

What Couples Who Adopt Children From Child Welfare Want Professionals to Know About Supporting Their Marriages

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This article provides suggestions for supporting the marriages of couples who adopt children from the child welfare system. These suggestions emerged from qualitative data obtained from 22 spouses in 4 focus groups. Data reveal that couples want professionals to address the impact of adoption on the marital relationship prior to placement of children, to facilitate contact among adoptive couples that focuses on couple relationships in addition to parenting issues after children have been placed, and to actively support the marital relationship in postplacement/postadoption services even when children's behaviors or needs constitute the presenting problem. Taken together, results indicate that it is appropriate for a broad range of professionals to address the couple relationship throughout the adoption process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Professionals can address the impact of adoption on the marital relationship in preplacement and postplacement phases of adoption.
- Professionals can encourage adoptive couples to form social support networks that include other adoptive couples.

Although researchers have generated valuable knowledge about adoption and about marital relationships in a family context, these bodies of literature are not often integrated. Therefore, despite deep concern for vulnerable children and families among child welfare practitioners and administrators, as well as related professionals, research that is applicable to practice is often fragmented and difficult to synthesize. Moreover, available research often reports and packages findings in ways that render the essence of client experience inaccessible to caring professionals, and offers few practical and specific suggestions to guide transactions between professionals and parents in the context of child welfare practice.

This article represents an effort to aid professionals working in adoption services, family court, child welfare, clinical family social work, couple and family therapy, pastoral counseling, pediatric medicine, and related fields. It centers on the value of supporting the marriages of couples who adopt children from the child welfare system, which is an important, but often overlooked aspect of adoption from child welfare. To give direct voice to a sample of these couples, their experience and suggestions are presented in their own words, and implications for professional practice throughout the adoption process are summarized.

Families of Children Adopted From the Child Welfare System

Efforts to enhance the well-being of children served by the child welfare system in the United States have increased the annual number of these adoptions from 51,000 in 2002 to 57,000 in 2009 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). These efforts have been informed by a growing body of research that describes characteristics

of children in the child welfare system and the families who adopt them, but there remains a need for application of this research to practice (Zamostny, Wiley, O'Brien, Lee, & Baden, 2003).

One stream of research is founded on the clinical tenet that the formation of a family through adoption carries unique challenges and opportunities (Lakin, 1992). This research compares the functioning and needs of adoptive families to other families and illuminates the service needs of adoptive families. In general, adoptive families and other families are similar in measures of well being (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998). O'Brien and Zamostny (2003) conducted a critical analysis of 38 studies and concluded that most adoptive families are notably resilient. Ceballos, Lansford, Abbey, and Stewart (2004) found that the transition to parenthood may, in fact, be less stressful for adoptive parents than it is for birth parents or stepparents. However, when adoptive parents seek professional help, it is usually because they want information or clinical services in response to the special needs of their children (Barth & Miller, 2000; Brooks, Allen, & Barth, 2002).

Parents who foster and adopt from the child welfare system, in particular, care for children with special needs who have experienced abuse and neglect and exhibit concomitant behavioral issues and attachment-related problems (Nickman et al., 2005; Rosenthal & Groze, 1994). Consequently, these parents often concentrate on building attachment and emotional health in their children (Hughes, 1999), and commonly work to develop a sense of family identity (Berry, 1991).

In this process, they may also experience strains from managing the special needs of their children (McGlone, Santos, Kazama, Fong, & Mueller, 2002; Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2006) that affect their adult relationships (Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006). Bird, Peterson, and Hotta-Miller (2002) cast adoptive parent help-seeking as a response to stress pile-up, and identified contributing stressors such as adoption of an older child with a foster-care history, completion of multiple adoptions, coping that primarily employs emotional strategies, experience of a lower sense of mastery in parenting, and receipt of low levels of support from extended family. When related postadoption service needs go unaddressed, such as counseling and other support for such stressors, adoptive parents of children with special needs report lower perceived quality of both parental and marital relationships (Reilly & Platz, 2004).

Marital Quality and Family Well Being

When considering specific associations of marital quality with indicators of family well being, however, relatively little is known about adoptive families in general, and especially those who adopt from child welfare, because the bulk of related research has been conducted with nonadoptive samples. Nonetheless, this body of research consistently indicates that the quality of marital and committed partner relationships is associated with a wide range of family variables such as child behavior problems, coparenting quality, maternal depression, and parent-child conflict (Fishman & Meyers, 2000; Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006; Leidy, Parke, Cladis, Coltrane, & Duffy, 2009; O'Leary & Vidair, 2005).

In an effort to specify this association by focusing on the "spillover" of tensions in the parent-child relationship and the wife-husband relationship, Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler (1999) employed an intensive longitudinal design using daily measures. Among other findings, their data indicate that both mothers and fathers are 41–60% more likely to experience tensions with their children if they experienced marital tensions on the previous day.

Taken together, this body of research is consistent with family therapy theory that centralizes the importance of the marital relationship as the base for child and family well-being (Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1980; Minuchin, 1974), and focuses attention on the potential value of supporting the marital relationships of couples who adopt children from child welfare.

Interaction Between Parents and Professionals

In light of the research cited above, it is clear that couples who adopt from the child welfare system face a complex array of needs on individual, couple, and family levels, all of which may interact systemically. From an ecological perspective, Schweiger and O'Brien (2005, p. 518) noted that "families who choose to adopt children from child welfare are exposed automatically to a system of social services." Consequently, many of these families contact professionals representing not only adoption services, family court, and child welfare, but also clinical family social work, couple and family therapy, pastoral counseling, and pediatric medicine (Leung & Erich, 2002; Rees & Selwyn, 2009). Given the salience of the couple relationship in child and family well being, interaction between adults who adopt from the child welfare system and relevant professionals who strive to support them emerges as a potentially instructive issue for service providers.

Despite the value of optimizing professional efforts in order to ensure efficacy and efficiency and support the primary couple relationship, the literature reveals very few investigations of the transactions between the parents and professionals who interact in child welfare and related fields of practice. One such study finds that biological parents of children in treatment foster care prefer that professionals regard them with honesty, respect, and support (Jivanjee, 1999). In more directly relevant work that synthesized studies of communication between parents and professionals in the child welfare system, Hall and Slembrouck (2009) noted that professionals often depersonalize issues by discussing them in relation to "people" in general rather than the client's specific situation, and prioritize their own perspectives and task orientation over the concerns of clients. Beyond this, an electronic search of *Social Work Abstracts* and *PsychINFO* using combinations of the terms "parent," "couple," "marriage," "child welfare," "professional," and "worker" with "adoption" yielded no peer-reviewed studies published since 1990 that were relevant to this area of inquiry.

In light of the paucity of published research on the interactions between parents and professionals in child welfare—and specifically on the preferences parents express for these interactions—this study seeks to expand the range of information available to conscientious practitioners by eliciting descriptions of desired elements of practice, using couples' own words. The particular question that guides this study is, "What do parents who adopt from the child welfare system have to say about the ways in which professionals can support their marriages?"

Method

This study is part of a larger federally funded project to develop a marriage/relationship curriculum specifically designed for adoptive couples (McKenzie, McKenzie, & Jackson, 2009). In addition to the data reported in this article, other data were collected to inform, pilot test, and refine this curriculum.

Focus Groups

We selected a qualitative approach employing focus groups for this study in order to obtain verbal descriptions of couples' experience and consensus regarding suggestions for professionals. This approach is intended to obtain and report participants' own words faithfully and minimize abstraction or researcher-induced distortion. We planned and conducted focus groups according to established guidelines for family research (Piercy & Hertlein, 2005). These guidelines include organizing data collection by inviting participants with special knowledge of the phenomenon of interest, establishing participants' trust of the facilitators, organizing the setting, and ordering questions with consideration for intensity.

Procedure

This application of focus groups began with composition of a research team that included two social work assistant professors who are also licensed and experienced marriage and family therapists, one social work doctoral student also in clinical practice with couples and families, and one experienced adoption consultant who is also a master social worker. This team was responsible for all aspects of data collection and analysis, and preparation of this article.

All members of the research team worked together to develop a semistructured protocol, with primary inquiries and suggested follow-up probes, and then apply it across all focus groups to ensure consistency. We formulated this protocol from the strengths-based perspective in order to avoid stigmatizing or pathologizing participants (Saleebey, 2002). Focus group facilitators provided the following introduction and asked these primary questions:

We know that families have all kinds of experiences when they go through the adoption process and when seeking services after adoption. Some experiences are positive and some are challenging. Adoption workers and community helpers such as mental health professionals, clergy, physicians, and others can be a resource to help adoptive families.

1. What is the most important thing that professionals taught you about the impact of adoption on your marriage/relationship?
2. Describe a situation where a professional helper really assisted you in preparing for or handling an adoption-related challenge as a couple.

3. What do you wish adoption professionals would have told you in advance of your adoption regarding how it would affect your marriage/relationship?
4. What is the most important thing you learned in your adoption home-study and/or pre-service training that helped you understand how your marriage/relationship would be affected by adoption?
5. Describe what you think adoption professionals and others need to know in order to support relationships between spouses/partners in adoptive families.

We recruited participants through secular adoption support groups for each of four focus groups arranged in locations across southern Michigan. Each focus group was facilitated by two members of the research team, who made research notes during and after the session. Each research team member facilitated at least one focus group. At the beginning of each focus group, we obtained written informed consent and collected demographic information. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audiorecorded. Digital audio files were transcribed by a hired transcriptionist, without identification of participants, and subsequently erased.

We analyzed transcribed data using a “code mapping” procedure as described by Knodel (1993). Code mapping requires that researchers read the transcript to identify sections that are relevant to the research questions and get a sense of possible categories within the data. A second reading is used to produce initial categories of words, phrases, and sentences. Cyclical reading and coding continues until final categories are derived from the data. In this analysis, all four authors read each focus group transcript independently to familiarize themselves with the data. Then three of the four authors (the social work assistant professors and doctoral student) independently coded participants’ statements into initial categories, based on the criteria of relevance to the research question, clarity of expression, and consistency with other included statements. These authors then presented the resulting categories to each other during discussion. Agreement for assignment of statements to initial categories across coders ranged from 85% to 93%. Conjoint cyclical coding and additional discussion resulted in consensus on all categories and identification of illustrative quotations. These categories and quotations were reviewed by the additional author (the adoption consultant) to minimize researcher bias (Piercy & Hertlein, 2005). No changes were recommended.

In order to parsimoniously represent the common voice of participants, we chose quotations that capture broadly endorsed and supported positions for inclusion in this article. We also included quotations that express significant dissonant positions and identified them as such, in order to provide a balanced and accurate account of participants’ preferences.

Participants

Participants included 9 married couples ($n = 18$), 3 married individuals with spouses not present ($n = 3$), and 1 divorced individual ($n = 1$) for a total of 22 participants representing 13 households. Nineteen participants indicated that this was their first marriage, and 2 their second. The mean length of marriage was 18 years (ranging from 8–38 years). The average length of adoptive parenthood was 12.7 years (ranging from 5 months to 32 years), and the average number of children in the home was 4.6 (ranging from 3–13). All adopted children

were initially placed as foster children, and none of these families provided kinship care.

Thirteen participants were women (59%) and 9 were men (41%). The average age was 48 years (ranging from 32–65 years old). Nineteen of the participants identified as White/Caucasian (86%), 1 Black/African American (4.5%), 1 biracial (4.5%), and 1 “other.” All participants described themselves as religious or spiritual. Seventy-two percent of the participants reported having education past high school with 4 completing some college, 5 earning an associate’s degree, 4 a bachelor’s degree, and 4 a master’s degree. Four reported having a high school diploma or GED and 1 reported completing “some high-school.” Eight of the households reported a yearly income over \$50,000, with nearly 40% in the \$50,000–\$75,000 range. Participants were evenly divided between rural and urban/suburban communities.

Results

Our analysis produced three cohesive categories of responses. We titled each category with its most representative quotation, and illustrated it with others in order to clearly present the positions of participants.

They Don’t Focus on the Relationship Between Parents

Participants were unanimous in stating that the adoption process—from home study through postplacement—was so focused on meeting the immediate needs of children that workers never seemed to consider the impact of adoption on the marriage. One wife simply stated, “They don’t focus on the relationship between parents.” Another wife summarized her experience by saying, “I don’t think they looked at that at all. They didn’t look at how this child was gonna impact our relationship and what they can share with us to strengthen that.” A husband reflected on his experience across multiple adoptions and said, “I don’t remember, in any of our adoptions, any worker talking to us [about] how it might impact our marriage.” In a statement that effectively summarizes this category, a husband noted, “We didn’t talk about our relationship at all...It was about how to deal with this...how to deal with that with the kids. Everything was focused on the children.”

Within this category, participants provided specific information regarding their experience of the home study, which is used to inform the placement decision. Collectively, they noted that the quality of the marital relationship was not directly addressed at this crucial stage of the adoption process. A husband said, “They looked at our finances, they looked at how we disciplined, whether or not we were going to take care of this child and that was it.” A wife noted, “In reality they don’t even look at the relationship,” and a husband said, “Maybe there’s a few questions on it but...no, they look at more, how many kids do you have, how many animals do you have, and how much money [do] you make?”

Although it was not a recurrent topic, one focus group spontaneously considered the appropriateness of adoption workers focusing on marriages. This exchange arose in response to 1 wife framing the question, “I wonder if that’s their role. Is that even their role or their function? Are you asking them to do something that really isn’t warranted in their profession?” Responses from other participants in this group indicated that they would not want an adoption worker to evaluate the strength of their marriage as a condition for placement. In this regard, all other participants who spoke noted that incorporating a concern for the couple in initial training should not be confounded with a negative judgment regarding the strength of their relationship. One quote that summarizes this position came from a husband who

said, “Not tell ‘ya, hey we’re not gonna adopt kids because we feel your relationship isn’t strong enough.”

Moving toward alternatives, 1 wife directly acknowledged the importance of the marriage as the foundation for the family, by sharing her understanding “that the child benefits from the relationship that one has” and offering a suggestion for professional guidance, “You have permission to go get everything you need for the two of you.”

Participants went on to suggest that professionals can support marriages in early stages of the adoption process by helping prospective adoptive parents anticipate some of the challenges they are likely to face as a couple. A wife suggested increasing awareness of potential marital challenges and encouraging self-reflection among adoptive couples by saying, “So maybe a list of questions that adoptions workers could have to give prospective parents to say, hey this is something you guys may want to look over.” Participants also made explicit recommendations for couple training, even at the foster-care phase, which many families who adopt children from child welfare experience prior to engaging in actual adoption proceedings. One husband asked, “When you go to trainings for your foster care license...why not couple that with training about relationships...where couples are aware that there may be problems between them, when they get into a foster care situation and on to adoptive?”

Be With Other Adoptive Families

Participants highly valued interaction with other parents who adopted children from child welfare. They found that being with others helped them see their own challenges as relatively common, and helped them manage their emotional reactions to developmental and situational crises. One wife expressed this view by saying, “Be with other adoptive families, because they have pitfalls, things that you think just you and your spouse are doing or vice-versa...it happens everywhere, whether they’re adopted families or not adopted families or just families.”

One productive strategy for adoptive family contact involved building a social support network that could bolster the husband–wife dyad when crises with the children arose. One wife noted, “It was really nice to be able to have other foster/adoptive parents that I could contact and know that it would help, help out.” Such social support can extend to advocacy for a couple within the child welfare system by mobilizing parents and professionals in collaborative action. One wife described her observation of such a network:

I was with another couple that I witnessed at one time. They had just had a real bad crisis in their home with their adopted son and I, I was amazed. These people had—they attended support group—they attended trainings and stuff—they had a good network. And when that crisis came, not only did they have peer foster parents and adoptive parents calling up and saying, “Someone’s gotta help these people,” but they had agency supervisors calling and saying, “Someone’s gotta help these people.” And it was just an amazing network I witnessed in a 24-hour period. Because they had developed such a good network and were seeking help...everyone just pulled together. It was amazing. Wish you could see that all the time.

Participants unanimously valued mentorship from experienced couples and membership in formal support groups. Many valued relationships with experienced peer mentors and were involved in ongoing groups. One wife described a willingness to share as a key element of mentorship:

I mean most people that are adoptive are pretty open people. They’re not—I don’t know many reclusive people who adopt foster kids. I have not just run into ‘em and among the hundreds of people I’ve met, you know, they’re pretty much willing to share their stories and share their stuff. But you gotta get ‘em together and that’s the thing that’s missing.

Some noted that predominant educational and support group activity focuses on parenting, rather than the couple relationship. They suggested targeted meetings for couples focusing on the adult relationship, in addition to meetings centered on parenting issues. One wife identified this missing opportunity, “What you don’t necessarily have is the ‘couples’ aspect. This is nothing really to do with your kids, your kids are not involved. It’s all about you.” A wife specifically suggested that the focus of group activities be extended to address couple issues and offered a format for this to occur, “I think by doin’ retreats and doin’ some of the support groups for those couples—just like you have support groups for the family, you need the retreat for couples.”

He Worked With Us as a Family...He Strengthened Us as a Couple

Participants communicated their recognition of the systemic interaction between couple, child, and whole family functioning, and the value of support from professionals who organize their activity from this perspective. One wife described her experience of this circularity and professional assistance by saying,

You all have to work together and you all have to have your emotions in check, because the child gets mad at us, we get mad at the situation, we’re going back and forth about what to do about it, and then we go to a counselor to find out what strategies to work it out.

Couples described specific experiences of support from adoption workers in the postplacement period that amplified this theme. Even seemingly isolated experiences can deliver significant impact, as one wife noted:

Our adoption worker we had for our boys actually would take us out for coffee, she didn’t pay, but we’d meet for coffee and she would sit and then you know, there we’d be sitting on one side of the booth and she’d be on the other side. When you have two little kids that fight all the time, you never sit next to each other. I mean, it was just so nice...I mean the setting was really good and I think that she really validated that we were a couple and she would meet at times of day that both of us could be there....It might have only been like twice, but I remember that.

Extending this recognition of systemic family functioning, participants noted that the pathway to professional support for their marriages often routed through presenting issues that centered on child behavior. One wife noted:

The therapist that we took our 20-year-old son—who was 9 at that time—to worked with [my husband] and I as a couple. Kinda like a team to get through this and also, she would talk about our relationship with each other. How were we letting this boy get between us? Are we working together as a team? What are you doin’ for each other or yourselves, you know? And that is the only

person that really went to that depth with us. Oh, there was one other person that we saw later...he worked with us as a family group...at that point he strengthened us as a couple in how he, when we went we were having a lot of trouble with that adopted daughter. And what he helped us with is the guilt that we felt that she was falling through the cracks and how we had failed as parents. And he dealt with that and it kind of reunited us so that, you know, I don't think it really helped her a whole lot, but it helped us, together so, I would say, maybe we've had two that really helped.

Discussion

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

At the outset, we delimited this exploratory research to investigate the experiences and preferences of married couples who adopt children from the child welfare system, with a specific focus on ways in which professionals can support their marriages. This decision precludes a comprehensive consideration of the complete interaction of individual child, individual adult, sibling, couple, family, and environmental or contextual variables that might otherwise be of interest to professionals in the field. Although this study focused specifically on married couples, it would be appropriate to extend these findings by illuminating the dynamics of unmarried parenting partners in varied family compositions, such as same sex couples, or other long-term committed partners.

Limitations of this research are due primarily to characteristics of the sample, and implementation of a cross-sectional qualitative method. Although participants were drawn from various locations and membership organizations, they reside in only one state. They are also relatively homogeneous in race, religiosity, income, and education. They report heterogeneity, however, in age, duration of adoptive parenting, and stages of the family life cycle, all of which may affect their experience of their couple relationship, parenting tasks, and contact with larger systems, in currently unknown ways. Research that involves participants of diverse backgrounds and varied family compositions would usefully extend knowledge. Gender patterns could also be illuminated by conducting separate focus groups for men and women.

This study reports only from the perspective of parents, who are an important element of the adoption system, but not the only element. An extension of this study could ask a sample of professionals about their comfort, preparation, and experience with efforts to strengthen the marriages of couples who adopt children from the child welfare system.

The use of qualitative methodology fits well with the research question, but methodological refinement would extend its utility. Although efforts have been made to assure the trustworthiness of this analysis, a procedure like "member checking," which is a process of sharing initial findings with participants in order to verify derived understanding and meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) would be useful to confirm or expand researchers' analysis of participant experience.

Practice Implications

Within its delimitations and limitations, this study highlights practice implications for adoption professionals, couple and family therapists, family social workers, agency administrators, and other professionals who seek to form lasting families through adoption, and help adoptive couples strengthen their marriages. Specific suggestions for professional support of the marriages of couples who adopt from child welfare are offered in the following sections.

Address the impact of adoption on the marital relationship prior to placement. Many professionals who serve adoptive couples face a deep question about whether it is appropriate—or even, more importantly, potentially helpful—to address the marital or couple relationship in the context of adoption from child welfare. Even when an individual professional appreciates the complexity of family relationships and the value of a strong marriage or committed relationship as the foundation for permanent parenting of children with special needs, there may be reticence to take such a position while engaged in the primary task of placing children.

Shedding light on answers to this question, participants in this study endorse efforts to strengthen marriages and committed relationships throughout the adoption process. Further, they offer suggestions that can guide professionals' work in this area. Participants strongly indicate that they would not want a professional to intrude on their intimate boundary by using judgments about their marital quality as a criterion for child placement. They also note, however, that it would be helpful to have a caring professional outline potential impacts that adoption may have on their marriage, in order to allow them an opportunity to fully consider their decision to adopt and better prepare them to deal with challenges that arise after a child is placed with them.

Adoption preparation typically involves education regarding child behavior and parenting procedures. While this information is helpful to many parents, participants in this study indicated that professionals should not be reluctant to directly address marital relationships as part of adoption preparation, as long as this interaction with prospective adoptive parents is approached with respect and recognition of their strengths. Therefore, child and parenting content can be complimented with strength-based education that addresses the couple relationship. Various curricula are available for this purpose, including *Loving Couples, Loving Children* (Gottman, Gottman, & Shapiro, 2010) and the *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program* (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999). Curricula specially tailored to foster, kinship, and adoptive parent couples, including *Building a Home with Heart* (McKenzie, McKenzie, & Jackson, 2009), are also available. Adoption preparation may include a discussion of the range and value of these relationship education programs along with referrals, or practitioners may choose to offer such programs to couples themselves upon completion of appropriate training in use of the materials. Program administrators who apply these findings may wish to build capacity and resources to implement and sustain such training, as well as facilitate staff efforts to support marriages by building an organizational culture that encourages such a focus. This kind of administrative action would be consistent with research on organizational culture in child welfare organizations which clearly establishes the crucial role of leadership and supervision in recruiting and retaining effective workers (Bednar, 2003).

Facilitate social support networks to strengthen couple relationships. Participants in this study highly value mentorship from other adoptive couples, who are seen to have earned particular credibility and wisdom through their experience as adults in adoptive families. According to participants, this mentorship is often delivered through individual and family-to-family interactions, as well as formal support groups. These findings converge with those obtained by Houston and Kramer (2008), who highlighted the contribution of formal and informal support to adoption stability. Social work practice has long recognized the value of social support networks, and practical models are readily available to guide professionals who are interested in expanding

the social support networks of adoptive couples (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990). Groze (1996) identified emotional support, informational support, and concrete aid as the three forms of social support most employed by adoptive families, but the potential value of spiritual support for particular adoptive couples may also be considered.

When applying these findings to practice, it may be important to note that there is a longstanding and potentially problematic tension between professional intervention and the self-help or mutual aid approach used in support groups. Across the social services, this tension has historically polarized attitudes and actions (Leung, 2010).

However, efforts to integrate the benefits of professional service with self-help and support groups may be encouraged by the finding that people who participate in self-help groups are more likely to obtain professional services than those who do not (Kessler, Mickelson, & Zhao, 1997). It appears that adoptive couples would be most open to professionals who provide service while also acknowledging the unique value of peer mentorship and support groups. Professionals may demonstrate their recognition of this value by actively referring couples to local mentors and groups, encouraging couples to include couple relationship content in their interactions with mentors and group members, and consulting with groups seeking to incorporate couple content.

Support the marital relationship even when child issues are the presenting problem. Following placement and adoption, attention is necessarily focused on navigating the child welfare system and the challenges of family formation. This usually involves professionals in a process of helping parents incorporate children into the family and manage difficult child behaviors. Following placement, couples are most likely to seek services in their efforts to manage the special needs of their children, so professionals may face a difficult decision about whether to inquire about the impact of adoption on the marital relationship or offer interventions intended to address it.

Participants in this study, however, remind professionals that family formation and child behavior problems also involve adaptation in the couple relationship. This recognition is consistent with family therapy theory (Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1980; Minuchin, 1974), and opens opportunities for a broad range of professionals to support the marital dyad in specific ways, using a positive, empathic, and understanding professional approach that recognizes the strengths in these relationships.

Drawing from the empirically supported marital therapy of Gottman (1999), couples can be supported by reminding them of the need to carve out time to be together to have fun with each other, as well as engaging both partners in acknowledging and expressing the emotions that their experiences stimulate, balancing and sharpening their communication skills, managing conflict and making difficult decisions together, learning to soothe each other as they encounter individual and dyadic stresses, and nurturing their mutual friendship and intimacy.

Conclusion

The words of participants in this study provide direction to professionals who strive to support adoptive couples through a multitude of challenges and accomplishments. Perhaps most encouraging, is their recognition that—even while caring for children—professionals can indeed focus on the relationship between parents and play a valuable role in maintaining and strengthening the marital relationships of the couples with which they work.

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