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NEEDS ASSESSMENT GROUP PROJECT

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2012
October, 2012
St. Louis, MO**

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Adoption is increasingly prevalent, whether international or domestic. It is a complex process with many varying needs and emotional issues that can occur throughout the process. There is a lack of services for families who have adopted children. There is a lack of clinical resources, such as therapy, counseling, and educational opportunities for parents and children alike (McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001). Counseling services are terminated upon adoption, regardless of necessity for continuation to ensure family cohesiveness (McDonald et al., 2001). Families are left with the financial burden of providing for their adopted children's mental health and behavior issues, which may be significantly expensive (McDonald et al., 2001; Plenty, 2003). The stress that comes with adoption and subsequent life changes can be expected to result in family conflict or failed adoptions, if not properly addressed.

Support groups are the most apparent resource that is lacking for post-adoptive families (Plenty, 2003). Support groups increase supportive interactions by allowing parents and children to learn coping and problem-solving skills from other adoptive families. The groups lead families along a path of self-sustenance. Counseling services are paramount, but not necessarily by all families, making this less of an immediate priority compared to support groups. Educational classes are the least needed, as information is obtainable through other sources.

Support groups can be offered on a monthly basis, providing opportunities for parents to interact with other post-adoptive parents. This approach is similar to that taken by a local church which hosts monthly post-adoptive support groups (Southland Christian Church, 2011). Children who have been adopted are also provided separate support groups, and the two groups will meet for the last half hour of the meeting. Support groups will meet for two hours, and will conclude with a potluck/social interaction hour to encourage family support within the post-adoptive community.

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Zastrow & Krist-Ashman, 2007), the needs

addressed by these support groups would be belonging and love. The intimacy and affection that is expected from families and children can be burdensome and difficult to express when there are a number of unmet psychological needs. These support groups will provide an understanding environment to help parents and children develop a sense of belongingness as a family, and within the adoptive community.

The populations most affected by the lack of services in the post-adoptive community are the adopted children and their parents. All of these issues affect adoptive families to some extent, hindering the growth and function of new relationships. Some adoptive families will be able to work through these issues on their own, and others will require more support to be successful (McDonald, Propp, & Martens, 2001; Houston & Kramer, 2008). The lack of services provided to post-adoptive families can have a negative influence on a family's finances, cohesiveness, emotional bonding, and attachment issues. Adoptive families can face financial challenges when they or their child require counseling or therapy that is no longer provided through the state. Children who have potentially come from multiple homes may have difficulty developing secure attachments to parents and siblings and bonding emotionally with them (Houston & Kramer, 2008). Cohesiveness can be hindered when a child is introduced into a family where the rules, structure, and roles expected in that environment are unfamiliar. Alternatively, the family can have difficulty adjusting to or meeting the child's expectations.

The primary identified stakeholders related to this issue are the parents, adopted children and biological children. Other stakeholders include: extended family, school systems, social workers, Child Protective Services, and community/religious groups. All of these stakeholders are involved, at one level or another, with the potential success of new families.

Literature Review

The number of adoptions is increasing throughout the United States, with roughly 14% of special needs adoption reaching a dramatic and tragic end (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2007). Kreider

(2003) found that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), there were 20,661 adopted children in Kentucky in 2000. In 2009, there were 842 adoptions in Kentucky involving public child welfare agencies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Adoption is a complicated process, both before and after finalization with the court system. Assistance in navigating the multifaceted process of adoption is available through the state, but often ceases after finalization. Once the adoption process is completed, the difficulties and complications for new families do not disappear. Families are left with a complex situation that may leave them vulnerable to dissolution, if no treatment or assistance is available or sought (Houston & Kramer, 2008). There is a growing acknowledgement of the need for post-adoptive services (Berry et al., 2007; Plenty, 2003).

There may be barriers to families accessing the services they need post-adoption. One such barrier is their fear of social service interventions, removal of the child, and being labeled an incompetent parent (Plenty, 2003). Parents may not be aware of what services are available, or what services are appropriate to their particular needs once the adoption has been finalized (Speakman, 2008). The needs of the post-adoptive family will not remain static, and will change over time (Houston & Kramer, 2008). Berry, Propp, and Martens (2007) agree, stating that “adoption is indeed a lifelong process, and that services must be available to families at any point in this process” (p.45). They support this statement with evidence that some families do not seek adoption assistance for many years after the adoption process has been completed (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2007). This long term aspect is a crucial point to consider in providing services to post-adoptive families. In addition, Simmel, Barth, and Brooks (2007) assert that “coaching adoptive parents in how to cultivate a structured, supportive environment, is...critically important” (p. 346).

Children who have been adopted through the foster care system are generally more likely to display behavioral problems than children who were adopted privately (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2007; Simmel, Barth, & Brooks, 2007). According to Simmel, Barth, and Brooks (2007), there is a lack of studies pertaining to adopted children's mental health functioning. Adoptive families are not only faced

with welcoming a new child into their family, but adjusting to meet the child's mental health needs. The negative behaviors and attachment issues that can arise from vulnerable children who have been tossed from home to home can be extensive if left untreated.

There are a variety of needs for post-adoptive families, which will not dissipate without addressing the core issues of those involved. Foster youth, prior to being adopted, have often experienced some form of trauma, such as abuse or neglect, which affects their psychosocial development (Simmel, Barth, & Brooks, 2007). Berry, Propp, and Martens, (2007) found that the most requested services by post-adoptive families included: counseling (child, family, and parent), support services, educational services, information about services and community resources, and mental and medical health services. Since the research indicates that the longer services are offered the better the outcome at one year after case closure, resources and continued treatment are vital for family cohesiveness (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2007). One study indicates that service characteristics are the most significant contributor to the prediction of whether families remain together, even more so than the child and family's characteristics (Berry et al., 2007). The importance of service characteristics may be surprising, but highlights the necessity of research for the most effective programs and services for post-adoptive families. McDonald, Propp, and Murphy (2001), found that families have an increasing need for services, and are frustrated by the lack of accessible resources.

Post-adoptive families may receive informal support from extended family, friends, and community. Formal resources often include emotional support and information, provided through varying outlets such as practitioners through the adoptive agencies, and other adoptive parents (Houston & Kramer, 2008). There may be financial barriers to accessing high-cost services such as formal counseling, making these resources not always a feasible option for adoptive families.

One easily accessible and beneficial resource for adoptive families could be peer-led support groups. Support groups give parents the opportunity to talk to someone, and provide information regarding what services are available or appropriate (Speakman, 2008). According to Child Welfare

Information Gateway (2010), “other adoptive families are often good sources of referral for therapists and other assistance. Other adoptive families can also offer their own support and experience as well as normalizing the experience” (p.10). In order for support groups to be most effective, it seems that post-adoptive families should be at varying stages in the post-adoptive process, to better provide knowledge and experience.

Available local resources in the Bluegrass area of Kentucky include both faith-based and secular support groups. Adoption Support for Kentucky (ASK) is a group of parent-led adoption support groups which operate in 32 locations throughout the state (Bryan, Flaherty, & Saunders, 2010). According to Speakman (2008), adopted children often have some “issues”, and, further, “all families who adopt need support.” Participants in the ASK program reported high levels of satisfaction, and believe the program stabilized their families and prevented adoption disruption (Bryan et al., 2010). A major faith-based option comes from Southland Christian Church (2011) in Jessamine County, which offers Adoptive Families Care Groups that meet once a month for those considering, waiting, or who have completed the adoption process.

Cost and Benefit Analysis

The main resources needed for support groups for post-adoptive families would be a monthly meeting facility and a program organizer. The meeting facility, depending on available locations, may involve a fee for rental. It is hoped this would be rectified by finding a local church or other place for the group to meet at no, or reduced, cost. There is also a need for tables and chairs, which may or may not be provided by the facility. The organization of these support groups could be facilitated by an active adoptive parent. The voluntary services of an experienced practitioner would also be crucial, to offer consultation on an as-needed basis to the facilitator. As this is a peer-led support group, the majority of resources and support will come from other post-adoptive parents within the group (Bryan, Flaherty, & Saunders, 2010).

The support groups will be offered at no charge, however, there may be a cost accrued from

facility rental, paper products and drinks for potluck. There is always the possibility of churches or other facilities, where support groups meet, donating food for the potluck, but the budget for these support groups will operate as though this is not anticipated. The cost for paper products and drinks per support group is estimated at \$20. Resources to run these support groups would require a significant cost; however, the services of the facilitator, the experienced practitioner, the use of the facility, and any possible food, are all expected to be donated. If this were not the case, the cost would otherwise be substantial.

Practitioners who volunteer their time and experience for as-needed collaboration with facilitators, would have the benefit of free publicity to this population. The families may not have to pay out-of-pocket for counseling and therapeutic interventions, allowing them to make better use of their finances. The risk of failed adoptions decreases with support groups (Bryan, Flaherty, & Saunders, 2010). By preventing failed adoptions, these support groups are potentially saving the state government the financial burden of having children re-enter the system after adoption. The devastating consequences of failed adoptions would also be avoided, along with the emotional toll these traumatic events cause (Houston & Kramer, 2008). These support groups concentrate on the maintenance of the family, rather than focusing primarily on the placement of the child (McDonald, Propp & Murphy, 2001).

The greatest cost of not implementing post-adoptive support groups is the potential for families to be isolated in the process of adjustment to the new family system, which can potentially lead to failed adoptions (Houston & Kramer, 2008). The financial cost of implementing this program is extremely low, as it is mostly based on donated services and peer mentorship. The cost of not implementing this program is to leave adoptive families vulnerable to instability within their new family system (Houston & Kramer). According to Houston and Kramer (2008), “previous research confirms that the amount and quality of support that adoptive families receive when parenting a child with a history of abuse or neglect is an important factor that contributes to family permanency” (p.

147). The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2010) stresses that “a willingness to learn about the issues and to be open to seeking support if necessary can help to ensure that parents and children experience happy and healthy family lives” (p. 10).

Methodology

Approach

A survey was developed to explore the community's perception of the needs of post-adoptive families in the Jessamine/Fayette county area. This assessment will help determine the extent of the need for a monthly support group for post-adoptive families. This survey consisted of 11 questions regarding the knowledge, experience, and perception of services available for adoptive families. The survey consisted of four Likert-type questions, such as: on a scale of 1 to 5, “please rate how beneficial you believe a post-adoptive support group would be for adoptees and their families” (See Appendix). These Likert-type questions were intermixed with seven qualitative short-answer questions, including: “what are the greatest stressors for families and children following adoption” (See Appendix).

Key Informants

Key informants for this study consisted of six interview subjects selected based on their personal and professional experience ($n = 6$). All research participants were local to the Jessamine/Fayette county area in Kentucky. Three local practitioners were interviewed who hold a variety of roles, including: adoptee, adopted parent, foster parent mentor, and independent living coordinator. The fourth interview was completed with a social work educator. A local adoptive mother, who co-leads adoptive support groups and is involved with foster care/adoptive parent trainings, was the fifth interviewee. The final interview was a local church pastor who has been involved in various positions of ministry for years and interacts with multiple adopted families.

As part of the research protocol, basic demographic data was collected, including gender and age. Interview subjects included five females and one male. The participants' ages range from 25 to 58 years old, resulting in a mean age of 40.8 with a standard deviation of 11.4 years.

Statistical Procedures

The research will be analyzed using certain statistical procedures in order to determine any significant statistical data. Descriptive statistics will be used to suggest central tendency, and then standard deviation will be utilized to determine the amount of variation in the sample. Further, inferential statistics, such as t-tests, will be completed to compare and contrast relationships between those under the age of 40, and those over the age of 40.

Results and Discussion

Findings

The key informant interviews have been compiled to identify common themes that occurred across the interviews. This section outlines the emerging findings discovered by the Adoption Questionnaire (see Appendix). First participants' were asked for their initial ideas about adoption. Their responses indicated primarily positive perceptions, with some negative connotations as awareness increased. Four out of six participants had both personal and professional experience of the adoption process. Attachment and adjustment issues, along with problems related to the biological families, were noted by most participants. Two out of six participants indicated no knowledge of any services in the area for post-adoptive families. The four who were aware of services did not believe these services were being utilized effectively. Participants were asked to identify any particular services in the Jessamine/Fayette county area they were aware of; the two services most identified were ASK and Comprehensive Care. Five participants mentioned there was a need for additional support for post-adoptive families, with three interviewees specifying services in the form of support groups. Three out of six participants also named counseling or mental health services as a needed resource. Five out of six participants felt positively about peer-led support groups, with the sixth participant believing this would be helpful if the leader was trained in group facilitation. Overall, adoption is viewed as a blessing, and "a good thing to do" by two participants.

An analysis of the Likert-type questions was completed combining questions 6, 8, and 10 (See

Appendix). Descriptive statistics were also completed for question 3 (see Appendix). Descriptive statistics were completed for the entire sample size to determine interviewees perception on the need for post-adoptive services (M=12.17, SD=2.71, Md=12, R=7). This suggests strong central tendency for the entire sample size (M=12.17, Md=12). There is not a high level of consistency among data, and there is no indication of saturation. A t-test was run to compare participants under the age of 40 (M=13.67, SD=1.97, Md=15, R=4) to participants over the age of 40 (M=10.67, SD=2.15, Md=11, R=5). The t-test ($t=3.57$, $df=22$, $p=.00$) reveals that participants under the age of 40 scored statistically higher than those over the age of 40. This indicates that younger participants are statistically significantly more supportive of post-adoptive services. Age does not explain the variation in the data.

Interview participants were asked to compare the rate of adoptions within the state of Kentucky to the rest of the United States (SD=.52). The mean score of 2.67 implies that interview participants believe Kentucky is below average in adoptions compared to the rest of the United States. Kentucky ranks 28th in the United States, with 20,661 adoptions in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Implications

It is clear that there is a need for additional support for post-adoptive families, and there are many implications for the services based on the collected data. Based on the stressors that participants identified for adoptive families, for support groups to be effective they need to address attachment and adjustment issues. All participants had some awareness of adoption, whether personal or professional, many having both. As indicated by the data, participants overall agree with the need for additional post-adoptive services. There is variability; however, it is relatively small. As this study is considered a pilot study, the limitations of this study include small sample size, and the use of unstandardized instruments. The instrument utilized has only been used for this study and thus was not tested for reliability.

Data implies that participants feel adoptive families will use peer-led support groups for advice, as it provides a comfortable atmosphere for discussing positive and negative issues. The majority of

participants felt that having this type of environment would be beneficial to children and families.

People are not aware of the services available, implying a lack of appropriate advertising. The data also indicates the community is likely to be in favor of a peer-led post-adoptive support group.

Ethics and Cultural Competence

There were a number of complex issues identified by participants, which indicates a high standard for competency required by social workers practicing in this area. The values of dignity and worth of a person and the importance of human relationships, support that children in the foster care system deserve to be in a permanent, loving family (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). In addition, the families adopting these children need to have relationships with those who understand their situation, so they can have the tools to be successful. Study participants had indicated that families do not use services effectively. Thus it is the social workers responsibility to bridge the gap between services offered and services utilized. Social workers need to find a way to better assist post-adoptive families to meet these needs.

Adoptive parents need to have an awareness of the child's background, whether religious, cultural, or ethnic. The children should be encouraged to embrace the culture they originated from, without feeling ostracized in their current family or cultural situation. It is also important to remember that many children may feel their sense of permanency is threatened by the presence of social services. Families may choose to not self-identify as adoptive parents, whereas others may take pride in this. Competence and consideration in the use of terminology and language, as well as the preference of the family and child, is critical to working successfully with post-adoptive families. These terms have a lot of emotional meaning and connotations attached to them which workers must consider.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the complex process of adoption requires consideration to determine if there are unmet needs for families. This study focuses on the extent and utilization of post-adoptive services in the Jessamine/Fayette county area of Kentucky. A structured interview guide was created for use with

research participants. The sample included six key informants who were selected based on their personal and professional experience. The collected data indicated that the community would likely be in favor of a peer-led support group for post-adoptive families. Services for post-adoptive families appear to be under-utilized, possibly due to a lack of awareness.

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Appendix

Adoption Questionnaire

1. When you hear the term “adoption,” what comes to mind?
2. What, if any, personal or professional experience do you have with the adoption process?
3. Compared to the rest of the United States, where do you think Kentucky rates in number of adoptions?
1 2 3 4 5
Very Low Low Average High Very High
4. What are the greatest stressors for families and children following adoption? Please explain.
5. Are you aware of any services or programs in the Jessamine/Fayette County area that may be beneficial to adoptive families? Do you believe these services are being used effectively? Please explain.
6. How much support do newly adopting parents need?
1 2 3 4 5
None, they are fine Some Average Moderate Maximum Support
7. What services, if any, should be provided for families following the adoption process? Please explain.
8. Please rate how beneficial you believe a post-adoptive support group would be for adoptees and their families.
1 2 3 4 5
Very Low Low Average High Very High
9. Do you believe that a peer led post-adoptive support group would help alleviate the stressors to adoptive families? Please explain.
10. How important would it be to an adoptive child to have services in their new home?
1 2 3 4 5
Very Low Low Average High Very High
11. Anything else you would like to add?