

The Impact that Age has on Post Permanency Challenges

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Objective: Research suggests that between 1% and 10% of adoptions result in children returning to state custody. Extant research has found that the older children are at the time of the adoption, the more difficulty they may have in adjusting to their adoptive families, which places these families at greater risk for post-placement challenges and/or discontinuity (Faulkner, Adkins, Fong, & Rolock, 2017). Other studies have found that as children reach adolescence, they are at higher risk for discontinuity regardless of their age when the adoption or the length of time they have been in the home (Rolock & White, 2016). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of literature that explores why adoptive families with older children may be at increased risk for discontinuity. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify possible reasons that may contribute to discontinuity as children who have been adopted reach adolescence.

Method: An exploratory study was conducted to examine post-permanency challenges experienced by 20 adoptive families. A total of 4 focus groups were conducted with a total of 20 adoptive and guardianship parents. The adoptive parents' ages ranged from 32 to 59 years old, with a mean age of 44. The majority of participants were mothers (95.5%) who adopted their children anywhere from 16 months to 14 years before participation in the focus groups. The children's age ranges were varied; thirty children were 12 and under, and 15 children were 13 and older. The number of children adopted ranged from 1 to 4 per family. The sample was predominantly White (64%), with 27% African American and 1% Asian. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis involved reviewing the transcripts for accuracy; coding the interviews (Padgett, 2008); and reviewing salient themes to identify and understand plausible explanations to answer the research question as well as looking for disconfirming and corroborating alternative explanations (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results: Families were divided by how they were doing post-adoption. Data analysis revealed that most of the families who were struggling had children 12 and older, which is consistent with the literature (e.g., Liao, 2016; Tan, Major, Marn, Na, & Jackson, 2015). However, it was not the child's age that seemed to influence these families' post-adoptive experiences and put them at risk for discontinuity. Instead, age appeared to be a proxy for whether families were internally protected or externally influenced. Internally protected families referred to the extent to which the adoptive parents were in control of, took part in, and made decisions regarding what was best for their families. Internally protected families were able to insulate and protect their families from many outside forces. They were able to meet their children's needs or found ways to get their children's needs met. Externally influenced families reported an inability to limit outside forces that affected their family and children's adoptive experiences, as well as the extent to which it took away their power and control over their families.

Conclusions: Whether adoptive families were internally protected or externally focused, they both needed support and strategies regarding how to talk with their children about adoption, birth parents, identity, transracial adoption, and other issues unique to adoptive families. Findings from this study suggest the need for more assistance as adoptive children enter their teen years and early adulthood. The challenge is to provide tailored supports throughout the child's life in dealing with identity, attachment, and grief while at the same time emphasizing family unity and both the uniqueness and sameness of the adoptive family.