# New Worlds of Adoption: Growing Up in Complex Families

## Adoptions from the Child Welfare System

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# Overview of Presentation

- National data on older child adoptions
- Openness in older child placements in general, foster and kinship adoptions
- Implications for research, practice and policy

# Characteristics of the 510,000 Children in U.S. Foster Care System (2006)

- – Avg. age  9.8 years; 52% Males/60% ethnic minorities
- – In care an average of  28.3 months
  - (67,088 in care for 5 yrs or more)

- 129,000 children are awaiting adoption

# Reasons for Removal and Placement in Foster Care

- Neglect
- Abuse
- Parental substance abuse
- Parental incarceration
- Child's behavior
- Inadequate housing

# Special Challenges for Youth in Care

- **Multiple placement moves/losses**
  - **Loss of contact with birthparents, community, siblings, culture,**
- **Perceptions about reasons for removal**
  - **Child may feel responsible for removal**
- **Sense of ambiguous loss**
  - **Birthparent is physically absent but psychologically present**
  - **Is loss permanent or temporary?**
  - **Will parent try to get child back?**
- **Attachment issues**
- **Identity**
- **Concerns/Fears about adoption**

# Special Challenges for Youth in Care

- **Physical and mental health problems**
  - **Mild to severe psychological and behavioral difficulties**
- **Developmental delays**
- **Educational difficulties**

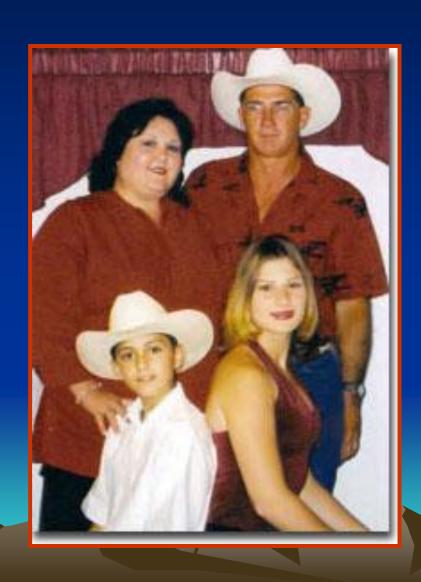# 51,000 children adopted from foster care in 2006

- 51% Male; 49% Female
- Average age—6.6
  - 23% were between 10 -20 years old
- 45% White
  - Majority were ethnic minority

# Who Adopted These Children?

- – 69% Married couples
- – 26% Single females
- –  2% Unmarried couples
- –  3% Single males

# Older Child Placements

# Relationship of Adopters to child (2006)

- 60% Foster Parents
- 25% Relatives
  - 40% of adoptions of AA children between 9 and 17 are by relatives

- 15% Non-relatives/General Adopters

# Outcomes of Placements from Care

- Most adoptions are stable and remain intact (Barth & Miller, 2000)

- Many of problems experienced by adoptive families do not manifest until several years after the adoption is legally finalized (Smith, Howard & Monroe, 1998)

# Openness in Older Child Placements

- Rationale
  - Interest in maintaining family continuity
  - Increase in kinship and foster parent adoptions
    - Reducing disruptions for children
  - Most children adopted at older ages have had prior relationship with biological family

- Still limited research on openness outcomes in older child adoptions

# Openness and Adoptive Parent-Child Relationships

- Berry (1991; 1998) in California Long Range Adoption Study studied 764 families four years after placement found high levels of satisfaction with their adoption, regardless of whether open or closed.

- Frash, Brooks, Barth (2000) 8 year prospective longitudinal study of 231 foster care adoptions (CLAS) found satisfaction and consistency over time in most arrangements whether open or closed.

- Johnson & Ryan's (2007) study of openness in families (N=429) with children age 13 or older found:
  - Most families who had contact with birthparents reported positive experiences

# Advantages of Contact with Birthfamily and Foster Families in Older Child Placements

- Contact can help youth reconcile pieces of their identity.
- Can help some youth commit to adoption
- Can ease the transition to adoption
  - Hard for children to move on when they're still worrying about whether their birth family is okay or not.
  - Prior foster families or birth family members can aid transition by assuring child that they love him and that being adopted is okay (NACAC, 2007)

# Challenges to Openness

- Substance abusing birthparents
- Inconsistent visitation/broken promises to the child
- Children's ability to relate to two families
- Birthparent issues--mental health/violence
- Adversarial court proceedings

# Complex Family Dynamics in Kinship Placements (Szolnoki & Cahn, 2002)

- Relatives often assume care under stressful circumstances and are responding to crises and problems among family members
  - Child, parent and relative caregiver still within the family
- Relative adopters may suffer grief from multiple losses (Cox, 2002)
    - Loss of old family role; loss of relationship with the child's parent; fear of loss of the child back to the parent
    - Loss of social support can lead to increased psychological distress (Kelley et al., 2000)

# Characteristics of Relative Adopters

- Many are single parents
- Many are African American
- Many are older with limited resources

# Kinship Placements: Connective Complexity (Schwartz, 2008)

- Dual connections to caregiver—role ambiguity
  - Is this person my grandmother or my mother?
  - Grandparents who in the past have been in a nurturing, outsider role now must be in parental role of disciplinarian.
  - Boundary issues—physical and psychological presence
- Role Reversal
  - May have to care for parents as well as grandparents
- Challenges to Openness—Child Safety

# Best Practices

- Educating caregivers about available services and handling potential conflicts
- Support Groups for youth and caregivers
- Use of family group conferencing beyond placement decision making but throughout case to address relationship complexities
- Training for staff on implications of openness in older child placements

# Research Needs

- Examine types of contact between relatives and birthparents
  - Research with a sample of African American relative adopters
- Long term impact of open kinship placements on children, birth parents, and relatives
- Explore issues of boundary ambiguity, grief and loss, identity, attachment outcomes over time
- How do children and birthparents handle a sense of learned helplessness and ambiguous loss?

# Research Needs

- Impact of age at placement, multiple placements, sibling separation on attachment
- Role of paternal relatives and birthfathers in contact in these complex families
- Strategies leading to successfully reuniting children with birthparents
- Service delivery strategies to improve birthparent outcomes
- Best practices in maintaining family connections