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Supporting Children and Families When Adoption Dissolution Occurs

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Disruption or dissolution is something that no one involved with an adoption wants to happen, and much has been written about the prevention of this occurrence. The reality is that some adoptive families, despite years of effort and multiple and varied interventions, find themselves unable to remain together as a functioning family. A small yet increasing number of these families seek dissolution as a result of the relational and functional crises their family faces.

The focus of this article is *adoption dissolution*, which occurs when parents that have finalized an adoption relinquish their parental rights to that child; the child is then either adopted a second time by another family, or placed in the state foster care system. The term *adoption disruption* is also sometimes used in this context; however, technically a disruption occurs when a family is planning to legally adopt a child – who is typically in their custody as a foster child – but decides not to complete the adoption finalization. Disruptions typically occur within a matter of months after a child is placed in a family, whereas dissolutions can and do occur years after the adoption.

Understandably, very strong opinions and emotions about dissolution and disruption exist both within and outside of the adoption community. This article describes some of the unique challenges in working with families going through dissolution, and seeks to identify the need for a best-practices model that seeks the best long-term interests of the adopted children involved while at the same time addressing the needs and limitations that exist within the adoptive family. In this article, we share



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the observations we have made while working with many families going through the dissolution process. We also discuss the outcomes we have seen and discuss recommendations for more formal study of outcomes in this population.

Statistics on dissolutions are difficult to find for a variety of reasons; however, according to our best estimates the rate of dissolution falls between 1% to 10% of adoptions. There have been a few studies on disruptions and dissolutions as well as a number of articles about the factors that contribute to these situations. Many articles have also been written on ways to prevent or address the problems that often lead to disruption/dissolution. An excellent recent review of the above data can be found in a report titled “Adoption Disruption and Dissolution” at the Child Welfare Information Gateway.¹

However, there is virtually no research in existence regarding the process and outcomes of disruption and dissolution situations. Very little has been written about the process, either descriptive or prescriptive; this article aims to provide some of both, to the best of our ability. It includes observations we have made as we have sought to counsel families going through this process, most of whom have come to us because there is so little information out there to help them.

It is important to note that, due to the current lack of research on this issue, the observations included in this paper are anecdotal, and the suggestions can only be theoretical in nature at this point in time. This article includes our observations regarding how dissolution and re-adoption occur, as well as some suggestions reflecting practices that we have found to be helpful to each of the parties involved in this confusing and painful process.

Factors in Dissolutions

While there is obviously no clear, exact set of factors that can predict an imminent dissolution, we have observed a number of commonalities in the cases we have seen. Some signals that a dissolution is likely include a parent repeatedly stating that they are afraid for their physical safety, the survival of their marriage, or – even more often – the safety of their other children, biological or adopted. They may say that the adopted child is purposeful and intentional in many or all of his problematic behaviors, and that the primary intent behind these behaviors is a personal attack on one or more individuals in the family.

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¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau (2012). Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s_disrup.cfm

Observationally, we see a tendency to over-pathologize behavior that may be relatively normal, or at least normal for an adopted child with attachment difficulties. This often takes the form of Reactive Attachment Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and many others, which may or may not be clinically warranted depending on the situation. We have also often seen labels used which are not appropriate in children prior to their later teen years, such as sociopathic, psychopathic, borderline personality disorder, and narcissistic personality disorder. In a dissolution, one or both parents become absolutely convinced of these labels, and seem to view the child and virtually all of his behaviors through this harmful and very negative lens.

Another common characteristic of pre-dissolution families is the serious deterioration of the marital relationship. Many couples have considered or succumbed to a split within the relationship resulting from one or more issues related to the adopted child. In a number of couples this has progressed to parents living separately in an effort to manage the conflict.

It is typical to see a dynamic of constant power struggles, in which both parent and child seem incapable of stepping out of the oppositional roles in which they have become stuck. In this dynamic, a parent has often moved from finding it difficult not to get “sucked into” a conflict, to expecting and often provoking an oppositional and contrary stance within the child – even if this is not the child’s initial position toward the parent.

In our observation, there are other parental characteristics which appear to reflect significant and possibly predictive dissolution factors. One is that many of the parents, especially the mothers, tend to be highly educated and fall within the upper middle to upper income brackets. This factor has actually been found in a few of the available research studies as well (Festinger, 1986; Rosenthal, et al., 1988; Berry & Barth, 1990). A second group that seems overrepresented in the families that experience dissolution are older parents who come to the realization that they just do not have the energy, flexibility, or physical ability needed to parent highly challenging kids. In yet another category of families, one of the spouses has died in the early years of the adoption; most often, in our experience, it is the adoptive mother who seeks the dissolution after losing her husband.

Another observation we have made is that the inevitability of a dissolution seems most strongly predicted by the adoptive mother reaching her limit or breaking point. Whether it is the father or the mother who appears most active in seeking the dissolution, we hear the typical description of the mother having reached a point of no return where she cannot even consider trying yet another strategy or intervention. In these situations,

we also see many of the adoptive fathers being only minimally involved with parenting in the home, except in instances in which the mother is overwhelmed and his attempts to fix things end up feeding into the divisions that have already occurred in the home.

While many of the family dynamics we have observed are typical in other homes as well, they are marked by a degree of intensity, pervasiveness, and entrenchment among this cohort of families seeking dissolution. It is possible that, for various reasons, these marriages and families are, at the outset, more susceptible to the unique pressures of dealing with children with attachment issues. Further study and understanding of these dynamics would prove extremely useful in developing more effective interventions for struggling adoptive families, possibly leading to greater success in preventing dissolution.

The Process

The process of a dissolution can look very different depending on the laws of each state, as well as the involvement or lack of involvement of an adoption agency or the state social welfare system. One scenario involves the relinquishment of parental rights to the state, necessitating the child's entrance into (or return to) the foster care system – whether that means a residential care facility, or a foster family with the possibility of a re-adoption occurring at some later point. In some states, this scenario also has legal consequences for the adoptive parents in the form of a charge of child abandonment, which has lifelong ramifications (such as being unable to teach or care for children in a professional capacity).

In a different scenario, the family seeking to dissolve their adoption is able to find a family willing to re-adopt the child. The initial family relinquishes parental rights, and the new family legally adopts the child (with the help of lawyers on both sides, in most cases). This is also known as a “family-to-family adoption.” Most of the cases we have been involved with have followed this path, which often allows for a planned and thoughtful process of informing and preparing the child and transitioning him to his new home. It can bring with it some significant challenges, and as such requires a great deal of coordination and trust between all parties involved.

The drawbacks to re-adoption, as we have seen, appear to originate from significant entanglement and poor boundaries in one or both of the relinquishing parents. This entanglement can create a strong desire to try to control the process and the re-adopting family. The child is then caught in the middle, and can sometimes even be drawn out of a healthy situation and back into an unhealthy or even dangerous situation with the

relinquishing family. Many people are shocked that a family pleading for help to find another home for their child would then disrupt the very process they began, but we have seen it happen on several occasions – and, in a few situations, it has happened to the same child multiple times.

In another type of scenario – though an uncommon one in our experience – an adoption agency participates in the process, sometimes taking legal guardianship of the child from the time of relinquishment until the adoption is finalized by the re-adopting family. This can provide protection for the child in situations like those described above, where instability of the relinquishing parents might endanger the child prior to the re-adoption finalization. In several of these cases, adoption agency involvement was clearly successful in preventing some potentially damaging actions by the relinquishing parents from affecting the child. However, laws vary significantly from state to state regarding who can be involved in a dissolution and to what extent they can be involved in helping a family dissolve their adoption and find a family willing to re-adopt the child. There are also a number of significant disincentives for adoption agencies to become involved in the dissolution process – including financial, reputational, and legal considerations. As a result, many families seeking a dissolution are unable to find agencies or professionals to guide and support them throughout the process. We believe that it is incumbent upon the professionals, lawmakers, and leaders in the adoption community to develop a solution to this problem and better support the children and families experiencing dissolution or re-adoption.

The Child's Needs

In the process of a dissolution, when typical interventions and support have failed, the primary concern for all involved should be the child's needs and individual best interest. This is, in our experience, the foremost concern for most relinquishing parents in their decision to move in this direction.

Due to the deterioration of the home situation in many cases, the first need that should be addressed is the establishment of the child's safety and stability. Most often this involves removing the child from the unhealthy and, at times, dangerous situation that has developed. This may involve respite care or some other temporary living situation outside the adoptive home while the parents determine what they believe is the necessary and best path forward.

Secondly, it is important that the child receive a truthful yet sensitive explanation for the changes that are occurring. This explanation should

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not include all of the parents' emotions or a list of the child's problems or misbehaviors – it should be a basic statement explaining that the current situation is not healthy and is not working, and that the parents and others are figuring out how to best take care of the child.

When a decision is made to find a new family interested in adopting the child, this should be communicated to the child only when all involved are certain that this is, in fact, imminent. It is not fair to the child to discuss this as a possibility that one or both parents are merely considering, or as one potential option based on some behavior change they want from the child. It should only be discussed when it is absolutely certain that there is no other viable option. The exact time frame of communication depends upon a number of factors, including the age of the child, his or her emotional stability, the individual family situation, and behavioral history. We believe that informing a child weeks or months before the transition to a foster home or new family occurs is likely to accelerate any deterioration, giving him more time to act out or punish the relinquishing parents. At the same time, it is also inappropriate to surprise or mislead the child – say, by allowing him to believe he is going somewhere else for a short visit when, in fact, he will not be returning to the home he has known.

A third and vital recommendation that we make to families is that they aid the child in developing a narrative about what is happening – and most importantly, why it is happening. We have found that this narrative is helpful to the relinquishing family in dealing with the guilt and loss, as well as to the child going through the grieving and reattachment process with her re-adoptive family. In our experience, it is most helpful when this narrative focuses on the primary theme of a family's inability to meet the needs of a specific child. Regardless of the specific circumstances, the many and varied reasons for a dissolution ultimately translate into the fact that the family is unable to meet the child's needs. Even if it appears that the relinquishing parents are able but unwilling to do the hard work necessary (which is rarely the case, in the families we have observed), it is not helpful to suggest to the child that the family is unable to care for her in the way that she needs due to the parents' moral deficit.

Here is one possible example of a narrative for the child, depending on her age and the specifics of the situation:

You know that we have been having some real struggles for a while and that we have all tried to figure out how to deal with those. We have talked to lots of smart people, and they have helped us realize that we are just not able to give you the kind of home and parenting you need to heal and grow and be happy. We don't know of any way that this family can do that for you. But

there are families out there that have different situations and knowledge and skills that can give you what you need, and we have found a family like that.

So we have come to the very tough decision that you will go and live with this family and become part of their family and be adopted by them. This is not because you are bad, or because something is wrong with you. We just can't give you the kind of home that you need to grow up into the healthy, mature, and strong person we know you are inside. You deserve a home like that.

We will miss you, and we will always care about you. We will be able to hear about what is going on in your life. We can also let you know what is happening here, and we can probably talk to or even see each other at some point. But we will let you and your new family figure out when and how that could best happen after you settle in there.

We want you to know that it is okay to love your new family. That will make us happy, because it will make you happy. It doesn't mean that you don't love us or that we don't love you. It's also okay for you to be sad or even mad at us, because this is hard. Let me tell you about your new family.

Ideally, the relinquishing parents will lovingly and appropriately communicate these things to the child. If they are unable to do so, someone else – a therapist, social worker, respite family member, or re-adopting parent – must communicate with the child as soon as possible. If a professional is the one talking with the child, it could also be helpful to have the family present to acknowledge and agree with what the professional is saying, which in turn will carry more weight with the child.

Without guidance, most children will settle on an explanation that puts the blame on themselves, resulting in additional damage to their self-esteem as well as their ability to accept love from others. Most of the families with whom we have worked have been able to help talk with and guide the child through the process, after receiving information and coaching on how to go about it.

Finally, it is crucial that the child have access to appropriate long-term support in the form of counseling, ideally with a person who has experience with and knowledge of attachment and grief issues. For all adults working with and supporting this child, it is important that the child's experience is always heard and validated. Whether he communicates sadness, anger, relief, fear, or confusion, his experience must be listened to, understood, and valued by those around him.

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The Dissolving/Sending Family's Needs

In our experience, families seeking dissolution and re-adoption with a new family for their adopted child only reach that decision as a difficult, often excruciating last resort. Most have attempted all conceivable treatment and temporary placement options they can find and afford. Many have experienced financial devastation trying all of the avenues available to them. All of the parents we have dealt with have expressed unimaginable guilt and shame for being unable to fulfill their promise to provide a loving home for their child forever. In the midst of a dissolution process, the relinquishing family's needs are often overlooked or disregarded.

At the point at which a professional or lay counselor becomes involved with a family discussing dissolution, a critical early step is to help them determine their true maximum capacity in terms of dealing with the difficult problems and behaviors their family is experiencing. While most families don't use this precise language in defining their limits, most have reached at least a tentative conclusion that the needs of the child in their home exceeds their capacity to meet those needs. These parents need a professional to discuss this issue with them at length, so that if they do have some additional capacity they have not yet utilized or been made aware of, they can pursue that option prior to the last resort of dissolution.

If, however, a family has already reached their maximum capacity and it is obvious that it is not enough for the child, then the support and guidance of a professional can help them reach their final decision, begin the process of grieving, and address some of the self-blame that all relinquishing parents experience in a dissolution. Among the families we have served, we have found that just talking with them can do a tremendous amount to relieve some of their crushing guilt and begin to see a way forward.

The experience of these relinquishing parents also requires validation. Even in situations in which their reporting of the problems becomes overblown or exaggerated due to turmoil in the family, the parents' experiences and feelings need to be heard and not dismissed. This allows them to be more intentional and thoughtful in helping their child through this process, rather than being distracted by their own feelings of defensiveness and self-condemnation. In our experience, this act of listening and seeking to understand what the parents have been through is the only way to develop the kind of trusting relationship that will allow them to effectively work with professionals and others involved in supporting the child.

One important concept that relinquishing parents need to understand is the difference between "letting go" and "casting out." Due to the intensity

of these situations, some parents reach a place where they talk and act in a way that communicates they are casting their child out of the family. This is obviously highly damaging to the child, and has the potential to have a lifelong impact on how he views himself. With some explanation and encouragement, the vast majority of relinquishing parents will see the importance of communicating to their child that it is necessary for them to let go so that his needs can be met. With guidance, parents can also find ways to assist and support the child throughout this difficult process, helping him understand and accept the seismic shift occurring in his life.

A professional or well-trained and experienced lay counselor should help the family reach and discuss the sort of narrative previously mentioned, which can aid both child and parents. Helping them find a way to discuss a very painful decision in a truthful, loving way is both possible and necessary. These families will also need help in developing a plan for communicating that narrative to the child at the right time, in the right manner, in a way appropriate for her age and level of development.

Professionals can also help parents recognize the need to grieve and determine how to do so individually and as a family. Without a plan, without support in their grieving process, a family can become mired in their grief – or ignore it for a time, only to see it resurface in the family later on. They also need to decide when and how to communicate what is happening to their friends and family.

Finally, many families have told us that after going through this process – which they describe as the most painful and difficult thing they have ever done – they then find themselves almost totally alone, often rejected by the people who once supported their adoption decision. Friends and family might abandon the family out of discomfort, uncertainty, or condemnation. It is critical for those in the relinquishing family's life to recognize and understand the magnitude of the loss they are experiencing. Though it is not through death that the family has lost a child, they have still lost one. They will experience the full impact of that loss – even as they struggle with guilt over the decision that led to it.

The Receiving Family's Needs

The receiving or re-adoptive family has its own distinct set of needs that must be addressed when a dissolution has occurred. The first area of need is that of recruiting and training these families. Children in need of re-adoption have, on average, a level of greater need than the typical adopted child. In addition, they have experienced yet another major loss – relinquishment by parents they thought were their “forever family”

– that will assuredly make subsequent trust and attachment more difficult for them. Families re-adopting these children need to be even more psychologically healthy, stable, and experienced than typical adoptive families. They require specialized training that will give them the knowledge and tools they need to establish and maintain a family environment of support, healing, and growth.

Despite the best efforts of adoption agencies, orphanage staff, and our own child welfare system, vital information is not always provided to adopting families, which can further separate their expectations from reality. This need not and should not happen in the case of re-adoption. It is essential to provide the new family as much information as possible about the challenges they will face. This can be a huge benefit for them – one that might not have been available to the first adoptive family. If the re-adoptive family understands all of the behaviors and issues ahead of time, they can and will have far more realistic expectations than the original family might have had.

A final need we have seen in some re-adopting families is the need for a certain level of mediation or the enforcement of boundaries. In a number of relinquishing families, we have observed significant boundary issues on the parents' side that can be exacerbated by the stress and grief of relinquishment, resulting in intrusive and demanding actions and behaviors. These behaviors may be worsened by even healthy discussion or confrontation. If that occurs, a third party – a professional or agency representative – should step in to establish and enforce the limits around contact with the child, so that her new environment will feel as safe and stable as possible.

Future Research Directions

It is critical that we obtain more information about the dissolution process and its impact on children and families, so that we can develop better practices for situations in which it becomes imminent. It is unacceptable to dismiss this problem by saying “it should never happen,” or by talking only of how to prevent it. Preventive measures are necessary and can often prove effective, but if dissolution does occur, we need to know how to best support the children and families affected.

We must study and improve the process of preparing families prior to adoption, and work on better supporting children and all parties involved during and after dissolution. Knowing with accuracy the predictors within dissolving adoptive families is crucial. We also need to study and identify the types of families that are best equipped to support and parent children

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with especially high needs, like those coming from disruptions and dissolutions.

There should be a far more knowledgeable and supportive process available to families experiencing dissolution. It is the responsibility of child welfare professionals and the entire adoption community to establish a best-practices model and work to align adoption policies and laws with that model, in the interests of children and families.

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As co-founder and Director of Family Relations of Hope for Orphans, Robin Pennington has over seven years' worth of experience listening to, encouraging, and learning from families experiencing dissolution. She and her husband Paul co-founded Hope for Orphans in 2002, and the organization merged with FamilyLife in 2003. Robin is a pioneer in developing church-based ministries to aid and support children and post-adoptive families. Robin and Paul have been married for 35 years. Five of their six children and four of their twelve grandchildren came to their family through adoption.



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