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Adoption Disruption

Over the years, there have been widespread changes in the policies, practices, and attitudes toward foster child adoption in the United States. One of the more noticeable changes in recent years has been in the volume of adoptions. According to federal estimates, the number of adoptions of children in public out-of-home care between 1983 and 1995 remained quite flat, between 17,000 and 20,000 (Maza 2000). Since then, the numbers have increased considerably in response to various federal legislative initiatives. For example, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 mandated permanency planning for all children in state custody. Courts and agencies were directed to pursue the goal of adoption for children who were unlikely to return to their birth families. The legislation also required states to establish an adoption subsidy program and provided federal funds to be used as part of the states' subsidies for children adopted from foster care. The most recent rise in adoptions has been in response to the Adoption Incentive program (also known as the Adoption Bonus program) of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), which provided both policy and fiscal incentives to states for increasing the number of adoptions (U.S. General Accounting Office 2003). It was the first outcome-oriented incentive program (Maza 2000), as it authorized payments to states for increasing the number of children adopted from public out-of-home care. This program was enhanced some years later by passage of the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893 2008). In 2010 for example, The Department of Health and Human Services awarded $39 million to 38 states and Puerto Rico (HHS 2010) for

increasing the number of adoptions. Various public outreach programs, such as AdoptUSKids, were also created to spur adoptions (Pertman, 2011). Thus by FY1998, roughly 36,000 adoptions had taken place (Maza 2000), a FY2002 report (Children's Bureau 2002) indicated 53,000 adoptions, and a FY 2010 report of finalized adoptions in FY 2009 (Children's Bureau 2009) estimated that nearly 57,500 children were adopted from the public child welfare system nationwide.

The national increase in foster care adoptions was accompanied by a rise in professional concerns that more adoptive placements would disrupt and more adoptions would fail. Before discussing the professional concerns, it is necessary to clarify these two situations. In the adoption literature, the term "disruption" has commonly referred to the removal of a child from an adoptive placement before the adoption has been legalized (Barth & Berry 1988; Festinger 1986, 1990). Situations in which a child has been returned to the custody of the child welfare system following legal adoption has been termed "dissolution," a term that was coined early on by professionals in the adoption field (Donley 1978) and continues to be used officially (The Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011).

The concerns about adoption disruption and dissolution are not new. Years ago, they were fueled by the belief that disruptions and dissolutions were apt to increase dramatically as caseworkers sought adoptive homes for children who earlier had been considered unadoptable. More recently, the concerns have been intensified as a result of the focus on increasing adoptions and on speeding the adoption process. In fact, some observers in the past have suggested that efforts to promote adoptions might lead to more adoptions that end (Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, & Carson 1988; Coakley & Berrick 2008). It has been noted that part of the concern has been based on an assumption that increases in adoptive placements and adoption would be a

function of speedy and inadequate home selection (Barth & Miller 2000). Worries have also been kindled by guesses and rumors about high rates of disruption. Such concerns are not surprising, because disruptions are painful for all involved—the children, the adoptive parents, and the caseworkers.

Rumors and guesses sometimes fill the void when there is a dearth of knowledge. In this regard, however, there is quite a sizable empirical literature on rates of disruption, showing that it is not such a frequent occurrence. In contrast, very little is known about the frequency of dissolution following legal adoption because it is so difficult to obtain accurate data. The limited data that are available show dissolution to be a rather rare event (Festinger 2002; Bruning 2007).

In this chapter, I focus on disruption. I begin with a review of available research on rates of adoption disruption, followed by a summary of child, family, agency, and other factors related to disruption and a discussion of practice implications. Parts of this review rely heavily on a previous article (Festinger 1990) that dealt with both disruption rates and correlates.

Rates of Adoption Disruption

Past reports on rates of disruption are quite scattered. Until the early 1970s, adoption disruption was rarely mentioned, probably because the phenomenon occurred so infrequently. For instance, Kadushin (1980) cites nine studies, including one of his own (Kadushin & Seidl 1971), covering the period up to 1970. These studies were mainly concerned with children who were white, very young, and without known handicaps at placement. Although there were minor variations among the studies, of the more than 34,000 adoptive placements of children that were monitored, only 1.9% disrupted.

More recent studies have increasingly focused on or included children who were older, from minority groups, or handicapped. These studies have reported higher rates of disruption.

For example, Kadushin (U.S. Congress 1975) cites figures from a North Carolina agency that showed a disruption rate of 8% among 410 placements of children with special needs who were placed between 1967 and 1974. Statistics from California public agencies noted a disruption rate of 7.6% in 1973, a considerable increase over the 2.7% reported by the same agencies in 1970. The increase apparently reflected "the increasing number of older children being placed" (Bass 1975:115). A Michigan agency that specialized in the placement of children with special needs (Unger, Dwarshuis, & Johnson 1977) reported that of 199 children placed from 1968 through 1976, the rate of disruption was 10.6%. A Canadian report (Cohen 1981) cited an increase in annual adoption disruptions in Ontario from 4% to 7% between 1971 and 1978, noting that disruptions occurred with greater frequency among private and kin placements than in agency placements. Disruption figures were also reported by the evaluators of an effort to place 115 children with special needs from a number of New York State counties. Of the 41 adoptive placements between 1975 and 1977, 15% had disrupted by the time data collection ended in 1977 (Welfare Research1978).

Developmentally disabled children placed for adoption during a 12-month period between 1978 and 1979 were the subject of a report of a mail survey of agencies in the United States and Canada (Coyne & Brown 1985). The authors reported descriptive data on 693 children, over half of preschool age, placed in adoptive homes by 292 agencies. An overall disruption rate of 8.7% was reported, which was a conservative estimate as it did not include information from workers who were no longer with an agency. Soon thereafter, a report from Connecticut (Fein, Davies, & Knight 1979) of a program serving emotionally disturbed children of "latency age" reported disruptions of placements for four of the 13 children placed in adoptive homes. At roughly the same time in Ohio, a report by Roberts (1980) of a demonstration project designed to

expand adoption services to children with special needs noted a 13.6% rate of disruption for the 59 children placed. A small study of children from a group care setting in North Carolina (Borgman 1981) reported that nine out of 19 initial adoptive placements did not hold.

In 1982, Lahti reported the results of a follow-up of cases from a demonstration project in Oregon. Of 107 children in adoptive placements with new or former foster parents, the placements of 5.6% had disrupted, with no differences apparent between these two sets of foster parents. Furthermore, no differences in rates of disruption were noted among cases assigned to workers who had been specially trained to work intensively with families and a comparison group receiving regular casework services.

Another agency study (Kagan & Reid 1986) of adoptive placements between 1974 and 1982 of 78 older youths with severe emotional and learning problems noted that roughly 53% had earlier been in at least one adoptive placement that disrupted. Unfortunately, such calculations, based on prior disruptions, are not comparable to other reports on rates. Roughly at the same time, Tremitiere (1984) distributed questionnaires to 116 agencies in Pennsylvania and 40 agencies serving children with special needs located outside that state. Based on usable responses received from 45 agencies, Tremetiere reports on the range of disruption proportions within various age groupings of children over a 5-year period. My calculations from her tables show that disruptions of placements among the youngest children (those under 6) were fairly level between 1979 (1.4%) and 1982–1983 (1.6%). For older children (those who were 6 to 18), however, the proportion of disruptions rose from 7.2% in 1979 to roughly 12% in 1982–1983. Furthermore, a report from a New Jersey agency that specialized in adoptive placements of children with special needs showed that of 309 children, the adoptive placements of 21.4% had disrupted by the end of the data collection period in 1981 (Boyne, Denby, Kettenring, & Wheeler

1984).

Argent (1984) reported on the work of Parents for Children, a British agency dedicated to the adoptive placement of children with special needs. Between late 1976 and early 1983, the agency placed 75 children into 56 families. By May 1983, the placements of 14 children (18.7%) had disrupted. A few years later, Partridge, Hornby, and McDonald (1986) presented data on 235 placements of 212 children from six agencies in four northeastern states. Most of the children were white, nearly 8 years old on average at the time of adoptive placement, and almost all were considered to have special needs. Based on information about disruptions or dissolutions from 1982–1984, the investigators arrived at a disruption rate of 8.6%.

Another report highlighted the problems of estimating rates of disruption and presented figures from five state agencies (Benton, Kaye, & Tipton 1985). In some instances, disruption rates were based on the ratio of disruptions (of placements that could have begun in prior years) to new placements in a given year, whereas in others, they were based on a cross-sectional sample of cases in adoptive home placements. In three state agencies, current disruptions were counted, whereas in two states, prior histories of disruptions of children in current adoptive placements were used. Data obtained from this mixture of approaches showed disruption rates for 1984–1985 ranging from 6.9% to 20%. In only one of the states, Virginia, was a sample tracked over time. This consisted of 53 children who were placed in adoptive homes in 1983. It is reported that 18 to 24 months later, by June 1985, 19% of these had one or more disruptions. Another study around this time (Groze 1986), based on data from a southwestern agency, reported a 14.9% rate of disruption among 91 cases examined.

A New York City study (Festinger 1986) used a longitudinal approach, following more than 900 children in adoptive placements in March 1983; the children were ages 6 or older at the

time of those placements. A large majority was designated black or Latino. During the first year, roughly 8.2% of all adoptive placements disrupted. There was a relatively steady trickle of disruptions during the second and third years of adoptive placement, so that the overall rate was estimated to fall between 12% and 14%. Age was a factor here, as the estimated rate of disruption for those who were 11 or older was roughly between 16% and 19%, whereas for those aged 6 to 10, the rate was a lower 8% to 11%.

Soon thereafter, a California study (Barth & Berry 1988; Barth et al. 1988) reported on 926 children age 3 or older in adoptive placements between 1980 and mid-1984. Intake placement forms filed with the state were used to obtain data about adoptive placements, supplemented by information on case outcomes from adoption workers in 13 counties. In addition, the investigators conducted a variety of interviews with a smaller subgroup of families. Most of the 926 children were white, placed with foster parents, placed alone rather than with siblings, and ranged in age from 3 to 17.9 years at the time of their adoptive placement. By 1986, roughly 10% of placements had disrupted, with a higher proportion (18.8%) of placements from 1980 than for subsequent placement years. Thus for placements of 1982, a lower rate (9.2%) had disrupted by 1986, this proportion dropping to 7.4% among placements of 1984. A related report (Berry & Barth 1990) focused on 99 adolescents aged 12 to 17 from the larger California study just mentioned. Among these teenagers, the rate of disruption was reported to be 24.2%, with lower rates among Latino (10%) and black adolescents (14%) than among whites (23%), who constituted most of the sample.

A few years later, McDonald, Lieberman, Partridge, and Hornby (1991) reported on a study of 212 children representing 235 placements from six agencies between January 1982 and July 1984 (see also Partridge et al. 1986). Most were children with special needs, aged 3 and

older, and white. Data were collected using content analyses of case records, augmented by agency statistics and interviews with agency administrators. All disruptions and dissolutions combined were compared to a randomly selected 25% sample of placements initiated between January 1982 and July 1984. The 212 children consisted of 54 whose placement had disrupted and 158 whose placements had not. Disruptions of greater than 20% are reported. But because the comparison group of 158 was based on a 25% sample, the overall rate of disruption for 686 children is, according to my calculations, roughly 8% (as also reported in the Partridge et al. 1986 report) rather than the much larger percentage reported in the 1991 published article.

The subject of disruption has been of interest in the United Kingdom as well. Thus a report from a city in the northeast of England (Holloway 1997) describes a retrospective 5-year cohort study of 129 children placed for adoption between January 1986 and December 1990. Almost all (95.3%) were aged 6 or younger at adoptive placement. In fact, more than half were under age 1 at the time. It is therefore not too surprising that only 2% of these placements disrupted. In stark contrast, a 1998 report from the United States (Pinderhughes 1998) focused on families who adopted 53 children older than 5 through four agencies in New England and Ohio in the mid-1980s. The children were on average 10.8 years of age at adoptive placement. The placements of 13 children (24.5%) disrupted.

In an attempt to document the rate of disruption across all segments of an adoptive population, Goerge, Howard, Yu, and Radomsky (1997) presented data from a multivariate, longitudinal analysis of children entering care in Illinois between 1976 and 1994. Among a total 4,840 cases of adoptive placement, 583 (12.1%) disrupted. Because this figure included some placements made near the end of data collection that might disrupt in time, a rate of 13.4% for placements prior to 1987 was considered more accurate, as it eliminated the problem of right-

censored data. It is of interest that the authors report a decline in the disruption rate following the 1980 passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act to an average 9.9% between 1981 and 1987, a time when the rate of adoption was gradually increasing.

Finally, a recent study addressing the rate of disruption used administrative data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan 2006). The investigators report on the outcomes of 15,947 children placed into their first adoptive homes between 1995-2000. By the end of data collection in 2003 a 9% rate of disruption was found. At that time 4% of children were still in care, hence the final rate was probably somewhat higher. The investigators report an interesting and to some a surprising finding, namely a decrease in the rate of disruption in the three years after 1997, the post ASFA period, at a time when the number of children placed for adoption increased (Smith et al. 2006, p.33).

Before leaving the discussion of rates, a comment on adoptive or legal guardianship placements with kin is in order. Although kinship foster care placements during the first 3 years of care have been shown to be more stable than non-kin foster placements (Testa 2001), there is a dearth of data on disruption following adoptive placements among kin not traveling the legal guardianship route (Freundlich & Wright 2003). Although one study of kinship placements (Terling-Watt 2001) reported a rather high disruption rate among 875 kinship placements in Texas (29% in the first 6 months of placement), it is not clear whether these were adoptive placements; in addition, the definition of disruption used was very broad and therefore not comparable to other studies reported here. Studies of disruption cited earlier may have included, but not reported on, kinship placements. A recent multivariate analysis noted a decreased likelihood of disruption among kin adoptive placements when compared to non-kin placements (Smith et al. 2006). Most likely, kinship adoptive placement disruption is a rare phenomenon, as

the placement would have deteriorated earlier and not become an adoptive (or guardianship) placement to begin with.

The variety of approaches used in these reports and studies attests to the difficulty faced when attempting to arrive at an accurate estimate of the rate of disruption. Some researchers focused on new adoptive placements, whereas others used all children already in an adoptive placement at a particular point in time (thus losing their history), following the children until an outcome was known. Most reports focused only on disruptions, but a few included dissolutions, which are impossible to disentangle. Some did not differentiate between single child and group sibling placements, although the inclusion of the latter can affect the rates reported and can result in problems of independence with respect to some data, such as the characteristics of the adoptive parents. Finally, with the exception of the Goerge, et al. (1997) and Smith, et al. (2006) studies, which used administrative data to track cases forward over time, the studies have used shorter follow-up periods, thus probably missing some cases because of the right-censoring problem.

Nevertheless, what can one say about all of these results? For one, the figures generally show that the proportion of disruptions has increased since the 1970s. This trend appears to hold regardless of problems of methodology and precision and probable variations in the definitions used. The general rise in disruption rates is not terribly surprising, as adoptive homes were increasingly sought for older children and for those with other special needs (e.g., sibling groups; children with physical, educational, and/or emotional handicaps). It is also clear that disruption rates are not uniform. This must be kept in mind as one thinks about rates: a global rate is really a composite of many rates that may differ depending on which particular group or subgroup is examined. Furthermore, the focus on disruption, although dramatic, distorts the picture. When

evaluating levels of disruption, it is best not to think of such rates in isolation, but to view them in conjunction with completed adoptions. Worries and rumors about disruption rates appear to have exaggerated the extent of the problem. It is indeed impressive that the rates reported since the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, despite some variations here and there, appear to show a downward trend. Excluding studies that singled out small groups of older children, disruption rates have mostly varied from about 9% to 15%, although a recent summary mentions a range of "about 6% to 11%" (Coakley & Berrick 2008, p. 102). Among older children, the reported rate has reached roughly 25%. Such rates hardly need to arouse astonishment, or be viewed in a negative light. In the long run, the vast majority of children will have been adopted.

Correlates of Adoption Disruption

A focus on rates alone is not much use for practitioners, who, when working with a child and an adoptive family, are faced with numerous factors describing the child and his or her history, the adoptive family, and the services available, to mention a few. So let us turn to factors that have been reported as associated with adoptive disruption, when these have been compared to adoptions. Many of the studies already mentioned, in addition to some others, generated a plethora of factors, too many to report on here. Because many studies did not utilize multivariate analyses, it is often not clear which factors are the strongest predictors of disruption. So I use a bit of poetic license to present some highlights in a summary that attempts to capture the flavor of what has been reported, while omitting many of the details. A cautionary note is in order, as various problems are overlooked, such as differences in the method of sampling and in the data gathering methods, the nature and wording of questions that may have been asked of workers and/or families, the depth of analyses, and even in the working definition of disruption. The reader also needs to be aware that different studies addressed different factors. Therefore, when a

particular factor is identified as a correlate of disruption in four studies, it is a mistake to assume that all the other studies also examined that factor.

Children and Their Placement History

Most demographic characteristics of the children have no bearing on the outcome of adoptive placements. In most studies, the gender of the children made no difference. Among a few studies that showed gender to be a factor (Barth et al. 1988; Barth & Berry 1988; Boneh 1979; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner 1988; Schmidt 1986), males were overrepresented among disruptions. The Smith et al. (2006) study showed white children at a lower risk of disruption when compared to African American children. With the exception of that study, the race of children was rarely a factor, as was the case for religion.

In contrast, more than a dozen studies have shown age to be a consistent predictor of disruption (e.g., Barth & Berry 1988; Benton et al. 1985; Festinger 1986; Goerge et al. 1997; Groze 1986; Hudspeth 2008; MacDonald 1991; Smith et al. 2006). Whether one examines age at entry into foster care, age when the children became legally free for adoption, or age at the time of the adoptive placement, children whose placements disrupted were older than those who were adopted. In addition, a few researchers have reported that the disruption group took longer to become legally free than those whose placements held (Boneh 1979; Partridge 1986), whereas others reported no time lag differential (Boyne et al. 1984; Festinger 1986). The total length of time in foster care prior to the adoptive placement has also yielded mixed results as a predictor of disruption. Some investigators have found that this time was longer for those whose placements eventually disrupted than for the adoptees (Boneh 1979; Partridge 1986), whereas other investigators either have found no such connection (Festinger 1986; Groze 1996; Smith & Howard 1991) or indicate that the time was shorter (Berry & Barth 1990; Goerge et al. 1997;

Smith et al. 2006; Zwimpfer 1983).

Several investigators have focused on the children's histories prior to their adoptive placements, noting that the histories of those whose placements disrupted showed a higher incidence of various kinds of abuse or neglect compared to children whose placements held (Nalavany, Ryan, Howard, & Smith, 2008; Partridge 1986; Schmidt 1986), or were more likely to show a history of sexual acting out (Smith & Howard 1991) or of sexual abuse (Smith & Howard 1994). In addition, a prior removal from a foster home due to inadequate parenting has been found to be a factor in disruption (Boneh 1979).

The average number of placements in foster homes and group settings also has been a fairly consistent predictor of disruption. These averages have been considerably higher for disruption than for adoption outcomes (Boneh 1979; Festinger 1986; McDonald et al. 1991; Schmidt 1986), although some researchers have reported no differences (Groze, 1986; Smith & Howard, 1991). Previous disruptions of adoptive placements have also been cited (Barth & Berry 1988; Barth et al. 1988; Boyne 1984; Festinger 1986; Partridge 1986). The nature of past placements also differed for the two outcomes. More children whose placements eventually disrupted had at some point resided in a group facility (Boneh 1979; Festinger 1986; Pinderhughes 1998), when compared to the adoptees. However, Smith et al. (2006) report a lower risk of disruption for youth who had spent some time in a residential or group home.

Some children were placed together with their siblings, whereas others were placed singly. Study findings as to whether this was a factor connected to the outcome are exceedingly mixed: three studies have found that placements with siblings were overrepresented among disruption outcomes (Benton et al. 1985; Boneh 1979; Kadushin & Seidl 1971); three studies have indicated that such placements were less likely to disrupt (Festinger 1986; Rosenthal et al. 1988;

Schmidt 1986); and four studies and one research review have found no difference in the outcome (Barth et al. 1988; Boyne et al. 1984; Groze 1986; Hegar 2005; Smith & Howard 1991). Furthermore, a recent multivariate analysis has shown small sibling groups at greater risk for disruption than large sibling groups (Smith et al. 2006). Such a mixture of results suggests that other factors related to sibling placements were at work. For instance, it may be important to examine sibling placements in relation to the household composition as a whole.

In sum, compared to children who were adopted, those whose placements disrupted were older at all stages of the process. They had more placements of all sorts, had been placed in more families, and their longest stay there was more protracted. Furthermore, they were more apt to have had a previous adoptive placement. Prior histories of care were more problematic. Their more checkered placement history suggests that these children exhibited more problems early on or developed them during their stay in care. They entered into an adoptive relationship in the wake of a more varied placement history. Because that history included a longer family placement, one can imagine past disappointments when these relationships ended and perhaps greater wariness about subsequent placements. Because they were older, they brought with them a history of past experiences. It is plausible to assume that they were therefore less adaptable and had greater difficulties adapting to new situations in foster care. In short, they were more difficult to manage. One can speculate that the older children may have been faced with a conflict between their growing need for independence in conjunction with a non-idealization of parents and the attachment tasks inherent in adoption. These difficulties could have been exacerbated if adoptive parents lacked sufficient skills and the flexibility required to bend with and be responsive to the ebb and flow of emotions of older children. It is also quite possible that because of their older age, more of these children had developed firmer psychological links to

their families of origin and may even have viewed adoption as an act of disloyalty. All these elements combined are apt to have interfered with their assimilation into their adoptive families.

<B>Adoptive Parents

The demographic characteristics of the adoptive parents—their age, race, education, and income—had either no bearing on or mixed associations with the outcome of adoptive placements. For instance, several studies showed higher education to be related to disruption (Barth et al. 1988; Rosenthal et al. 1988), whereas more than seven studies showed education not to be a factor. The employment outside the home of either or both adoptive parents has also had no bearing on the outcome (Benton et al. 1985; Festinger 1986), although a father's lower occupational status has been linked to disruption (Westhues & Cohen 1990).

The couple or single status of the adoptive parents is unrelated to the outcome, with the exception of one study's finding that single parents were overrepresented among disruptions (McDonald et al. 1991; Partridge et al. 1986). On the other hand, one review reports fewer disruptions among older children suffering attachment disorders who were adoptively placed with single parents (Burrell Cowan 2004). Factors such as length of marriage and prior divorce, mentioned in a few studies, have either had mixed results or had no bearing on outcome. Social worker ratings of parental functioning and parenting skills have also been reported as strongly associated with intact, rather than disrupted, placements (Rosenthal et al. 1988). Unfortunately, the raters knew the outcome, which no doubt influenced these ratings.

The background of adoptive parents has received little attention. Two studies that examined this issue (Rosenthal et al. 1988; Schmidt 1986) found that parents in the disruption group came from families with fewer or no children.

More than six studies have examined whether the adoptive families were foster parents

with whom the children had been living for some time, or were new families. It is hardly surprising that almost all of these report that among placements that disrupted, a larger proportion of the children were with new families rather than with foster families (e.g., Coyne & Brown 1985; Rosenthal et al. 1988; Schmidt 1986; Smith & Howard 1991). There has been very limited investigation of adoptive placements with relatives. One study that included a moderate number of such homes found that these placements were less likely to disrupt (Festinger 1986). A recent multivariate study also reported a decreased likelihood of disruption among kinship adoptive placements (Smith et al. 2006).

A few investigators have also examined parental preferences about the characteristics of children they want to adopt. Disruptions were more likely when adoptive parents stated requests, for instance on a child's age, were not met (Boneh 1979; Schmidt 1986), or when a child was "considerably different from what parents had expected" (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes 2002, p. 297). Among placements that disrupted when compared to those that did not, a larger proportion of adoptive parents were less flexible in their preferences or had a greater number of preferences. Clearly, such pickiness at the start did not augur well in the long run.

Composition of the Home

Questions concerning a possible effect of the presence of biological children on disruption have generated considerable interest; hence, a number of investigators have examined this issue with mixed results. For instance, four studies found no connection to outcome (Barth & Berry 1988; Boyne et al. 1984; Festinger 1986; Zwimpfer 1983); one study (Groze 1986) found the presence of other children in the home to be associated with reduced risk of disuption; whereas two found that disruption was more likely if biological children resided in the adoptive home (Boneh 1979; Kadushin & Seidl 1971). Kadushin and Seidl (1971) suggested, however, that this result was

probably confounded. That is, adoptive parents with biological children were older and were in turn offered older children for adoption; the older age of the placed children was the factor that was linked to disruption. Using a somewhat different measure, Pinderhughes (1998) noted that adoption disruption was more likely among smaller families.

A number of other factors, such as the ages of other children, their gender, and the racial composition of the home, has also been examined. For instance, one study found that the difference in age between the children in the home was unrelated to outcome, but the age distribution was. Sample children who were in the middle position, flanked by both older and younger children who were not biological siblings of the sample children, were found to be more vulnerable to adoption disruption than were those who occupied the oldest or youngest position (Festinger 1986). However, another study noted that when the adoptive child assumed the position of eldest, disruption was more likely (Boneh 1979). Finally, the gender of other children in the home and the racial composition of the adoptive home have been investigated and found to be unconnected to the outcome (Festinger 1986).

In sum, most aspects of these adoptive households—the number of other children and their ages, sex, and race—were not linked to outcome. Here and there, elements distinguished between disruptions and adoptions. These are isolated findings, warranting replication. Overall, one is impressed by the limited significance of household composition in the outcome of adoptive placements.

Children's Problems

In more than 10 studies, the number and severity of a child's problems at the time of the adoptive placement has been a consistent predictor of disruption (e.g., Benton et al. 1985; McDonald et al. 1991; Rosenthal et al. 1988; Smith & Howard 1991; Smith et al. 2006). Usually these factors

consist of one or a combination of emotional, cognitive, or physical problems. Smith and Howard (1991) examined rosters of potential behavioral and emotional problems following the adoptive placement and highlighted the prevalence of sexual acting out, vandalism, defiance, stealing, and lying as prevalent among the disrupted group. Other investigators have noted that although various problems were linked to disruption, mental retardation (Boyne et al. 1984) and physical and/or intellectual handicaps were not (Benton et al. 1985; Smith & Howard 1991). The existence of specific problem behaviors prior to the adoptive placement has also been examined. Thus, in contrast to non-disruptions, a larger proportion of those whose placements disrupted exhibited such behaviors as serious eating problems, sexual promiscuity, stealing, suicidal behavior, fire setting, wetting or soiling, vandalism, or physical aggression toward others (Partridge et al. 1986). A more recent study (Smith & Howard 1991), however, found no such differences prior to adoptive placement, with the exception of sexual acting out, which was seen more frequently among children whose placement eventually disrupted. Finally, adoptive parents' capacity to cope with the problems presented by the children has been examined. It is no surprise that disruption outcomes were more frequently linked to lower ratings of the parents' capacity than was the case among adoptions (Festinger 1986; Schmidt 1986).

Contact with Biological Parents and Others

That a child may have unresolved feelings about separation from past biological family members has been suggested as an important element in his or her ability to accept and attach to an adoptive family. Festinger (1986) approached this issue by collecting information about the timing of each child's last contact with biological parents. The recency of their contacts was immaterial to the outcome. However, children whose placements disrupted were older at the last contact than those who were adopted. This finding was in line with their older age at all stages

of the process and suggested that more of those children whose placements disrupted had developed firmer psychological links to their families of origin than was true of youngsters who were adopted. Another study (Smith & Howard 1991) used case record information to rate attachment to birth parents, finding that although both adoption and disruption groups had weak attachments to birth parents, the placements of those who were rated strongly attached to their birth mothers were more likely to disrupt.

Motivation and Placement Risk

It comes as no surprise that lower ratings of the strength of parents' motivation to adopt, or or of children to be adopted, were linked to disruption (Festinger 1986). Furthermore, couples who shared an equal commitment to the adoption were less likely to experience a disruption (Partridge et al. 1986), as was the case among families where fathers were affectively involved and played a sustaining role (Westhues & Cohen 1990).

A larger proportion of disruptions were thought to be risky situations at the time of the adoptive placement, compared to adoptions. The ratings of motivation and risk, like some other ratings reported earlier, were undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the ratings relied to some extent on inferences made after the outcome was known. Therefore the differences just discussed are probably exaggerated. In view of this likely distortion, it is noteworthy that in one study, roughly 42% of the children with disruption outcomes (Festinger 1986), and in another study more than 60% with that outcome (Zwimpfer 1983), were in placements that were not considered particularly risky. Apparently there were some surprises when trouble arose. In fact, one study reported that for nearly one-half of the children whose placements disrupted, signals of trouble were never given or recognized, or were first noted only 4 or more months after the adoptive placement (Festinger 1986). Another study indicated that in 58% of cases of disruption,

the worker did not learn of the problems until 2 months or less before the actual disruption (Partridge et al. 1986). Through a review of the records, Zwimpfer attempted to provide evidence of a "suspected tendency by social workers to ignore warning signals" and noted that less than 20% of cases of disruption "attracted any negative observations at all by the social workers during the supervision period" (1983, p. 172). The tendency not to recognize signs of trouble in adoptive placements has, in the past, been discussed by others as well (Brown 1963; Gochros 1967).

What was going on? Perhaps home visits were cursory because staff had too many other responsibilities. Perhaps signs of problems were overlooked because the implications of recognizing that one may have made a mistake are upsetting (Brown 1963). However, there may be an alternative interpretation. Let us look at the larger picture. Generally, the children whose placements disrupted were older and had been in foster care for some time; most were thought to exhibit problems of one sort or another. Finding new families or encouraging foster families to adopt often could take considerable effort. As has been stated by Meezan and Shireman (1982), this no doubt sometimes involved persuasion of people who were reluctant to take such a serious step, and at times led workers to oversell a child (Kadushin 1980). In recent years, pressures for the timely achievement of adoption goals possibly prompted workers to pressure people to avoid delays in making decisions. In the process, workers probably also persuaded themselves about the strengths of these placements. Thus it is plausible that once the goal of an adoptive placement was achieved, workers overvalued the families and exaggerated the families' desires and abilities to cope. Risks may have been inadequately assessed and signals of trouble not spotted or belatedly recognized. This is not to say that all disruptions could have been avoided, but to suggest that a more open and conscious recognition of practices that include persuasion,

and the attendant effects of such practices on workers themselves could be beneficial. Such recognition would help workers to anticipate, and therefore increase their accuracy in assessing the weaknesses or potential areas of risk in many situations at an early stage. This greater accuracy could in turn lead workers to explore ways to counteract forces that contribute to the deterioration of placements.

Service Characteristics

Sometimes children were adoptively placed with families whose homes had been studied and approved by a different agency. This circumstance occurred more often among placements that disrupted than among adoptions (Boneh 1979; Festinger 1986; Partridge et al. 1986). It would be incorrect to conclude that reliance on adoption studies completed by others is risky, because in most such instances, the children were placed with new families rather than with former foster families, and placements with new families were more apt to disrupt for reasons other than who had studied and approved the home.

Time spent in preparing the child for the adoptive placement has been found to be unrelated to the eventual outcome (Boneh 1979). Other researchers have shown that preplacement meetings between the child or foster family and the adoptive parents were unrelated to the outcome (Boyne et al. 1984; Festinger 1986). Yet others have reported that group sessions with the current caregiver, once referred to as "the goodbye blessing," prior to the adoptive placement, either reduced the likelihood of disruption (Partridge et al. 1986) or had no bearing on outcome (Schmidt 1986).

Although one study noted that the number of workers carrying a case was not associated with outcome (Smith & Howard 1991), staff discontinuities of a particular sort have been linked to disruption (Festinger 1986). That is, staffing patterns in which the same workers did not

simultaneously prepare both a child and an adoptive family were disproportionately in evidence among placements that disrupted. Apparently, when different workers had responsibility for preparing children and their families, the risk of disruption increased, perhaps because disparate information was communicated to the child and family. Furthermore, situations in which the last worker who prepared the child did not then supervise the adoptive home were also more frequently seen among disruption than adoption outcomes. When preparation and supervision were carried out by different staff members, the child was not only faced by a new family but also by a new worker. It is also possible that the relationship between foster care and adoption staff members may sometimes have been strained (Donley 1978), and this strain played a role in the clarity of what was communicated. All these things could have hindered a smooth transition into an adoptive placement.

During the period of supervision that followed the adoptive placement, worker contacts with adoptive families and children were, on the whole, more frequent for placements that disrupted than for those resulting in adoption (Festinger 1986; Partridge et al. 1986; Smith & Howard 1991). Worker time with the families and children, referrals for counseling and support groups, and the use of respite care, clearly increased somewhat in response to serious problems in these placements.

It is interesting that the training of staff has been rarely studied. One recent report, however, notes that children placed in adoptive homes by caseworkers with more experience had a lower risk of disruption (Smith et al. 2006) than those placed by caseworkers with less experience.

Disruption Circumstances

Studies have reported on lengthy rosters of reasons given by workers for disruption, reflecting

the complex nature of family-child interactions, as well as numerous, sometimes idiosyncratic, situational elements that were at play (Benton et al. 1985; Festinger 1986; Kadushin & Seidl 1971; Partridge et al. 1986; Smith & Howard 1991). In view of the variations in the categories used to classify these reasons, and variations across studies in the meaning of each category, I can only attempt a very crude summary. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that the largest group of reasons for disruption concerned the families' inabilities or reduced willingness to cope with the children's problems, demands, and behaviors, combined with unrealistic parental expectations. Various attachment difficulties also have been mentioned. Reasons related to the marital relationship or situational factors, such as illness of parents or financial stress, are much less frequently cited. Although interviews with adoptive parents were conducted by few investigators, when adoptive parents were interviewed (Barth & Berry1988; Benton et al.1985; Partridge et al 1986), many differences between their perceptions and the percepstions of their workers emerged. For instance, with respect to the reasons for disruption, Benton et al. (1985) have noted that whereas workers emphasized a child's behavior, parents either cited their lack of preparation for or knowledge of a child's problems or felt they were misinformed about a child's prognosis. Furthermore, whereas workers spoke of a child's not meeting parental expectations or failing to bond to the parent, parents emphasized a child's not wishing to be adopted or spoke of a child's failure to bond to other siblings.

Some Thoughts about Correlates

It is difficult to arrive at a neat summary statement about factors that predict disruption because the picture is so complex, involving the children and their histories, the adoptive families and their circumstances, and service factors. Factors in all of these areas have been found to distinguish between placements that did and did not disrupt. Such a plethora of findings is partly

a function of the limitations of univariate analyses among factors in many studies. Many of these factors were probably correlated, and their number would have been reduced by using multivariate approaches. Findings were also often quite contradictory. This was apt to be in part a function of differences among samples and methodologies, but it also leads one to question whether the group of disrupted placements is actually composed of several subgroups that require separate analyses for clarity in prediction. For instance, there would be merit in separating the analyses of foster parent adoptive placements and new (sometimes called "legal risk" or "stranger") placements. The former, for example, has consistently been shown to have lower rates of disruption, most likely because the child and family have in many instances been together for some time. If problems in these placements arose, the placements would have "disrupted" before they became adoptive, and thus were not part of an adoption disruption group. The common prediction that foster parent placements are less likely to disrupt is in a sense an artifact of a select group of placement "remainers" that did not experience a prior replacement. But this conclusion, as Barth and Berry (1988) have also suggested, requires further study.

The other two factors that have most commonly predicted disruption are the older age of the child at adoptive placement (or at entry into foster care or legal freeing) and the psychological and behavior problems exhibited by the child. As already mentioned, older children bring a longer history of past experiences, possibly including a greater number of prior placements and more families, stronger psychological links to birth families, greater wariness about entering into new relationships, and perhaps less adaptability with respect to new family constellations and situations. The problems that some of these children exhibited were more difficult for families to manage and presented the adoptive families with major challenges to their patience and skills.

Interviews with adoptive parents following disruption (Barth & Berr 1988; Schmidt, Rosenthal, & Bombeck 1988; Valentine, Conway, & Randolph 1987), although based on small samples of volunteers, provide some clues about their disappointments, sense of failure, guilt and sorrow, and perspective on what they felt went awry. Important themes concerned the attachment problems of the children and the parents' expectations for a less difficult child, a difference between what parents had imagined and the reality. Other themes concerned such things as children's difficulty "letting go" of birth families and gaps in information about the child's background. Parents felt the information about the child was neither accurate nor complete, that they were given a sales pitch, and that they felt ill-prepared to handle the problems presented by the youths placed in their homes. Some felt the children were not ready to be adopted. Parents also spoke of little support from agencies following the placements.

Practice Implications

These studies point directly to the importance of extensive and accurate preparation of all parties—the children and the prospective adoptive parents—and the parents' recognition that children adopted when older have greater adjustment difficulties than do infants (Sharma, McGue, & Benson 1996). Prospective parents for older children may require help in moving beyond such recognition to an acceptance of that likely reality. Furthermore, prospective parents need to be given as much accurate information as possible about the children and their backgrounds to avoid being enticed into stretching beyond their comfort level with regard to the kind of child they had in mind (Nelson 1985).

At the same time, families may need help in altering idealistic notions that their love and acceptance are sufficient to overcome the children's sense of deprivation and loss. This is especially important because such beliefs can arouse considerable guilt if children begin to

exhibit emotional and/or behavior problems. In this regard, adoptive parents can be helped to recognize that many children come from high-risk backgrounds that include genetic vulnerabilities as well as adverse past environmental experiences (Cadoret 1990; Erich & Leung 2002; Nalavany et al. 2008; Rutter 2000). Individually or in combination, these vulnerabilities are likely to have a bearing on the child's psychological makeup. However, adoptive parents should also be told that studies show there is much individual variation in children's responses to such past conditions, possibly due to various protective influences, including factors related to resilience.

Much has been written about the elements of thorough pre- and post-placement preparation, indicating that various supports may be needed at different points in time (Barth & Berry 1988; Berry 1997; Groza & Rosenberg 2001; Laws 2001; Smith & Howard 1999). Unfortunately, all these recommendations have been set forth amid an absence of any evaluation of their effectiveness. For the child, the importance of including his/her voice in the adoption process (Schwartz 2006), the construction of a life book, the establishment of the child's level of commitment to adoption, and contact with other adoptees individually as peer mentors or as a support group have been recommended. For the adoptive family, full disclosure of a child's background and difficulties and the availability of both the birth parents' medical records and the child's birth records are considered very important. Adoptive parents have also suggested that child-specific information from sessions with a child's current or previous caregiver can be very helpful. Handouts that set forth the potential pitfalls have been suggested as has, above all, the availability of post-placement services (Bruning 2007; Kramer & Houston 1998).

Research has found large discrepancies between the information that social workers have reported that they gave and the information that the parents stated they received (Barth & Berry

1988). Although it is unclear which assessment is accurate, this difference does lead to the conclusion that it is important for social workers to insure that parents hear and understand the information provided. In this regard, it can be useful to ask families to predict possible child behaviors and have the family role play responses. This exercise can also provide the social worker an opportunity to discuss various parenting skills and strategies.

Support groups, including a "buddy" family as mentor, meetings with other adoptive families, and on-line support groups; warm lines (telephone support services); and respite care have been discussed in the literature. Also, assigning readings, providing factual information about adoption, and discussing subsidy contract negotiations and relevant tax laws have been suggested. Furthermore, it has been recommended that agencies ensure that, as a preventive approach, adoptive parents are provided training in behavior management methods, adoption preservation services, and help in advocating for the child in day care and school (Laws 2001). Also, if the intended adoption is a so-called "open" one with some level of connection maintained between the child and his or her birth parents, there are additional considerations for support (Grotevant & McRoy 1998). For all adoptions, following the placement, social worker contact with the family is vital so that the family can discuss whatever questions and concerns may arise, and workers can assist families in developing plans and strategies or provide referrals, if needed. Finally, adoptive parents need information about accessing various community supports and services so that they know where to turn in case the need arises.

<A>After Disruption

What happened to these children after their adoptive placements disrupted? This is a key question, for the answer is of utmost importance when considering adoption disruption. The focus here is on the number of these children who were ultimately adopted or were, at a

minimum, in another adoptive placement awaiting legalization. Unfortunately, accurate figures are not available because the percentages reported are totally a function of when, after placements disrupted, the investigators asked the question. Therefore, the figures underestimate the final outcome. Nevertheless, a brief review is useful. For example, Kadushin and Seidl (1971) indicated that about 50% of the children were adopted by other families, and that adoptive placements were planned for yet more. Unger et al. (1977) reported that roughly 90% of the children were re-placed in other adoptive families. Based on accumulated information from a number of specialized adoption programs, Donley (1978) noted that more than 75% were successfully re-placed. Boneh (1979) stated that nearly 40% of those whose placement disrupted had been legalized in another placement by the end of the study period. Boyne et al. (1984, p. 159) reported that "many of those who disrupted" went on to a legalized adoption with other families. Benton et al. (1985) indicated that in one state for which information was usable, 41% of the children subsequently resided in another adoptive home, and that others possibly would be so placed. Partridge et al. (1986) noted that 58% were placed again for adoption, but that 24% of the re-placed cases had again disrupted when case records were reviewed. Festinger (1986) found that within 6 to 18 months after a disruption, 42% had either been adopted or were in adoptive homes awaiting legalization; adoption remained the plan for another 21%. Finally, Rosenthal (1988) reported that 74% of those who had experienced a disrupted placement were successfully placed.

It is evident that disruptions, when they occur, are not the final blow to the children's adoption. Nor can it be said that these children could not make an adequate adjustment to an adoptive placement. The figures just cited show otherwise. In view of the emotional baggage that children bring to a placement, the multiplicity of factors in the home environment, and the

flaws in our ability to predict their interaction, it is inevitable that some disruptions will occur. The point is that disruptions neither end the hope for, nor likelihood of, a later successful adoption. In the process, children, families, and workers can learn how to improve the chances that the next placement will hold.

The figures on re-placement suggest that in many cases, there may have been a mismatch, in the sense that the "chemistry" appeared to be wrong, or soured after a time. This is akin to what has been called a problem in the "goodness of fit" (Thomas & Chess 1984, p.1), when the properties of the environment, its expectations and demands, are not in accord with the child's "own capacities, motivations, and style of behaving." It is also possible that some families misjudged their own abilities or were encouraged or stretched to adopt children whose needs and/or behaviors were in fact greater than the families could handle. Whatever the reason, at this particular point in time "these specific children and these specific parents were a failing combination" (Kadushin & Seidl 1971, p. 34).

It is apparent that some configurations of factors are more risky and require more concentrated service efforts, and that staff training must emphasize child and family assessment (Coakley & Berrick 2008). In addition, the problems posed by staff discontinuities require review. Adoption services need to consider ways to assist workers to recognize any tendency to ignore warning signals in order to help workers anticipate and assess vulnerability and areas of risk, so that early intervention is possible before a crisis erupts.

The wonder is that in the long run, most of the children placed in adoptive homes are adopted. However, that happy news is quickly forgotten when disruptions occur. It is a jarring experience for all involved. Moves in foster care are handled with much more equanimity. The expectation that moves will not occur in adoptive placements all too often leads all parties to the

adoption to feel they have failed. Debriefing sessions are needed to understand what was not working, so that the parents, the child, and the agency can learn from the experience. Furthermore, agencies can provide an open forum for discussion of these situations (Fitzgerald 1985) and thereby foster an environment that avoids recrimination, blame, and defensiveness—one that moves "away from a model of practice based on success or failure" (Aldgate & Hawley 1986, p. 45). Adoptive placements of older children and of children with problems oblige agencies to take risks. To do so implies that goals may not be reached. But not to do so also entails risk -- the risk of not giving children who are waiting the opportunity to grow up in families they can call their own.

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