



## The Value of Adoptive Parent Groups

### What Adoptive Parent Groups Can Do For You

Parenting has often been called the most complex profession. It becomes even more so when the family includes a child who has been adopted. This is true whether the child is an infant, has special needs, or is of a different race or ethnic background. Adoptive parent groups help parents share, understand, and manage these complexities. Whether it's general support, such as enduring the adoption waiting period, or specific advice, such as traveling to an unfamiliar country to receive a child, adoptive parent groups have unparalleled value.

In the following comments, prospective adoptive parents and adoptive parents attest to the wide range of benefits.

#### **Adoptive Parent Groups Provide Educational and Social Activities**

"We talked with other families and learned about topics ranging from Korean culture to sexual acting out. These sessions were not only educational, but great social get-togethers as well, with hot chocolate and popcorn. These were opportunities to get to know one another, hear each other's kids' stories, and learn of their progress."

#### **Adoptive Parent Groups Can Lead to the Formation of a Play Group**

"As each mother arrived with a child or children, there was a buzz of excitement as the mothers asked names, country of birth, and age. Standing around our darlings as they invaded the toy box, the four of us were mesmerized with the scene of commonality of the children's height, their playfulness, and their Latin American cuteness."

"Once the children were settled into playing, we chatted and chatted about so many topics all dealing with adoption, or Latin culture issues—we shared stories, our older children's conversations, and our own observations. It was like a flood of topics needing to emerge from each of us that we sometimes forgot the toddlers until there was a yell or a tugging at a toy."

#### **Adoptive Parent Groups Can Bring Comfort in the Form of a Newsletter**

"Your newsletter has been a real source of support for us. We have lived in Arizona for a year and a half now, and we still very much miss a strong, supportive parent group."



### **Adoptive Parent Groups Can Provide Examples of the Problems and Pleasures of Parenting a Child With Special Needs**

"One thing that makes adopting a child with special needs easier is the encouragement and advice that you get from other group members whose children have experienced the same or almost similar emotional/behavior problems."

### **Adoptive Parent Groups Can Be Supportive to Prospective Adoptive Parents While They Wait for Their Child**

"Our group is unique in many ways, but mainly because we are like a family. Our children range from infants to teenagers, and some families join us to just endure the `wait' until their child arrives."

### **Adoptive Parent Groups Can Provide Guidance for Prospective Adoptive Parents Planning Intercountry Adoption**

"One woman we spoke with provided us with a diary of her trip, giving the sequence of steps. This was invaluable despite the minor changes we encountered. The more we learned from other adoptive parents, the better we felt about our impending trip into the unknown."

Prospective adoptive parents have much to gain from the experience of adoptive parents, who can advise them on how to deal with agencies on issues of licensure, home studies, and fees. Talking with adoptive families can expose them to the potential difficulties of parenting. It can also reveal the successes and joys.

## **History of Adoptive Parent Groups**

The first formal adoptive parent group started in the New York City metropolitan area in 1955. The group was called Adoptive Parents Committee, and it is still active today. Not long after, in 1957, some families involved in intercountry and transracial adoption in Montreal, Canada started a group. The adoptive parents felt they needed a support group to help them deal with special issues that accompanied these kinds of adoptions. This type of networking rapidly became popular throughout Canada and the United States. By the late 1960s, parents in several cities in both countries began to form similar organizations.

Until then, adoption in the United States was almost exclusively restricted to healthy Caucasian infants. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, when adoption expanded to other kinds of children—those who were older, had developmental disabilities, and were from other countries or of mixed race—it became evident that parents needed help beyond that provided by agencies.

Even families who had adopted healthy infants found themselves needing support for several reasons. More adopted children insisted on knowing who their birth parents were; some actively searched for them. Many adoptive parents were stunned, having never imagined they would one day face a possible reunion of their adopted child and his or her birth parents. They needed help to cope—and it was parent groups to which they often turned.

Also, adoptive parents found children needing support on other fronts. In some cases, the expression of the normal adolescent need for autonomy and independence seemed more

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intense for adopted children. Some parents wanted to know how other families told their children they were adopted. Or they wondered what happened when children were not told early and learned of their adoptive status later in life. Information and experiences exchanged by the parents were invaluable.

Regardless of the type of adoption, an adoptive parent group has value to the

- adoptive family
- prospective adoptive family
- child
- social worker
- waiting child
- legislative process.

### Value to the Adoptive Family

Although many adoption agencies provide services to families after the adoption has been finalized, adoptive parent groups provide a different kind of environment that often feels more comfortable. The family can find a support system and friendship. Parents can relate easily to the advice and experience of those who have been there. They are able to express negative feelings about the child without fear of judgment.

Parents of young children often are interested in educational activities about general parenting skills. Once children reach the age when they become more aware of the adoption issue, the support that groups can offer parents becomes more important.

### Value to the Prospective Adoptive Family

An adoptive parent group gives waiting families an in-depth understanding of adoption and enables them to hear first hand about the successes and the problems that may be encountered. They can probably meet others who have adopted children similar to the one they want to adopt. Families who have already adopted can offer advice and guidance that makes the adoption process more understandable and less threatening.

### Value to the Child

Children benefit from knowing other children who have been adopted and their parents. They can share their feelings and concerns about being adopted, about their birth parents, and about their cultural heritages if they were adopted from foreign countries.

### Value to the Waiting Child

Through adoptive parent groups, more people become aware of children with special needs and feel comfortable entertaining the idea of adopting such children. Through the groups, directly and indirectly, more children are adopted. Groups often include both adoptive parents and people interested but not certain they want to proceed. Being part of an adoptive parent organization often gives the knowledge and the confidence to move ahead into adoption.

### **Value to the Legislative Process**

Parent groups have been the force behind many of the valuable changes in adoption. These changes have benefited children with special needs and allowed parents to have a stronger voice in many vital issues. For example, parent groups were instrumental in getting legislation passed in which the Federal Government agreed to provide funds to expand adoption opportunities for children. This included making subsidized adoption a reality, so that families who were qualified to adopt but could not afford it were able to do so. Parent groups have consistently testified at hearings on a variety of child welfare issues. The North American Council on Adoptable Children, a national adoption support group, developed National Adoption Awareness Month, which has brought awareness about adoption to people throughout the country.

### **Value to the Social Worker**

Many adoption social workers were trained only in the adoption of infants. Much of what they have learned about adoption of children with special needs has come from the experiences of adoptive parents. This knowledge helps them work more effectively with prospective adoptive parents.

### **Formation of Groups**

Adoptive parent groups are formed in different ways and around different issues. They may spin off from an agency dealing with many interested parents at the same time. They may be a collection of parents from diverse sources coming together around a common issue, such as adopting children of mixed race. Subgroups may form within a main group addressing special interest areas or child age groups.

### **Activities of Groups**

Adoptive parent groups usually engage in social, educational, and support activities. The types of activities undertaken in each category are listed below.

#### **Social Activities**

- Parties, including those focusing on the culture and traditions of the children adopted from other countries
- Potluck suppers
- Discussion groups for older children
- Holiday celebrations
- Night on the town just for parents.

#### **Educational Activities**

- Production of newsletters about adoption issues and newly adopted children of members
- Preparation for parenting through special training
- Referrals to newsletters, books, and other resource materials
- Referrals to appropriate agency and community resources
- Providing up-to-date information on children available for adoption
- Participation in agency staff training and development
- Convening public information meetings to discuss current adoption issues

- Educating legislative groups and Government sources about child welfare issues
- Information on the foreign culture of the children adopted internationally.

### Support Activities

- Postplacement support through a "buddy system," "listening ear," telephone counseling, crisis intervention, and assistance
- "While you wait" meetings for adoptive applicants
- Special groups for special circumstances; that is, single parents, parents of teenagers, parents of disabled children, parents who have adopted transracially, or divorced parents.

## Where to Find a Group

The resources listed below can help parents seeking local or special interest adoptive parent support groups.

The **North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC)**, a nonprofit umbrella organization of adoptive parent groups, was formed in 1974 as a coordinator for newly forming parent groups. It facilitates information sharing among groups, holds a national conference and helps new groups start. Contact NACAC at 970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106, St. Paul, MN 55114-1149, (612) 644-3036.

**Adoptive Families of America (AFA)** is a national parent group with chapters throughout the country promoting domestic and intercountry adoption. Contact AFA at 2309 Como Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 535-4829 or (800) 372-3300.

**Families Adopting Children Everywhere (FACE)** is an adoptive parent support organization in the Maryland and Washington, D.C. areas. It gathers information about adoption resources in the whole mid-Atlantic region. Contact FACE at P.O. Box 28058 Northwood Station, Baltimore, MD 21239, (410) 488-2656.

**Latin America Parents Association (LAPA)** is a support group for parents who have adopted or wish to adopt children from Latin America. Contact LAPA at P.O. Box 339, Brooklyn, NY 11234, (718) 236-8689. Other chapters are located in Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland (Metropolitan Washington, DC), New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

The **Committee for Single Adoptive Parents** is an umbrella organization of single adoptive and prospective adoptive parent support groups. Its address is P.O. Box 15084, Chevy Chase, MD 20825.

**The National Adoption Center (NAC)** focuses on the adoption of children with special needs. Contact NAC at 1500 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102, (215) 735-9988 or 1-800-TO-ADOPT.

The **National Adoption Information Clearinghouse**, 330 C Street, SW, Washington, D.C. 20447, (703) 352-3488 or 1 (888) 251-0075, has a comprehensive listing of foster/adoptive parent support groups in each State in its National Adoption Directory (<http://naic.acf.hhs.gov/general/nad/index.cfm>).