties are amenable. Youth and parents may need adoption competent therapists to help them navigate the complex emotions and challenges around search and reunion.
7. **Residential Treatment:** In some cases, short or longer-term residential services may be necessary for children and youth with severe difficulties that cannot be sufficiently addressed at home. It is essential that parents stay engaged in treatment and connected to their children during the course of residential treatment.
8. **Adoption and Guardianship Preservation:** Specialized post-permanency services have been developed in many states to provide intensive supportive and therapeutic interventions to stabilize adoptive and guardianship families in crisis. These services help families experiencing significant challenges and go beyond weekly counseling sessions. They may include home-based services, 24-hour support, and any of the services we have just discussed.

For more information on the array of services and service providers in your state, you can access a link to the National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support in the Resources tab, which provides a program catalog of services that are being used, or could be adapted, to work with families. You can also find profiles on state resources through their Resource Library.

Video obtained from https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=23q7MakQqqM

6. Conclusion

6.1 Wrapping Up

In this lesson, we have examined the impact of adoption instability on families and the range of post-permanency services to help them.

6.2 Your Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

6.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

6.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

6.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have now completed Matching Child and Family Needs After Permanency with Effective Services.

In the next lesson, we will explore strategies for working collaboratively with multiple systems, particularly when serving families with intensive needs.