

FROM OUR MEMBERS, FOR OUR MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

In the spotlight is an occasional series of briefings showcasing new projects being implemented by our members to improve practice in their agencies. The series will provide a platform for agency members to share information about new initiatives or approaches with the wider community, UK wide, both in print and online. Submissions for consideration should be sent to membership@corambaaf.org.uk and should be no more than 2,000 words.

Recognising the importance of the couple relationship through the adoption process: attending to the missing link

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Introduction

Within the field of adoption, it seems somewhat surprising that the quality and significance of the couple relationship has received so little explicit attention when compared to the extensive literature on adoptive parenting. Yet, in terms of positive outcomes for adoption, a supportive couple relationship that expresses the couple's satisfaction with each other is key in helping couples manage the transition to adoptive parenthood and the ongoing challenges of raising an adopted child (Mooradian *et al*, 2011; Martin *et al*, 2016).

By its very nature, adoption is a process that has many ups and downs. Indeed, for most couples the transition to parenthood represents a major shift in their couple relationship as they naturally move into the domain of parenting. However, in the same way that couples themselves have a tendency to lose sight of the significance of their relationship when they become parents, the field of adoption also appears to have lost sight of the importance of the couple relationship in creating a family life through adoption. Yet taking care of the adoptive couple's relationship is vital for the stability of the family as a whole, especially since it is core to maintaining a healthy, satisfying family life where both the adults and children can thrive. It is also core to identifying and managing the inevitable challenges of raising children and particularly the stressful issues that have become familiar in adoption where the child's start in life is heavily influenced by abuse and/or neglect, which may in turn threaten the stability of the family and include the risk of adoption breakdown. Selwyn *et al* (2015) found that a key risk factor in the breakdown of adoption placements was the strain placed on the couple relationship, particularly when the couple were unable to provide adequate containment for an adopted child or young person whose heightened behaviour and emotion had become overwhelming.

The motivation for and consequences of adoption on the couple relationship

The decision to adopt holds important clues concerning the nature, meaning and history of the couple's relationship. For instance, heterosexual couples faced with infertility and failed attempts at IVF are likely, because of the painful process of mourning, to experience something of a crisis in their relationship, associated with the anxiety, frustration and pain of not being able to complete what for others might seem like an easy route to becoming pregnant. For some, adoption will represent a natural "moving on", whereas for others it may be a conscious or indeed unconscious attempt to fill the void. It is therefore possible that some couples, at the same time as exploring and establishing that they are suitable for adoption, may also continue to process the impact of their loss or may even be in denial about the impact that this has had. Unfortunately, feelings associated with the loss, when it has not been adequately dealt with prior to, or during, the process of adoption, may eventually surface and unsettle any fragile balance of the forces within the family system that helps maintain its sense of equilibrium. Other couples who identify adoption as a possibility for different reasons, such as same-sex couples, those motivated by altruism or those who have chosen not to go down the route of donor insemination or surrogacy, may also be confronted with challenges to their couple relationship. In all families, the preoccupations, demands and intensity that arise from the presence of children may challenge the couple if there were unrealistic expectations or a crisis of confidence in combining parenting with adult life. Where two people become three (or four or five), there will be major adjustments to be made as that which worked before now requires adjustment and change, and levels of life satisfaction alter with varying degrees of frustration being experienced and indeed expressed.

Once a couple have adopted a child or children, there may be similar issues but these may be amplified by a range of specific concerns, e.g. children whose development has been influenced by significant abuse and neglect, the loss of previous birth family and foster carers, separation from siblings, and adjustment to a familial environment that has never been a part of the experience to date. The adoptive couple, in common with many other parents, may struggle to preserve and/or adapt their relationship, especially as the needs of the adopted child become clearer and more pressing. Moreover, some adoptive couples may feel that the timing or motivation to adopt was influenced by one partner more than the other, and these feelings may surface and complicate the adjustments that need to be made when it comes to the transition to parenthood. Creegan (2017) draws particular attention to the importance of the adopted child finding a "psychic home" with his or her adoptive parents, whilst at the same time also suggesting that the adoptive parents need to find within themselves a "creative couple state of mind" to secure the adoptive placement over time.

It is therefore telling, although perhaps not entirely surprising, that within the field of adoption the help available through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) is primarily directed towards the needs of the adopted child, with the adoptive parents included in this particularly in being provided with access to parenting programmes. In a recent evaluation of the ASF by King *et al* (2017), therapeutic parenting constituted 44 per cent of the proportion of applications made to the Fund, whilst those for individual therapeutic support for children and young people accounted for well over 50 per cent. The evaluation shows that these interventions were well received and that the majority of adoptive parents receiving therapeutic support through the Fund felt that it had benefitted themselves, their children and indeed their families. This, therefore, confirms the need of these families for support and the understandable focus on the specific needs of adopted children, given the trauma in their early lives. However, it is concerning that the ASF so far has not seen the need to incorporate therapy that is focused on the adoptive couple's relationship into its list of approved interventions, especially since many adoptive couples struggle to hold their own relationship together and, without support, may be in danger of experiencing significant inter-parental conflict, separation or divorce, with all of the well-documented risks for children that this entails (Harold *et al*, 2016).

Tavistock Relationships' Adopting Together Project

Given that, until now, help for the couple relationships of adopters has not been widely available, Tavistock Relationships (an organisation specialising in couples therapy) applied for and was successfully awarded two separate grants from the Department for Education (DfE). The first, in 2015/16, helped establish the Adopting Together Project, and the second, in 2016/18, enabled further development and refinement of the model relating to its training and clinical offer, specifically focused on the impact of adoption on the post-adoptive couple relationship. The Adopting Together Project had two main objectives: firstly, to train frontline and senior adoption practitioners and managers in recognising and attending to the importance of the couple relationship through the adoption process; and secondly, to deliver an evaluated therapeutic couple intervention for up to 50 couples across both phases of the project.

Evaluation of the training

In terms of evaluating the training, it is telling that so many frontline and senior adoption practitioners as well as managers attended the different training events on offer throughout the country, testifying to the importance of, and interest in, the couple relationship of adopters through the adoption process. One participant described the training as 'The most profound and useful training I have been on for a long time and it endorsed the thoughts I had about the assessment process'; while another commented that it is 'Seriously wonderful to attend a training that is actually useful and relevant'.

It is clear from the training that many practitioners within the field of adoption do not feel confident in opening difficult or challenging conversations with prospective or post-adoptive couples. Many fear that they will meet resistance or that they will open a "can of worms" that will then be hard to work with. The training was therefore designed to assist practitioners in understanding the importance of addressing the couple relationship of adopters, as well as gaining confidence in engaging these couples in exploring underlying issues and dynamics.

Over the past four years, 50 adoptive couples have been offered an intervention to help them explore and think about the impact of the adoption on their couple relationship. Although the majority of the couples seen within the service were heterosexual (N=40), a further 20 per cent were lesbian or gay. Many couples approached the service because of the impact of the adoption on their own relationship and because of the very real concerns about their children. They were offered an initial consultation to determine whether the service was right for them, followed by a further 20 sessions. The work was undertaken by a number of experienced couple psychotherapists specialising in therapy with adoptive couples.

Given that this was an evaluated therapeutic intervention, data was collected at various points during the course of the therapy, i.e. at the initial stage, again at 10 weeks and finally at the end of the therapy. Measures used for the evaluation included the *Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (CORE-OM)* (Evans *et al*, 2002), *Quality of Marriage Index (QMI)*, *Parenting Stress Index (PSI)*, and *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)* (Goodman, 1994, 1997) – measures designed to capture data on the couples' psychological distress and depression, the quality of the couple relationship, levels of stress related to parenting, as well as children's emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Thankfully, we were successful in obtaining very high rates of return for completion of the questionnaires, which provided a rich source of data for evaluating the impact of the intervention on these adoptive couples. In both cohorts, we found strong evidence of a decrease in both partners' mental distress, as well as a statistically significant improvement in the quality of the couple's relationship. It is also of note that the couple intervention had a positive impact on the adopted child's psychological profile and well-being, suggesting that a couple intervention of this nature has benefits for the family as a whole. One participant commented that their therapist had them 'Think about how we communicate or address

difficult issues or disagreements', adding that 'We now communicate much more openly and freely, even around difficult or contentious issues'.

Conclusion

There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of this couple relationship-focused approach in terms of achieving improvements in adult and child mental health, well-being and relationships. The fact that this intervention was so successful in helping to create a space for couples to think and work together to improve patterns of communication and resolve conflict indicates that it has much to contribute to the field in terms of helping to secure both the adoptive couple relationship and the placement of the child. In other words, incorporating a couple-focused approach offers a significant contribution to family stability, reduces inter-parental conflict and ultimately helps to prevent adoptive family breakdown. The explicit focus on the child in terms of therapy is understandable, but the relational context of family life and what sustains and challenges this cannot be underestimated or indeed be ignored.

Tavistock Relationships will continue to work within the adoption field to influence policy regarding the importance and provision of services for adoptive couples.

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