

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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Supporting Families Waiting to Adopt

BY KIMBERLY HARRELL

The wait can be challenging for many attempting to grow their families through adoption. Along with this wait, which is oftentimes quite long, come significant emotions—including joy, sadness, anxiety, excitement, and anticipation. This powerful mix of emotions can be hard for many families to navigate. As adoption professionals, it is our responsibility to support these families; to understand the journey each individual person has taken; to know and provide what they need from us moving forward.

This can be a daunting task for professionals, as we are busy supporting current placements, birth parents, post-adoptive clients, and adopted adults. Yet the rewards of giving our waiting families the time and attention to which they are entitled are many. Not only will we provide them with a superior adoption experience—which is our duty—such families will also be more likely to return to our agencies in their time of need, allowing us to provide the services and support they need to be successful post-adoption. They will become stakeholders in our organizations and might be called upon when other waiting families or prospective parents need support. All parties can then reap the benefits of relationships forged in trust, support, and understanding.

It can be difficult to know the needs of each unique waiting family. There is no one formula that fits each individual situation. But we can start with seeking a true understanding of why the waiting is difficult for so



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many families, and there are things we can provide that will allow them to feel known, cared for, and empowered. All families need information, education, and connectedness during their adoption journeys, and it is our duty and well within our power to provide that for them.

Putting the Wait in Perspective

It is crucial to understand why this time of waiting is hard for our families. Unless we have been there ourselves, waiting to adopt a child, the answer is not so obvious as we might think. Many imagine this time as a period of excitement and anticipation only, and assume these are the feelings of those actually experiencing the wait. But it's important to recognize that each waiting family has a different experience, a different history that brought them to adoption.

Those of us who work directly with families have the privilege of knowing what these journeys can look like. Outside the safety of that relationship with a trusted adoption professional—and sometimes, even within it—many people are reluctant to share the details of their history or struggles, their fears and other conflicting emotions, and as a result find themselves isolated and marginalized as they wait to adopt. This is where we as adoption professionals can and should step in, and put into place programs and supports that will allow our waiting families to feel heard and empowered.

All waiting families can benefit from having a thorough understanding of what, exactly, creates the often-long wait times in adoption. Providing them with as much information, education, and support as possible can help them feel more in control, less at the mercy of factors and events over which they have no say.

During the adoption process, there is usually a great deal of emphasis on how long a family will wait and how long they have been waiting. As their professional point of contact, we get and answer the question “How long will we wait?” countless times. Coming to an agreement on when this wait actually begins is the first step in answering this question. What our families see as the start of “the wait” is often different from what agencies and attorneys consider the start.

There are two potential approaches to this conundrum. The first is to join with each family and follow their thinking on when their waited started. (For many, the wait begins at the time they first started to consider adopting.) Another approach is for the adoption professional to decide when the wait begins and explain it to every family they serve, so each and every family knows precisely how to determine the “start of their

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wait.” For example, the adoption professional might determine that wait times for their families begin upon completion of the home study. This allows for consistency across the agency/attorney and all the families it serves, and helps families know what to expect. Getting everyone on the same page can help alleviate frustration.

Creating perspective on wait time can be very empowering for families. But of course there is no concrete way to answer the question, “How long will we have to wait to adopt?” The response of “It depends” is true, but frustrating for the prospective family that wants specifics, and can feel like it is in opposition to the feeling of empowerment we are hoping to give our families. We can give some of that power back to them by sharing what we know.

Providing Information in Order to Empower

We have all heard and used the phrase “Knowledge is power.” For families waiting to adopt, knowledge is often empowering. We have the ability to give back some of the power that is lost to families during this frustrating time.

People like concrete facts and information that is consistent over time. In the world of adoption, however, things are rarely consistent—they are ever-changing. This can make waiting families feel even more vulnerable. In order to feel more grounded, families often look for numbers, statistics, explanations, processes. We can give them all of these things.

Numbers and statistics do not always tell the whole story, of course, and can at times be inadvertently misleading; therefore, it is always necessary to provide needed disclaimers. For example, for those pursuing intercountry adoption, we have information about specific countries and the overall process that can be extremely helpful. We also know that intercountry adoption has declined by 75% since 2004, in part due to slowdowns and shutdowns in various countries.¹ This is not good news, but it is the truth, and with this and other truthful information, families can make the decision that is best for them.

Making this information readily accessible on a website or in handouts will cut down on the number of phone calls and questions you will manage and give your families instant access and answers to their questions. There is also a great deal of transparency in this practice, which contributes to the positive relationship you are building with your families.

¹ U.S. Department of State. (2016). Adoptions Abroad Statistics. Retrieved from <https://travel.state.gov/content/adoptionsabroad/en/about-us/statistics.html>

This can be done in explaining your agency processes as well. Just because we as adoption professionals know the process inside and out does not mean our families get it the first time we explain it. Creating clear flow charts for each program you have and posting them on your website will be helpful for all. These can also be provided as handouts and referenced as often as necessary.

Continuing Education While Families Wait

Ongoing education is essential to empowering waiting families. Education differs from the information mentioned just above, in that the educational focus is on becoming an adoptive parent and less about facts, statistics, and processes.

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The education process can begin during the orientation process and carry into the home study. While home study criteria vary from state to state, there is always an element of education required. Families are introduced to the concepts of openness and special needs, educated about birth families and cultural issues, and challenged to consider what characteristics in a child they are open to. The education process begins early on, but it doesn't need to end once a family has settled into their "wait."

Once the paperwork is done and filed, families often find themselves in a holding pattern, waiting and wondering. This is the perfect time to encourage families to participate in training that pertains to the specific needs and challenges and joys of adoptive parenting. Having a list of local resources can help point them in the right direction and allow them to feel productive even as they wait, which is empowering for many.

Finding Connectedness

A sense of connection for and among waiting families is often the missing piece. Gathering information and seeking ways to learn are easier, more concrete things to do. Being connected requires an element of vulnerability, and families waiting to adopt already feel vulnerable. Our human nature often keeps us from wanting to put ourselves out there—it can feel too risky to share with others how difficult the waiting has been.

As adoption professionals, we have the opportunity to guide our families to the kind of connectedness that will help them feel seen and understood. This can be done by fostering relationships with agency professionals, other waiting families, and families that have already adopted.

Be sure that waiting families have easy access to agency staff. Each family needs to feel known by their social worker; taking the time to answer their questions and listen to their concerns, even if there is nothing you can do while you all wait, can go a long way toward meeting this need to feel connected. Putting their needs on the back burner while they wait cannot facilitate the connectedness that many of them need.

Agencies can also provide regular training and social opportunities for waiting families. Bringing waiting families together in a large group may not always produce the result you desire—sometimes these events are held and families are physically present but emotionally removed and cautious, which keeps them from connecting to those around them. Working in opportunities for families to interact with each other, sometimes in smaller groups or even one-on-one, can be more helpful.

Whenever possible, include waiting families in events that involve adoptive families. Engaging with families that have adopted is very powerful, and can provide a great deal of hope to those waiting.

Social media is another way to provide connectedness and meet people with an interest in adoption. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are all great places to promote events and share articles, pictures, and memes that are adoption-oriented. Social media cannot be the only way your agency provides opportunities for connection to your waiting families, but it can be a good way to enhance existing programs and face-to-face interaction.

Finally, encouraging your waiting families to create a support system made up of their own family and friends allows them to connect with those who have known and loved them for a long time—since before the adoption process started. We know that the agency is not always available and cannot provide all the emotional support our families both need and deserve. Whenever possible, encourage them to find and cultivate a small group of their own family and peers they can fully trust and rely on as they wait and after they adopt.

Final Summary and Recommendations

In order for adoption professionals to move away from categorizing waiting families as merely being in a holding pattern and move them into a place of active participation and empowerment, we must intercede and provide crucial support. Agencies have the ability to meet both the tangible and intangible needs of these families. Most importantly, we must work to understand where they are emotionally and what they are going through, and be attentive to that throughout the adoption process.

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Here are some practical suggestions of steps adoption professionals can take to better support their waiting families:

Make sure that those working with waiting families understand why “the wait” is so difficult. Recognizing that each family struggles for different reasons is important. We have a responsibility to be available and respond with empathy and compassion as they wait.

Provide information. Concrete facts and materials give our families something to hold on to. This information can be in the form of handouts or on a website for easy and ongoing access.

Provide opportunities for education. Doing this during the waiting process benefits families and provides them with more information for post-adoption life. Once the home study is complete, many feel like there is nothing to do but wait. Ongoing learning and educational opportunities—about parenting, adoption, what to expect, etc.—will allow families to feel active and engaged rather than dormant.

Help them feel connected to the agency, other adoptive families, and their own community. Agencies have the perfect platform for helping waiting families feel connected; through trainings and social events, families can spend time those waiting to adopt and those who have already adopted. We know that an agency alone cannot meet all the needs of waiting families, so it is in our best interest as professionals to help them develop a support system that includes the agency, the adoption community, and the people in their lives who already love and care for them.

Conclusion

When professionals that work with prospective adoptive families strive to meet the needs of all waiting families through information, ongoing education, and opportunities for connection, we see many positive results. Families should feel known and cared for when they are most vulnerable. The building of trust and support during the waiting period can become the foundation for the building of community—one that includes your agency, its families, and their loved ones and others interested in adoption. If families in your community feel supported in their wait to become parents, they will be more likely to return to you seeking necessary guidance and support in the future. These are the families who will become ambassadors—not only for your agency, but for adoption.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Harrell, M.Ed., LPC, NCC is the program director of Pregnancy and Adoption Support with Catholic Charities, Diocese of Arlington. She holds a Master's in Education from Virginia Tech University, and has over twenty years of experience working with those whose lives have been touched by adoption. Kimberly is also in private practice in Centreville, Virginia, where she works with individuals, families, and adolescents. She has written a number of articles on the importance of support for birth parents, and also speaks to groups of mental health professionals to educate them on the adoption-related issues they may encounter in their practices.



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