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EDITORIAL

Adopting an older child: Are parents sufficiently capable and skilled? (Second part)

As a follow-up to the previous Monthly Review, which addressed the child's perspective and his specific needs, let us now focus on the parents' perspective, and assess the support that receiving countries and professionals can provide them with.

Whilst the adoption of older children is clearly part of the future of intercountry adoption (see Monthly Review N° 181 of May 2014), it is important to remember that it should never be considered as an adoption by default. In order for these adoptions to occur under the best auspices, they require different resources from the professionals in receiving countries, but, above all, from the parents, whose adoption project often still remains inconsistent with reality. Indeed, the expectations of prospective adoptive parents have not changed much in relation to the child they wish to adopt: as young and healthy as possible. The latter must therefore often reflect upon, or even redefine, their expectations and their criteria, and must be prepared in this sense. It is important for prospective adopters to be aware of the challenges raised by the adoption of an older child and, in particular, by his specific physical, cognitive and psychological needs. Faced with this reality, are receiving countries ready to provide these children and their prospective parents with adequate support?

Overcoming fears and myths relating to children in care

Fears and myths remain as to the adoption of children, who have been placed in care, sometimes for several years. Based on the survey undertaken by the ISS/IRC in 2013, many parents are afraid of failing in their parental responsibilities, and fear that the fact of not having been able to witness the child's first experiences (first steps, first words, etc) may render the attachment more difficult, or even impossible. The child's story, his health conditions and specific needs, may also be an obstacle to considering his adoption. However, based on the study undertaken in 2008 by the ISS/IRC¹, the adoption of older children does, on average, not fail more often than the adoption of babies. Nonetheless, it is true that children, who have experienced several break-ups or situations of neglect, may develop attachment and behavioural disorders, which make their adjustment to a new family, cultural and social environment more complex. However, as demonstrated in Monthly Review N° 181 of May

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2014, if the assessment of the child's adoptability and his preparation are adapted to his situation, this fear may be reduced. Furthermore, the abilities of the parents, as well as their preparation, will have a dominating impact on the positive development of this project.

Informing, preparing and supporting the parents

As stated by Anne-Marie Piché, in order to better address '(...) the very strong tension of interests between the private sphere (the wish to build a family and a bond with a young and healthy child) and the social sphere (expectations of the institutions as to the parents being more distanced "actors", which act in a placement process', it is important for the parents to be correctly informed, prepared and supported by professionals, in order to help them deconstruct preconceptions and value those bonds that are built in some other ways². Unlike a newborn, an older child already has a past, often his own language and culture, which the parents do not necessarily understand. The parents will need support prior to as well as after the adoption, on the medium and long term, adapted to the particular needs of each child and each family context. Several experiences have been developed, such as in Italy (see p. 6) or France (see p. 5), for example. Receiving countries also have a role to play in the care of the child and in the support provided post-adoption. The establishment of longer parental leaves for these parents, who must display greater availability, and/or financial aid may be considered in this framework.

Are specific abilities required?

Some skills, which are often important in adoption in general, turn out to be particularly relevant in the framework of an adoption of an older child (see p. 10). The great majority of professionals, irrespectively of the country that they work in, regularly mention a series of necessary psychological dispositions amongst the parents: flexibility, empathy, openness, stability, intuition, tolerance, understanding, etc³. Furthermore, in the context of the adoption of older children, the psychological, cognitive and emotional abilities are not the only ones that are expected from the parents, but these also require linguistic competencies (it is strongly recommended that both parents speak or have some basic knowledge of the child's mother tongue), physical abilities (good health), financial resources (the possibility of resorting to private educational support or to psychological support), or even family skills (such as having already brought up a child or having experience with older children, and benefiting from the support of relatives – family, friends, etc).

The assessment of the prospective adopters, of their resources and their motivation, is decisive in the success of a late adoption. For some parents, it will be more fulfilling to develop a relationship with an older child than with a newborn. In order to identify such vocations and to enable prospective adoptive parents to raise the correct questions, this Monthly Review intends to present and define the profile of the families and to provide better tools to the professionals.

The ISS/IRC team,
June 2014

References:

¹ Romanens-Pythoud, S., *L'adoption des enfants grands*, ISS/IRC, 2008 (Monthly Review N° 10/2008). On sale at: http://www.iss-ssi.org/venteonline/product.php?id_product=7.

² Romanens-Pythoud, S., *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.4.

³ Replies to the ISS/IRC survey, 2013.

Erratum: We have been informed of an error in the Editorial of Monthly Review N° 181 of May 2014. In Burkina Faso, a child is considered to be older – and is therefore included in the profile of children with special needs – from the age of six years, and not two years (Source: Bernadette Bonkougou, Director of Placements, Adoptions and Sponsorships, Burkina Faso)..



ACTORS

- **Cambodia, Denmark, Kenya, Norway, Romania and Sweden:** These countries have updated the contact details of their Central Authorities. Norway and Sweden have also updated the contact details of their Competent Authorities.
- **Denmark, Malta and Norway:** These countries have updated their lists of accredited adoption bodies.

Source: The Hague Conference on Private International Law, http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.publications&dtid=43&cid=69.

BRIEF NEWS

Benin: Suspension of intercountry adoptions in view of the forthcoming ratification of the HC-1993

On 25 February 2014, the National Assembly authorised the government's ratification of Law N° 2014-03 on the authorisation of accession to the HC-1993. Following up on this authorisation, Benin decided to suspend intercountry adoption procedures until it establishes a Central Authority and accredits adoption bodies. This suspension is not applicable to ongoing files. This decision is also in line with the adoption of the Code on Children in June 2014, which provides for the establishment of institutional prevention, identification and notification mechanisms relating to child victims and children at risk, as well as for their care.

Sources: 'Autorisation de ratification à l'Assemblée nationale: Le Bénin adhère à la Convention internationale sur l'adoption d'enfant', 26 February 2014, *Benin Web News*: <http://beninweb.wordpress.com/2014/02/26/autorisation-de-ratification-a-l-assemblee-nationale-le-benin-adhere-a-la-convention-internationale-sur-ladoption-denfant/>; France Diplomatie, Press release of 27 May 2014: <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/adopter-a-l-etranger/comment-adopter-a-l-etranger/les-fiches-pays-de-l-adoption/fiches-pays-adoption/article/adopter-au-benin>; 'Adoption d'une politique nationale de protection de l'enfant', 5 June 2014, *Ici Lome*: <http://news.icilome.com/?id=1&idnews=781736>; U.S. Department of State, http://adoption.state.gov/country_information/country_specific_alerts_notices.php?alert_notice_type=alerts&alert_notice_file=benin_1.

Publication of a handbook on the practical operation of the HC-1996

According to the information provided by the Permanent Bureau of the Hague Conference on Private International Law, the Practical Handbook on the Operation of the 1996 Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children has recently been published. The HC-1996 is applicable, amongst others, to children, who are victims of international abduction or at the centre of international parental conflicts, to children, who are placed abroad on the basis of alternative care agreements other than adoption (placements with the extended family or international foster care placements), to children, who are refugees or unaccompanied migrants, etc. The handbook also offers, in an appendix, a checklist for the implementation of the Convention, aimed at States (pp. 195 and following). In the framework of its activities, the ISS has developed legal, social and intercountry family mediation expertise for resolving these situations. Close cooperation with its specialist network of national and international partners makes it a priority actor for governments.

Source: Available in English and French at: http://www.hcch.net/index_fr.php?act=events.details&year=2014&varevent=359.

SOS Children's Villages International published a youth-friendly version of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children

A youth-friendly version of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children has been developed by the members of the 'I Matter' International Youth Council from SOS Children's Villages International. This document does not use the legal text of the Guidelines, but is rather an interpretation by the members of the previously-mentioned Youth Council. It presents, in a very concise manner, the structure and the content of the Guidelines and uses a very accessible language aimed directly at affected children.

Source: Available in English and Russian at: <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/library/youth-friendly-version-guidelines-alternative-care-children>. As a reminder, RELAF also published a friendly version of the Guidelines in 2011, in collaboration with UNICEF; available at: <http://www.relaf.org/aplicacion.html>.



Awareness of origins among Roma children adopted by Italian families

The psychosocial team of the ARAI – the Piedmont Regional Agency for Intercountry Adoption – tried to examine this issue amongst an Italian sample of children adopted from Eastern Europe. Marta Casonato, Doctor in Psychology- University of Turin, describes briefly the results of this study.

The condition of Roma children in Europe is a challenging issue, and experts sometimes hold different positions in this regard. On the one hand, some anthropologists¹ raise the issue that the adoptability of Roma children may be eased by the social and civic prejudice towards their family of origin. On the other hand, the over-representation of Roma children in institutions could derive from a prejudice affecting their chance of being adopted². The aim of this contribution is not to make a stand on this debate but, on the contrary, to represent the first effort to explore how Roma children's origins are addressed by adoptive families.

Roma children adopted from Eastern Europe: The experience of the ARAI

The ARAI has worked in collaboration with the Central Authority of the Slovak Republic, a country which is investing in local adoption, following accurately the principle of subsidiarity. Children suitable for adoption often share a Roma origin. 'In our experience', said the director Anna Maria Colella, 'a few years after adoption, Roma children appear to be well adjusted on different levels. However, due to the recognised importance of the narrative regarding the adopted child's history, we decided to deepen this issue'.

In eight years of collaboration with this Eastern European country, 91 children have been adopted in the north-west of Italy through the ARAI. All these families were asked to fill in a questionnaire about the child's knowledge and interest in his origins, and the potential discrimination experienced by the child and/or the parents.

'Shall we talk about their origin?'

Only one third of the adoptive parents answered the questionnaire and data revealed that the

These preliminary results underline an interesting and challenging complexity. What is this parental difficulty linked to? Many aspects may play a role: the effort to preserve the children from potential discrimination, the couple's subtle prejudice, and even a reluctance to truly accept the child's previous life. A deeper knowledge could help the practitioners to better address the pre and post-adoption training and, in turn, empower these families.

large majority of those, who adopted a Roma child (66%), are keeping this part of the child's identity hidden³. The low percentage of the respondents makes us believe that this is a burning issue, and results can be biased by the fact that the families, who answered the survey, are likely to constitute the most sensitive parents, and those concerned about this issue.

Before adopting, prospective parents attended a training, in which practitioners stressed that, in order to develop and maintain a good well-being and a strong identity, a parent should provide the child with information about his past. So why do parents still find it so hard? Parents explained this silence as a way to preserve the child from discrimination or as an effort to postpone this discussion to an older age. Some parents seem to be aware of this issue, but they admit having difficulties to apply this discourse themselves. A few couples even took advantage of the survey to ask for the practitioner's help in order to address this subject, requesting suggestions on how to begin this discussion.

Episodes of discrimination

Fortunately, only a few families perceived themselves as victims of discrimination (six children and four parents). When present, discrimination frequently derives from an external prejudice related to thefts (a higher control toward the child or even direct allegations). Parents seemed less discriminated against, and more for their adoptive choice than for their child's characteristics. However, these results must take into account the secret kept by most of the families regarding the children's Roma origins.



References:

¹ Saletti Salza, C., *Dalla tutela al genocidio? Le adozioni dei minori rom e sinti in Italia (1985-2005)*, CISU, Roma 2010.

² See ISS/IRC Monthly Review N° 07-08/2012, 'The situation of Roma children in Europe'.

³ Casonato, M., Avataneo, C., Aime, F., Neirone, C. (2012), *Roma children adopted from Slovakia: origin's awareness and discrimination*, contribution to the international conference 'From discrimination to empowerment', Trieste; available at:

[http://www.arai.piemonte.it/cms/media/files/Casonato_Roma%20children%20\[modalit%C3%A0%20compatibilit%C3%A0\].pdf](http://www.arai.piemonte.it/cms/media/files/Casonato_Roma%20children%20[modalit%C3%A0%20compatibilit%C3%A0].pdf).

The adoption of children with special needs: Supporting the parental project in order to prevent some risks

Sandrine Dekens, a Clinical Psychologist and Coordinator of the Enfants en recherche de famille (Children in search of a family, ERF) programme¹, addresses, in the present article, the support offered to those parents, who commit to an adoption project relating to a child with special needs.

ERF is a private means, which enables to undertake a search for parents at national level for all state orphans in France, in particular those with multiple special needs and in relation to whom parental projects are more limited. This search is based on an in-depth analysis of the child's needs and resources in several areas (medical, affective, psychological, social). The adoptability assessment is the basis, which ERF undertakes the search amongst potential adoptive parents on.

From imagination to reality

The prospective adoptive parents, whose adoption project has been authorised, follow a process, which consists in confronting their imagination to the reality of adoptable children in France. The nine months committed to their suitability certificate thereby result in the birth of an imaginary child in the parents' psyche, which will gradually leave space to reality. For some, this process makes it possible to develop the opportunities and limitations of the adoption process, which becomes more precise with time and which gets closer to the profile of those children, for whom ERF is looking for parents. This process initiates when they meet an ERF representative, who is a volunteer member of EFA.

At the time of the prospective adopters' registration, they have already met adoptive families and their children, heard personal stories and obtained information on the specific needs to the adoptable children, on the consequences linked to their life stories, the impact on

parenthood and on the day-to-day life of the family. This confrontation with reality – between the granting of the suitability certificate and the registration with ERF – enables everyone to measure, on the one hand, what he feels ready for, the experiences he will be able to rely on, and on the other hand, to assess whether imagination may serenely incorporate elements of reality. Thus, in the course of the interviews with the ERF psychologist, the imaginary child of the suitability certificate becomes a 'realistic' child, able to match a real child.

The matching stage

At the following stage, when a parental project appears to have been well reflected on and adapted to the needs of a real child, the profile of a child awaiting a family is presented to the prospective adopters, and insisting on the difficulties that may be foreseen. Matching is not undertaken without the prospective adopters' knowledge, as it is important to prevent situations, in which the parents become aware afterwards of important information for the child's future life. The revelation of this 'concealed but known' information throughout the life with the child could give the parents the impression that they were fooled – something that would hinder their resources and their abilities to react. On the contrary, it appears convenient to cooperate with the latter and to make them aware of their responsibilities in this decision-making, which will create lasting consequences on their future.



ERF prospective adopters choose to go towards a child, in relation to whom they feel that the characteristics match their abilities. Some of them may be reluctant to initiate a process that gives them the impression of a 'catalogue' of characteristics – an impression that fades as and when the administrative dimension of the questionnaire comes to life and words in meetings and interviews. Thus, one realises that an adoption project may vary considerably from one family to another : what may raise a difficulty to some may not be considered as a problem by others. It is therefore a matter of supporting these prospective parents in order for them to be able to assume the part of responsibility linked to this type of parenthood and which the child will undoubtedly question (did you really want me, me with my story, my wounds, my colour, my disability?), and to overcome the altruistic dimension of their motivation in order to assess their own limitations, without any guilt or denial. This stage enables each one of them to be the actor of his project and to create a potential of resources, which will be necessary to face possible difficulties.

The meeting and initial life together

After having sent their file to the competent adoption service and having met once or several times its members, the prospective adopters are selected by the family committee. The last stage of the process is then launched: the child, who was first imagined and has become increasingly

real, will gain his own identity (name, date of birth) in the parents' mental space, where he will place himself in a more or less smooth manner. In order to prepare the moment of the meeting with the child, phone interviews become deeper, the parents' imagination is set to work, representations are confronted with the reality that may occur. In the initial moments of the meeting, the child may display a reserved behaviour, express concern when faced with these parents, who are still strangers. The parents are supported and prepared by phone, as much as they are willing to, before the meeting and during the matching week – a period full of strong emotions. During the initial moments of the meeting and life together, it is possible for the child to take one of the parents over more – often the mother for the younger ones and the father for the older ones – and to ignore or reject the other parent. These moments may be difficult to experience and deserve to be supported, in order for the child's behaviour to make sense to his new parents. Thus, a good knowledge of the child's file is a support for ERF's psychologist. Post-adoption follow-up, through phone interviews and home visits, is provided to the families, who wish to have them, and are undertaken over the first two years. Other than that, life will remain as it is: an amount of – good and bad – surprises, in relation to which the children and the parents will each call upon creative and surprising resources.

For the prospective adoptive parents, it is not a matter of excluding all the risks of their parenthood, as if all prospective difficulties could be foreseen, but rather to not add any unwittingly. The role of the professionals is to allow them to measure and assume, to their best, the long-term consequences of their choice.

Reference:

¹ See: <http://www.adoptionefafa.org/index.php/enfants-en-recherche-de-famille> and Monthly Review N° 04/2012. For further information, see: *Construire un projet d'adoption pour les enfants grands*, DVD, Enfance & Familles d'Adoption, 2014, on sale at: http://www.adoptionefafa.org/images/FORMATIONS/2014_enfantsgrands_dvd.pdf.

Preparing prospective adoptive parents to adopt children with special needs

Marco Chistolini – a Psychologist and Psychoanalyst – and Graziella Teti – Head of CIAI's adoption office¹ – share, in the following article, their knowledge and practice in relation to the preparation of prospective adoptive parents, who are planning to adopt children with specific needs.

The number of intercountry adoptions of children with special needs has increased in Italy over the

last 10 years. There have been a progressive growth of the average age of adopted children,



which reached a peak of 6.1 years in 2011, as well as several adoptions of children with medical problems (28% of adoptions in 2013). 70% of adoptions carried out by CIAI refer to children with special needs, who require more support. Furthermore, the prospective adoptive parents must be adequately prepared to be able to take into consideration their ability to cope with children with such characteristics. In order to give adoptable children with special needs the best possible option, CIAI's training for prospective adoptive parents also focuses on these children. Moreover, CIAI ensures life-long support to both families and children. Post-adoption follow-up and the certainty of being supported are fundamental for the families when making such a demanding decision.

General characteristics of CIAI's training programme

CIAI's training programme is offered to the families after they have obtained their eligibility to adopt and have attended the courses provided by their local social services. It is therefore a 'second-level' training, which concentrates on particularly significant aspects of the adoptive experience. Two eight-hour days are organised to increase the applicants' awareness and capacities. Our programme focuses on issues, which we consider particularly important, such as the couples' motivations and expectations, the characteristics of the children, confronting the history of their adoption, ethnic identity and bonding. The various topics offered aim to make prospective parents meditate on the peculiarity of adoption and help them understand that raising an adoptive child is an experience only partly comparable to biological parenthood. Numerous issues are considered during the training, amongst them: the child's experience of abandonment, dealing with information relating to the past, how to talk about these matters and give them a meaning, the analysis of thoughts and emotions raised within the adoptive parents, comparison with biological parents. Moreover, importance is given to the ethnic identity: how to appreciate the child's country and culture of origin, how to help the child to feel Italian at the same time, and how to face racial discrimination.

The method used is very active and all-involving. Besides a theoretical contribution of the supervisor, films are viewed, discussions are held in sub-groups, exercises using the body and role-plays. From our experience, this last form, together with non-verbal communication, is very effective, as the parents are able to empathise with different situations and experience them directly and truly.

A specific approach for the adoption of children with specific needs

In the last few years, particular attention has been drawn to the characteristics of children with special needs, school-age children, children with medical problems, children, who have survived adverse childhood experiences and groups of siblings. This specific approach takes into consideration different aspects such as: general knowledge of the various codifications of special needs, the couples are encouraged to reflect upon their availability to adopt a child with such needs, recognition of methods and strategies apt to manage the different problems. In order to reach this purpose, we propose exercises based on the use of the body, on non-verbal communication and the overview of practical cases that help the couples to identify with the situation the children experience, becoming aware of the effects of specific difficulties over short, medium and long-term periods. The profiles of a few children with special needs are shown to them, in order for them to assess whether they feel ready to cope with such an adoption as well as the positive and negative aspects. We take into account the choice of the prospective adopters, who choose this type of adoption, in order to undertake the best possible match.

At the same time, the children's capacity to recover, their abilities and capacity of resilience are emphasised. Our goal is to help prospective parents to become aware of the complexity and the stress inherent to the adoption of a child with special needs, maintaining at the same time a positive inner state of mind, characterised by hope and appreciation of the children's abilities.

We continue to work with the couples throughout the whole period during which they are waiting for the child, we organise further



training (psychomotricity, support groups) and also seminars on specific topics, intended to ensure the parents' competency, increase their awareness, keep their motivation high, help them manage and control their anxiety due to the long waiting period and to uncertainty.

Of course, the best results are obtained if the adoption agency is able to establish a good relationship with the couple and gain their

confidence. The couple will therefore feel supported by skilled and receptive professionals, will maintain a relationship that allows them to communicate even after the adoption has been finalised, they will be able to frankly speak about the struggles and difficulties connected with the adoption, allowing the experts to help during the different stages of the child's growth, even many years after the arrival.

Reference:

¹ *Centro Italiano Aiuti all'infanzia*, <http://www.ciai.it>.

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESOURCES

Parental experiences in the intercountry adoption of 'older' children

Anne-Marie Piché, Professor at the School of Social Work of the University of Quebec, is currently a researcher in intercountry adoption. She has also developed and co-led preparatory and post-intercountry adoption workshops in a health and social service centre in Quebec. Here, she presents the conclusions of a study undertaken amongst adoptive parents of 'older' children adopted internationally¹.

Today's intercountry adoptive families have increasingly varied profiles. As a response to the new criteria in countries of origin, several of them adopt an 'older' child, who arrives with important health, global developmental or so-called 'special' needs – which are no longer that 'special' in the current reality. These families also experience adoption processes, which are very different from those of the 1990s or the beginning of the years 2000, whilst a legal and ethical transformation has resulted in a confirmation of adoption as an exceptional intervention, aimed, first, at the protection of the rights of these children. As a result of these initial amendments and their consequences in Quebec, we undertook a qualitative study, which gathered the personal accounts of 12 adoptive parents between 2008 and 2010; we followed them throughout the first year after the adoption and after that, in order to understand their experience in this context.

The implications of the political transformations of intercountry adoption within the families

The personal accounts of parents met during the study stated the complexities of the procedures, and the current extension of the adoption processes have impacts on their families, much after the adoption. This 'administrative

pregnancy', as it has been called by a participant, changes their chronological points of reference, but also their psychological points of reference during the waiting for the child: stress, renunciation, mourning of real and symbolic children, lack of understanding among persons close to them. In the current context of long waiting periods for the arrival of the children, it would therefore be commendable for the preparatory workshops that are offered to be followed up by other forms of support. This is important, from a perspective in which the challenges of adoption are increasing and must be supported in a constant manner, within a framework of respect for the individuality of the needs of each child and each family. Without this support, the adoption remains intellectualised by the parents during the waiting period. In particular, the gathering of prospective adoptive parents is an excellent means to promote the creation and preservation of small support networks that will last within the community.

The refocusing of expectations in relation to adoption and adoptive parenthood

Modern society accepts and even promotes different family models, including intercountry adoption. However, the true promotion of the creation of different family bonds is less visible in



the day-to-day life of the families, which hear from those close to them and from childhood professionals a constant idealisation of family bonds of a biological nature, or encouragement to become 'super-parents', or even therapists for their children. As for those professionals, who are aware of the challenges in intercountry adoption, they may help the families in recontextualising the behaviours and interpersonal means that are different in older children. The latter have learnt to create bonds with adults in a different and often difficult manner, given the institutional, family or cultural environment in which they were placed. In the presence of health difficulties and developmental delays – the fate of most of these children – or when the creation of an attachment bond proves to be demanding, the medical or psychosocial actor may assist the family in the deconstruction of a family ideal (the prescriptive biological bond) and in raising awareness as to the child's different story at the affective and social level, by taking advantage of the existing forces in the family, and by ensuring a coordinated interdisciplinary work. Group interventions with adoptive parents also serve as a channel for other values. The family experience is, on these occasions, recontextualised from the child's perspective and from the parents' reality. A distance is placed in relation to those speeches, which idealise adoption or idealise the 'super-parent', who is efficient in his role and restorative in all the pains and deficiencies of his child.

The process of active construction of a solid bond

Given that they do not have the same points of reference in the process of waiting for their child (length, decisions made abroad and that may change), several adopters try to regain some control over their family project, by preparing themselves actively for the life with the child to come, and the latter by increasing their search for information and specialised advice in order to set the bases for a more solid bond as soon as he arrives. In this study, we have observed to what extent the level of preparation of the adopters has changed. It relies now, much more than before, on professional knowledge. Through their entry into the family, adopted children, who have

gained sensory, affective, physical and social experiences elsewhere, push the latter to consider other means to establish a relationship. These go through a different process of construction and do not benefit from an early bond, established on the basis of the first stages of the child's life, nor from knowledge of their personal story when he arrives. The idea of 'working on the bond' in order to create a solid relationship with the child is already very strong, even before he arrives; the parents in the study were aware of the general shortcomings of the children's living environments and assumed, as a particular challenge, to welcome them later in their life, when they are already fully immersed in a difficult life story. They were even ready to consider their role as a 'healer', including therapeutic – more superficial from an affective perspective – to the extent that this role remains temporary. However, they minimised at the time the emotional effects and sometimes the exhaustion linked to this other position as a parent, despite their 'intellectual' preparation to come to terms with the shortcomings and difficulties of their child to come.

Beyond attachment: Different bonds to be valued

These parents noticed that their bond with the child, as it developed, increased in other dimensions, sources of satisfaction and rhythms. In the practice of the support offered to adopters and, subsequently, to families, it becomes fundamental to centre the interventions on an individualised support, which is sensitive to the complex needs of children adopted later in their life. First of all, this knowledge should not restrict the adoptive parents to a therapeutic role, which may sometimes lead them to think that they are responsible for repairing all of the child's physical and psychological shortcomings and pains; rather, various forms of support must be made available to them (specialised health services, groups, parental leave, subsidies, psychosocial support, other adoptive parents). It is becoming even more important than before to ensure accessible and long-term support for these families, as much with regards to information as to emotional support for all.



References:

¹ Piché, A.-M., *La construction sociale de la relation adoptive: Expériences parentales de l'adoption d'enfants grands à l'international*, Ph.D. thesis, School of Social Work, McGill University, 2011.

See also: Piché, A.-M., 'La prescription de l'attachement en contexte d'adoption internationale', *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*, Vol. 24: La prévention précoce en question, Hors-Série N° 1, pp. 79-101, 2012.

READERS' FORUM

What does it mean to *become the parent of an older child*?

The adjustment efforts required from an older child in his adoption go far beyond what his prospective parents may imagine. Aggressive attitudes and misunderstandings will result from these discrepancies. Blandine Hamon¹ suggests working on these in order to provide the adoption process with the best opportunities for success.

Adoptive parents will observe numerous behaviours in the child upon his arrival: agitation or hyperactivity linked to stress, lies due to the difficulty of accepting the control of adults, an absence of empathy, etc. Even though one part of the process will be undertaken by the child himself, thanks to his unbelievable abilities to adapt and an astonishing adjustment in these delays, how may the parents be helped in understanding, accepting and finally receiving the latter's trust?

Facing the emergency whilst taking time

The concept of urgent matter is very present amongst the parents. According to the father of a child adopted at the age of nine years, *'it is a race against time, I have very little time left before adolescence to have her unlearn her bad patterns and give her new points of reference'*. This concept of emergency is even stronger at the child's educational level; parents as well as teachers may set the standards too high, with high school expectations, without taking into account the child's rhythm and his imperative need to first settle down and to develop quality relationships with his new parents and to build new points of reference. In such a context, early schooling may prove to be traumatic for the child; thus, the parents should not become overwhelmed by the emergency at the risk of jeopardising the child. Indeed, some 'model' children will do all they can to meet the expectations of their parents and teachers, at the risk of a critical decompensation at adolescence or once they reach adulthood.

Developing parental skills and creativity

Parents become parents through their interactions with the child. This compatibility is progressive and will be more or less positive, depending on the preparation and support they will have received. Some skills will be particularly required amongst the parents, such as:

- A natural tendency to understanding, listening and being empathetic;
- Psychological flexibility, in order to question their prejudices, their beliefs, their educational and moral principles;
- Interpersonal and emotional intelligence, in order to try to decipher the child's deficiencies, needs, wounds, pains through his behaviours (escape, aggression, instability, weakness);
- An optimistic perspective and one open to astonishment, aimed at valuing each of his developments;
- The capacity to develop educational skills that are different from those received; it is a matter of having a creative potential aimed at educating this suffering child with kindness and firmness at the same time;
- A capacity of assertion in relation to those close, in order to position oneself as the child's legitimate parent, whilst leaving a place to the biological parents;
- A capacity to manage their emotions, in order to be able to listen to the child's trauma, the difficult elements of his story, his emotions linked to mourning, without anticipating, without being discredited and by putting things into perspective to be able to digest them later, alone or with the help of a third party;
- Open-mindedness, allowing to face the child's differences and to manage those emotions



and disappointments generated by one's own expectations;

□ Considerable complementarity, solidarity and communication within the couple, or similar habits with relatives for a single parent.

It goes without saying that no parent has all these qualities from the start! Any parent is imperfect and must remain so at the risk of providing the child with an inaccessible model. These points of reference are, however, useful for the prospective parents, insofar as they allow them to reflect on their resources and their weaknesses at the time of consideration of their adoption project. Even though the relationship with the child stimulates parental abilities, some of them must be gained prior to it in order not to lead the adoptive process towards failure.

Creating a favourable environment for the child's well-being

In addition to the above-mentioned internal elements, external factors will also come into play. The adoption of an older child entails, from

To conclude, the parents must create an attachment reference point that is sufficiently solid for the child to be able to grow and develop his own talents in order to, one day, sail a boat alone...²

the adoptive parents, considerable availability in terms of time and organisation, but also material and financial comforts that will make it possible to pay, in particular, for the non-reimbursed care, which the child will need, or various activities, help with homework, etc. Furthermore, the parents must have some comfort as to their living environment, such as the proximity of care and rehabilitation teams. Moreover, it is necessary to be able to rely on persons close to them (godparent, friends, extended family), who are able to support them.

When the child arrives in a family where there are already older siblings with a certain balance, the latter will have to be well prepared; they will have to be informed of the newcomer's potential difficulties whilst highlighting the wealth of differences. It is important for the parents to reassure the siblings as to the fact that their needs will remain one of their essential concerns, even if the latest child takes a lot of space.

References:

¹ Doctor, member of the federal 'Family support' team and trainer at EFA. Author of the book *Parents par adoption: des mots pour le quotidien*, available at: www.adoptionefa.org (see Monthly Review N° 176, October 2013). This article follows up on B Hamon's intervention at the EFA conference *Construire un projet d'adoption pour les enfants grands*; DVD on sale at: <http://adoptionefa.org/index.php/component/content/article/36-generalites/687-construire-un-projet-dadoption-pour-les-enfants-grands>.

² A detailed version of this article is available in French at the ISS/IRC.

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES AND TRAININGS

- **Denmark:** *13th European Scientific Association on Residential and Family Care for Children and Adolescents Conference (EUSARF) 2014*, SFI - The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Copenhagen, 2-5 September 2014. For further information, see: <http://www.sfi.dk/eusarf2014-11463.aspx>.
- **South Africa:** *Safeguarding Conference 2014: Keeping Children Safe*, Cape Town, 3-5 September 2014. For further information, see: <http://safeguardingconference.org/>.
- **The Netherlands:** *International Forum on Intercountry Adoption and Global Surrogacy*, International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 11-13 August 2014. For further information, see: http://www.iss.nl/research/conferences_and_seminars/periodic_conferences_debates_and_seminars/international_forum_on_intercountry_adoption_global_surrogacy/.

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