

Adoption Advocate



Predictors of Adoption Disruption and Dissolution: A Literature Review

BY LINDSAY LANHAM

Predictors of Adoption Disruption and Dissolution: A Literature Review

BY LINDSAY LANHAM

Unsuccessful adoptions are markedly complex. Child welfare scholars have attempted to guide and inform social work practice by isolating specific variables that may serve as “predictors” of adoption placement instability. This article provides an overview of the existing empirical evidence pertaining to adoption disruption or dissolution and associated variables. Mirroring most studies on this topic, this article highlights factors related to the child, the adoptive parent(s), and the professional adoption services.

Child-Related Factors

It is well documented in the literature that the *child’s age* at the time of adoption and the *child’s behaviors* in the adoptive home are the strongest predictors of adoption instability. In their now classic and heavily cited study on adoption, Barth et al. (1988) examine the outcomes

- **Disruption:** An adoption that is unsuccessful prior to an adoption being legally finalized.
- **Dissolution:** An adoption that is terminated after an adoption is legally finalized.

Age of child at adoptive placement	Percentage of adoption disruptions ¹
3-5 years of age	4.7% of adoptions disrupted
6-8 years of age	10.4% of adoptions disrupted
9-11 years of age	17.1% of adoptions disrupted
12-14 years of age	22.4% of adoptions disrupted
15-18 years of age ²	26.1% of adoptions disrupted

Source: Barth et al. (1988), p. 230

of public adoption cases (n=926) in northern California from 1980-1984. Children under the age of 3 were removed from the sample as were children placed out of state. Although not the first large-scale study on age and adoption outcomes in the U.S., this study is particularly noteworthy for its rigor and methodical approach. Findings show that as the age of the child increases so does the risk of an adoptive placement’s disruption.

¹ Barth et al. (1998) use the term “adoption disruption” to refer to all adoption placement breakdowns regardless of the legal status (finalized or pending) of the adoption.

² The age category of 15-18 years is less stable for a variety of interesting reasons beyond the scope of this paper.

Despite the myriad changes in child welfare practice and policy since the 1980s, these early findings have been consistently replicated in a number of rigorous studies over the past two decades for both domestic and intercountry adoptions³ (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004; Julia, 2013; Palacios et al., 2005; Paniagua et al., 2019; Reilly & Platz, 2003; Sattler & Font, 2020).

Many theories have emerged (and were later empirically tested) to help explain why older children appear to be particularly vulnerable to adoption disruption or dissolution. Several scholars were quick to note that the *child's age at the time of adoptive placement* may be a proxy for the amount of time a child has been in an out-of-home placement; however, studies do not confirm that the length of time in care is associated with adoption instability (Barth et al., 1988; Coakley & Berrick, 2008). Scholars increasingly agree that the *age of the child at adoptive placement* more accurately captures an accumulation of negative experiences that harm the child's development and perception of the world, thereby increasing the likelihood that the child will experience mood instability and express challenging behaviors (Helder et al., 2014; Palacios et al., 2018). This theory does gain additional support from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study completed by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente. In the ACEs study, researchers proved that as a child's ACE score increases so does the likelihood that the child will experience less favorable health and well-being outcomes (Felitti et al., 1988).

Unsurprisingly, a *child's behaviors* in the adoptive home are also reliable predictors of

adoption placement instability. Children who exhibit aggression or children who sexually act out are at an increased risk of adoption disruption or dissolution. In a study using case data (n=74) from the Illinois child welfare system, Smith and Howard (1991) documented that children who exhibit sexually acting-out behaviors were 74% more likely to experience an unsuccessful adoption. Selwyn et al. (2014) found that aggressive behaviors (particularly aggression perceived as violent) in the home significantly increase risks of adoption disruption and dissolution.

It is well documented in the literature that the child's age at the time of adoption and the child's behaviors in the adoptive home are the strongest predictors of adoption instability.

Placing a child with siblings yields mixed results, with some studies suggesting that sibling placements are more stable (Rolock & White, 2016) while others suggest just the opposite (Selwyn, 2018). In their comprehensive review of the literature, DiGiovanni and Font (2021) highlight that sibling placements are complicated, and outcomes are difficult to predict. In social work practice, these findings seem to make sense as social workers can attest to the fact that sometimes sibling groups thrive, while at other times sibling groups seem to increase stress and overall discord in the adoptive home.

³ This trend is also observed in guardianship placements. These findings are primarily for public domestic adoptions because private domestic adoption is usually infant adoption. We would rarely see disruptions/dissolutions for this age group. In fact, many studies examining adoption outcomes eliminate children under three.

Other child-related factors where there is no established association, a weak association, or mixed research findings include gender, race and ethnicity⁴, child's intellectual ability, school performance, and medical diagnoses (Barth et al., 1988; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004; Palacios et al., 2018; Rosenthal, 1993; Sattler & Font, 2020).

Adoptive Parent-Related Factors

Evidence of predictive factors relating to the adoptive parent or adoptive family are less conclusive. Demographic characteristics generally yield mixed results or generate weak associations, while measures of the *parent-child relationship* are better indicators of adoption success (Barbosa-Ducharne & Marinho, 2018).

Measures of the parent-child relationship are better indicators of adoption success.

Adoption research studies that examine characteristics of the adoptive parent such as age, marital status, parenting experience⁵, income, and race and ethnicity yield mixed results across the literature. Interestingly, the adoptive mother's educational attainment level emerges as an indicator of adoption placement instability, with higher educational levels associated with more disruptions or dissolutions when compared to mothers with more modest academic achievements (Barth et al., 1988; Coakley & Berrick, 2008). More contemporary research, however, complicates

these findings suggesting that the adoptive mother's education is actually a proxy for "heightened expectations" regarding the adopted child, and it is instead the adoptive parent's *expectations* that are associated with adoption instability (Barth & Miller, 2000; Helder et al., 2014; Palacios et al., 2018).

In their study of adopted children (n=609) from Nevada, Reilly and Platz (2003) measured adoptive parents' expectations (of their child) along with other variables (e.g., child's age). *Parental expectations* emerge as a significant indicator, with the greatest influence on adoption outcomes (Reilly & Platz, 2003, p. 799). Other studies have replicated these findings (Selwyn et al., 2015). Of particular interest for intercountry adoptions, researchers suggest that as adoptive parents wait for their adopted child to join their family, they "idealize" their child and the adoption experience thus leading to unmet or disjointed expectations (Lopes Almeida et al., 2021; Palacios et al., 2018). Adoptive parents who can readjust or better align their expectations are far more likely to experience positive adoption outcomes (Reilly & Platz, 2003).

The parenting style of adoptive parents is also linked to adoption outcomes. Many studies have examined the impact of parenting styles on adoption outcomes (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004; Reilly & Platz, 2003). In their recent publication Barbosa-Ducharne and Marinho (2019) examined all unsuccessful adoptions (n=117) in Portugal from 2006-2009. Their findings showed that parents with rigid parenting styles were five times more likely to experience adoption placement

⁴ It is important to note that when examining the span of adoption literature that includes all adoptions (private domestic adoptions, intercountry adoptions, foster care adoptions, and relative adoptions) findings pertaining to race and ethnicity are inconsistent. However, when you isolate for U.S. adoptions from foster care, findings highlight that African American children are more likely to experience adoption instability (Sattler & Font, 2020).

⁵ Previous experience parenting a child diagnosed with a special need suggests improved adoption outcomes in some studies; however, single parents with no previous parenting experience tend to have successful adoptions despite the fact that they often adopt older children with more special needs.

instability. The researchers, however, report that when a parent exhibiting a rigid parenting style is able to identify the specific challenges in the home, the probability of the placement breakdown reduces by three times (Barbosa-Ducharne & Marinho, 2019).

Another important finding in the child welfare research is that adoptions are far more stable when the adoptive parent and adopted child have a relationship prior to the adoptive placement (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004; Palacios et al., 2018). Barth and Berry (1990) studied adoption disruptions and dissolutions in older child adoptions from California (n=1,115). In this study, 19% of the foster-adopt (or relative adopt) placements disrupted, while 39% of cases where there was no prior relationship between the adoptive parent and the adopted child disrupted. These findings have important implications for intercountry adoptions, where families rarely have opportunities to develop a significant relationship with the adopted child prior to placement.

Professional Adoption Services

The impact of professional adoption services on adoption outcomes is also considered central to the discussion about adoption disruption or dissolution. Researchers have examined an array of variables such as adoption preparation, adoption training, post-adoption services, adoption timeliness, and public vs. private adoptions. While the results are interesting, the studies rarely produce results capable of being replicated. Components of the matching process and access to child file information appear to be stronger predictors for adoption placement stability than other aspects of professional adoption services.

The adoption matching process garners much attention in the literature. Child welfare researchers have suggested that when the adoptive match involves “stretching” or moving outside of the adoptive parent’s identified child parameters, the adoption is at an increased risk of disruption (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004; Selwyn et al., 2014). Although it is not uncommon for families to revisit their adoption parameters throughout the adoption process, research highlights the need for caution. As Palacios et al. (2018) point out, stretching may help place a child more quickly; however, it can create serious long-term challenges for a family as adoptive parents may not be fully or realistically equipped to successfully parent the child.

Components of the matching process and access to child file information appear to be stronger predictors for adoption placement stability than other aspects of professional adoption services.

Having access to the child’s complete and accurate history prior to the adoption is also associated with better adoption outcomes (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004). Many studies reported that lack of documentation or inaccuracy in the child file was associated with adoptive placement instability. Reilly and Platz (2003) found that 58% of adoptive parents participating in their study reported

not receiving enough information on the child and 37% reported that information was inaccurate or minimized the seriousness of the child's problems. Barbosa-Ducharne and Marinho (2019) found adoption instability was more likely to occur when the social worker and adoptive parents have less information about the adopted child.

Implications for Adoption Practice

- The evidence suggests that if a problem in the adoptive home can be identified quickly and support is offered at the onset of the concern, adoption stability increases (Palacios et al., 2018). Monitoring and waiting to see if the child's behavior persists does not align with the evidence for adoption stability. In a study of children adopted outside the U.S. between 1990–2005 (n=937), Paulsen and Merighi (2009) encourage social workers to identify high risk profiles and prepare families with 'ready' access to resources. Adoption social workers should offer interventions at the onset of an expressed concern — even if the family is still in their child's birth country.

Adoption social workers should offer interventions at the onset of an expressed concern.

- Children with sexual abuse histories are particularly vulnerable to adoptive placement instability. Studies consistently show that adoptive parents often learn of sexual abuse history *after* the child is in the adoptive placement (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004). It is recommended that social

workers universally prepare families for behaviors associated with sexual abuse trauma and the possible impact of sexual abuse. Adoptive families should have the language necessary to speak about child sexual abuse and know how to access supportive resources in their community, such as child advocacy centers, prior to placement.

- Although there is not strong evidence to suggest that transracial adoptions are more vulnerable to adoption instability, there is a consensus that transracial adoptions do require additional tools and skills (Sattler & Font, 2020). This aligns with evidence to continue to emphasize race and ethnicity trainings for adoptive families and include these conversations in the home study. Paulsen and Merighi (2009) found that adoptive parents who participate in cultural activities from their child's birth country felt more prepared and ultimately more satisfied with the adoption experience.
- Adoption stability outcomes improve when the adoptive parents and the adopted child have a relationship prior to the adoptive placement (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004; Palacios et al., 2018). Although more research is needed, these findings suggest that participating in a hosting or fostering program prior to adoption may be beneficial to the overall outcome of an adoption. If it is not possible to foster, host, or even visit with the adoptive child

Emphasize race and ethnicity trainings for adoptive families and include these conversations in the home study.

prior to placement, it is recommended that prospective adoptive parents use every opportunity to create connections with their adopted child prior to the adoptive placement. If policies allow, social workers should encourage adoptive families to video-conference, send care packages and pictures, and write letters to the adopted child once they have accepted a referral.

Conclusion

Although this paper discusses adoption disruptions and dissolutions, it is important for adoption social workers to remember that there is unanimous agreement in the scientific literature that the vast majority of all adoptions are successful (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Likewise, once with their adoptive families, most adopted children thrive and make significant gains on a number of important indicators (Helder et al., 2014). Moreover, the majority of adoptive parents are satisfied with their adoption experiences and share that adoption had a positive impact on their families (Paulsen & Merighi, 2009). Despite these encouraging statistics, it remains important for adoption social workers to be prepared to help support families who may struggle after adoptive placement.

Additional Resources from NCFA



Publications

Improving Long-Term Outcomes for Adopted Adolescents

adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-148

The Adoptive Parent's Responsibility when Parenting a Child of a Different Race

adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-146

Beneath the Mask: Adoption through the Eyes of Adolescents

adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-124



Webinars & Training Modules for Adoptive Parents and Adoption Professionals

Race, Identity Formation, and Adoption

adoptioncouncil.org/article/race-identity-formation-and-adoption

Child Sexual Abuse: What Adoptive Families Need to Know

adoptioncouncil.org/article/child-sexual-abuse

Sexual Trauma

adoptioncouncil.org/article/sexual-trauma

Trail of Trauma

adoptioncouncil.org/article/trail-of-trauma

Post Adoption Connection Center

adoptioncouncil.org/article/post-adoption-connection-center

Ethical Guidelines for Supporting Families at Risk of Disruption or Dissolution

adoptioncouncil.org/article/ethical-guidelines-for-supporting-families-at-risk-of-disruption-or-dissolution

References

- Barbosa-Ducharne, M., & Marinho, S. (2019). Beyond the child's age at placement: Risk and protective factors in preadoption breakdown in Portugal. *Research on Social Work Practice, 29*(2), 143-152.
- Barth, R. P., Berry, M., Yoshikami, R., Goodfield, R. K., & Carson, M. L. (1988). Predicting adoption disruption. *Social Work, 33*(3), 227-233. *Child Welfare*.
- Barth, R.P. & Berry, M. (1990). A Study of Disrupted Adoptive Placements of Adolescents. *Child Welfare, 69*(3), 209-225.
- Barth, R. P., and Miller, J. M. (2000). Building effective post-adoption services: What is the empirical foundation? *Family Relations, 49*(4), 447-455.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2012). Adoption disruption and dissolution. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/s_disrup.pdf
- Coakley, J. F., & Berrick, J. D. (2008). In a rush to permanency: Preventing adoption disruption. *Child & Family Social Work, 13*(1), 101-112.
- DiGiovanni, A., & Font, S. A. (2021). Revisiting conventional wisdom: What do we know from 30 years of research on sibling placement in foster care? *Children and Youth Services Review, 126*, 105943.
- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. (2004). What's working for children: A policy study of adoption stability and termination. New York, NY: Donaldson Adoption Institute. <https://www.nationalcenteronadoptionandpermanency.net/post/what-s-working-for-children-a-policy-study-of-adoption-stability-and-termination>.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*(4), 245-258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)
- George, R. M., Howard, E. C., Yu, D., & Radomsky, S. (1997). Adoption, disruption, and displacement in the child welfare system, 1976-1994. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.
- Gunnar, M. R., VanDulmen, M. H., & International Adoption Project Team. (2007). Behavior problems in post-institutionalized internationally adopted children. *Development and Psychopathology, 19*(1), 129-148.
- Helder, E. J., Mulder, E., & Gunnoe, M. L. (2014). A longitudinal investigation of children internationally adopted at school age. *Child Neuropsychology, 22*(1), 1-26.
- Julian, M. M. (2013). Age at adoption from institutional care as a window into the lasting effects of early experiences. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 16*(2), 101-145.
- Lopes Almeida, M., Souza Schwochow, M., & Bitencourt Frizzo, G. (2021). Associations between symptoms of common mental disorders, parental satisfaction and consideration for adoption breakdown in Brazilian adoptive parents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 122*, 105910. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105910>

Palacios, J. (2019). Adoption breakdown research comes of age: Introduction to the special section. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 29(2), 127–129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731518783583>

Palacios, J., Rolock, N., Selwyn, J., & Barbosa-Ducharne, M. (2018). Adoption breakdown: Concept, research and implications. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 29(2), 130–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731518783852>

Palacios, J., Sanchez-Sandoval, Y., & Leon, E. (2005). Intercountry adoption disruption in Spain. *Adoption Quarterly*, 9(1), 35–55.

Paniagua, C., Palacios, J., Jiménez-Morago, J. M., & Rivera, F. (2018). Adoption breakdown in Spain: A survival and age-related analysis. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 29(2), 176–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731518791037>

Paulsen, C., & Merighi, J. R. (2009). Adoption preparedness, cultural engagement, and parental satisfaction in intercountry adoption. *Adoption Quarterly*, 12(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926750902791540>

Rosenthal, J. A. (1993). Outcomes of adoption of children with special needs. *The Future of Children*, 3(1), 77–88. Reilly, T., & Platz, L. (2003). Characteristics and challenges of families who adopt children with special needs: An empirical study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 25(10), 781–803. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0190-7409\(03\)00079-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0190-7409(03)00079-3)

Rolock, N., & White, K. R. (2016). Post-permanency discontinuity: A longitudinal examination of outcomes for foster youth after adoption or guardianship. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 70, 419–427. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.10.025>

Sattler, K. M. P., & Font, S. A. (2020). Predictors of adoption and guardianship dissolution: The role of race, age, and gender among children in foster care. *Child Maltreatment*, 26(2), 216–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559520952171>

Selwyn, J. (2018). Sibling relationships in adoptive families that disrupted or were in crisis. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 29(2), 165–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731518783859>

Selwyn, J., Wijedasa, D., Meakings, S., Great Britain. Department for Education, & University of Bristol School for Policy Studies, Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies. (2015). *Beyond the adoption order: Challenges, interventions, and adoption disruption*. Department for Education.

Smith, S. L., & Howard, J. A. (1991). A comparative study of successful and disrupted adoptions. *Social Service Review*, 65(2), 248–265. <https://doi.org/10.1086/603836>

Originally published in 2022 by National Council For Adoption. Reprinting or republishing without express written permission is prohibited.

National Council For Adoption
431 North Lee Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314



AdoptionCouncil.org
ncfa@adoptioncouncil.org
(703) 299-6633

Predictors of Adoption Disruption and Dissolution: A Literature Review

BY LINDSAY LANHAM

About the Author

Lindsay Lanham has been a child welfare social worker for 18 years. She began her career as a child welfare caseworker and then was promoted to child welfare adoption supervisor. After over a decade in field practice, Lindsay transitioned to child welfare research and policy. In collaboration with state agencies, Lindsay has had the opportunity to work on a variety of child welfare related research projects, including evaluations that examine racial disproportionality, parent-child visitation, and training competencies for social workers, foster parents, and relative placement providers. Lindsay has also worked directly with state legislators to draft and implement state policy aimed at creating a more responsive child welfare system for parents and children. Deeply informed by child welfare history, a steadfast commitment to cultural humility is interwoven throughout Lindsay's work. Lindsay received her master's degree from the University of Washington School of Social Work, where she was a fellowship recipient. Lindsay currently lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and two children.



This issue of the *Adoption Advocate* was edited by Ryan Hanlon and Nicole Davi.