

ATTACHMENT STORIES: THE ATTACHMENT  
EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL NEEDS ADOPTIVE  
FAMILIES

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## Introduction:

This presentation will focus on the findings of a recent nationwide study of adoptive families who are parenting children who have suffered trauma (abuse and neglect) and instability (multiple moves, school changes, multiple losses of caregivers)

# Research Question:

How do families describe the process by which attachment is established in successful adoptions of children with special needs?

(Successful families were defined as those families who had adopted children from foster care and who identified themselves as having favorable long term outcomes)

# AdoptUSKids

- This study was part of a large scale nation wide study conducted by AdoptUSKids, the principal investigator was Ruth McRoy, PhD, and was funded by the U.S. Children's Bureau.
- This study had two goals: (1). To identify barriers to completion of the adoption process and (2). To identify those components that led to favorable long-term outcomes for families that adopted children with special needs.

# SAMPLE DEOMOGRAPHICS:

(n=160) The typical adoptive family was a married heterosexual Caucasian, college educated, family with the average age of 46 years of age and an average income of \$62,000 who adopted a white male child in elementary school . Approximately 57% of the focus children had an abuse history (physical, sexual or emotional) and 68% of the focus children had a neglect history (physical or medical), while many had experienced both. The children that were the focus of this study ranged in age from 0-17 years with 89% being placed before the age of 10 years. 55% of the focus children were male and the majority (42%) were in elementary school when placed.

# Child Characteristics

The children who were the focus of this study ranged in age from 0 to 17 at placement, but the majority had been adopted after the age of five (46% adopted between five and 8 and 24% between 9 and 12). In addition, 55% male and 45% female. Half (50%) of the focus children were Caucasian, 19% African American, 19% Hispanic, 16% Other/Biracial and 3% American Indian. The children's special needs ranged from Mental Disorders (62%), Developmental Disorders (20%) to Attachment Disorders (14%) and Medical issues (11%).

# Methods

- This project used a mixed-methods cross-sectional design. The 161 families who participated in this study were interviewed and completed the Adult-Child Parenting Inventory-2 Inappropriate Expectations Subscale (Bavolek & Keene, 1999); Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983); ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Fowers & Olson, 1993); Parenting Stress Inventory (Abidin, 1986); Reilly and Platz Questionnaire (Reilly & Platz, 2003); and the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney & Noller, 1994).

# Findings

- 76% of the parents interviewed rated their level of attachment to their children as “very attached”
  - Families described their level of attachment as:
  - Well, in a way, I almost feel like he’s a part of me. Naturally, in a way, I feel like he is mine. Naturally, it might not have been my womb that he came out of, but I feel like God was saving him for me for some reason.
  - (stranger adoption)
  - 
  - And.....
  - 
  - Just like she’s my child. Like I gave birth to her. And if anybody tried to do anything towards her or hurt her just like with my children, I’d take up for her just like I would them.
  - (foster adoption)



# INTERESTING FINDINGS:

- A whopping 55% endorsed building a relationship (getting to know them/loving them) as the activity that most helped build the attachment level they achieved.
- One participant described these activities in these terms:
- “Just by getting to know him, just by talking with him a lot, having fun with him. And I’ve—we have a belief that—I just believe that he’s just going to become somebody wonderful.”

# INTERESTING FINDINGS

- Over 40% of the sample of adoptive parents said that the level of attachment was as they expected it to be and 26% said that the level of attachment was more than they expected. Therefore a total of 70% had achieved or exceeded the level of attachment they expected with their adoptive child.

# SIGNIFICANCE

- Although the findings suggest that parents of younger children had higher levels of attachment, the majority of these parents were able to form a level of attachment that they described as “very attached”. In addition, as attachment theory suggests attachment for these families was built through the day to day activities and interactions between the child and primary caregiver (especially when the child is loved and valued by the parent)