

INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION: A UK PERSPECTIVE ON POST-ADOPTION ISSUES

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Abstract

Introduction

This paper explores the development of post adoption services for intercountry adoption in the UK (Selman & Wells 1996; Selman & Haworth 2005) looking at the needs of adoptive parents, adopted persons and birth mothers.

With the passing of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the ratification of the Hague Convention in 2003, Local Authorities are now required to provide the same level of services to intercountry adopters as domestic adopters. However, because intercountry adoption has been on a small scale in the UK post adoption services available to families have been fragmentary around the country and the expertise and support available to parents has differed greatly.

Post Adoption Services

For families who have adopted domestically the first port of call if they are experiencing difficulties is most likely to be the agency that arranged the placement but for families who adopted from overseas this may not be the case. In the case of intercountry adoptions in the UK the earliest adoptions will have had no adoption agency involvement. For the more recent adoptions a local authority or voluntary adoption agency will have done the Home Study Assessment and they may provide the State of origin with post-placement reports. They will not have been involved with the actual child placement element.

Support is therefore most likely to come from friends and relatives, although many will also find contact with parent's groups of great value. Membership of parents support group can be of a practical nature but there are also emotional benefits one of which is alleviating feelings of isolation overseas adopters can sometimes feel.

What parents have to say

Using findings from earlier studies (Mason 1999 & 2005) we will look at issues that parents have raised as being important to them.

Support Groups

The number of parent support groups available in the UK has grown in recent years as intercountry adoption has become more popular. Membership of such groups during the pre-adoption stage and after the adoption has many advantages at an emotional and a practical level. However, more ways of supporting families may be needed if adequate help is to be available to overseas adoptive families in the UK *Medical Information*

Outcomes of research suggest that much more attention needs to be given to the health care of the children on arrival. Many will have conditions ranging from genetically determined disorders to parasitic infestation and intestinal problems. It is therefore important for prospective adopters to be given clear, precise and honest information about the health of the children they are considering adopting.

In the research on adoptive parents in the UK (Mason 1999, 2005) parents expressed a number of concerns about the health of their children when they first joined their families. It appeared that there were variations in health status according to the country from which the children originated but this was also influenced by the age at which the children were adopted.

Bullying and Racism

Many of the parents in Mason's (2005) study spoke of worries about racist attitudes towards their children. The types of racism experienced by the families had been name-calling and comments about appearance, which included questioning about differences in appearance between family members. This has been experienced in a number of different situations including school, walking in the street and playing outside and was found to come from complete strangers, friends, and neighbours.

None of the parents reported any major incidences but what was less clear was how parents were going to prepare their children to manage such situations if or when they happened in the future. Overall the parents appeared unprepared about how they were going to handle any major acts of racism directed at them or their children.

Identity and difference

Parents who have adopted children from overseas face the same tasks as parents of children who have been adopted domestically telling them about the circumstances surrounding their adoption but overseas adopters also have a set of additional tasks. The main one is the acknowledgment of the children's dual heritage that will include the country of origin, as well as ethnic, cultural and racial characteristics (Triseliotis et al 1997).

The more familiar parents can become with the details about their child's pre-adoption history and the more practised they are at telling the adoption story the more comfortable they will be transmitting the sensitive information to the children. This is why it is important for parents to have the information at hand before they begin to tell the adoption story.

Search and Reunion

In the UK it is becoming more and more common for domestically adopted people to search for their birth relatives and in the Adoption & Children Act 2002 a number of different birth relatives have been given the right to request an intermediary service to search for the child they relinquished for adoption. This has come about as recognition of the life-long impact on the birth mothers after parting with their child and in the spirit of openness that surrounds adoption today. However, it does not seem possible that birth relatives in sending states will be able to access or to afford such services. Nor will it be an easy matter for adopted people to undertake a search in their birth country and for those adopted from China the chance of them finding their birth family will be very unlikely. Support for either party during their search is unlikely to be provided by statutory agencies in the UK.

Summary/conclusion

All aspects of support are important to families adopting from overseas but often contact with statutory services can be affected by an atmosphere of approval or disapproval surrounding the very action of adopting a child from abroad. Sometimes changes in formal services can carry with them elements of recognition and approval which go beyond any practical help offered – as in the introduction of a right to “adoption leave” or the clear statement that local authorities must offer advice to all adoptive families.

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