

Early Adjustment of International Adoptive Families Compared to Non-Adoptive Families

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- ❖ Internationally adopted (IA) infants often arrive in the U.S. with multiple risk factors (e.g., poor prenatal care, premature birth, adverse preplacement experiences) and show signs of regulatory disorders and adjustment difficulties.
- ❖ The adoptive family provides an important caregiving context that will affect the child's regulatory functioning, emotional and behavioral development, and learning later in life.
- ❖ Adoptive parents report positive expectations and satisfaction in parenting, but many experience fear, stress, and anxiety associated with their parental responsibilities, exacerbating adjustment difficulties of children and parents.

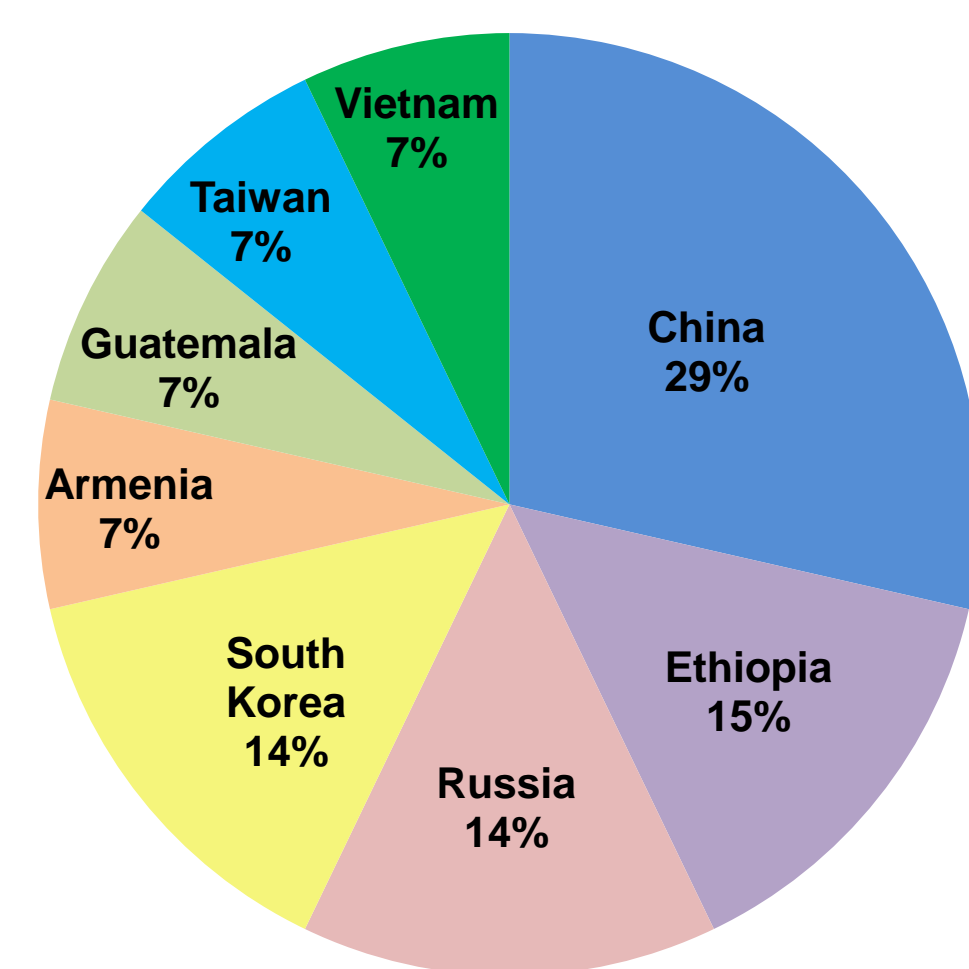
OBJECTIVE

Aim: Examine experiences of adoptive parents and their internationally adopted infants early in their placements in comparison to parents and their nonadopted (NA) infants

METHOD

Participants

Infants between 6 and 20 months were recruited shortly after (within a month) their arrival to the U.S. Nonadoptive infants were matched on their age and gender.



	N	Mean	Range	Sample %
Child's age at first visit				
IA	14	14 mths	8 – 21 mths	--
NA	12	14 mths	9 – 21 mths	--
Child's gender				
IA (Female)	7	--	--	50.0%
NA (Female)	7	--	--	58.3%
Parent's age at first visit				
IA	14	43 years	35 – 52 years	--
NA	12	32 years	27 – 40 years	--
Pre-placement ^a				
Orphanage	9	--	<1 – 13 mths	64.3%
Foster care	2	--	12 – 12.75 mths	14.3%
Hospital	3	--	<1 – 3 mths	21.4%
Other	2	--	1 – 6 mths	14.3%

^a Some children have experienced more than one placements before adoption

Procedure

Families participated in two lab visits (three weeks post-arrival and three months after the initial visit). At each visit, three salivary cortisol samples were collected to assess infants' emotion regulation and stress responsivity. The three cortisol samples were taken early in the visit for baseline, and 20- and 40-minutes after two emotion challenges: a loud noise at a safe volume and the presence of a costumed stranger. The emotion challenges were followed by a free play period. The same experimental protocol was repeated three months later.

Parents' post-placement experiences and the nature of parenting stress were measured using:

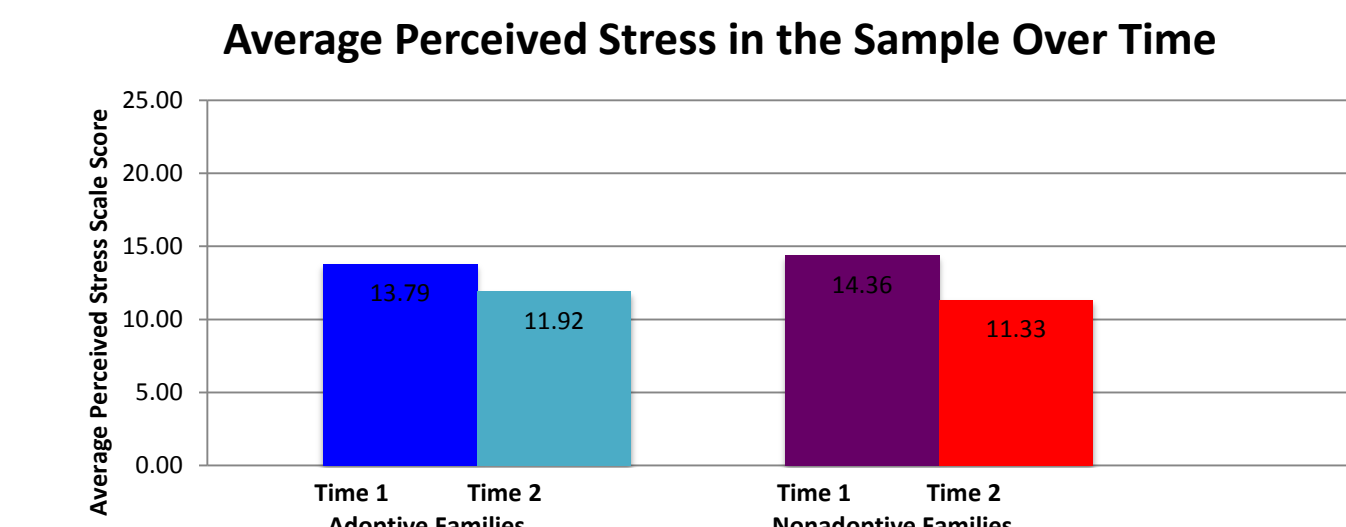
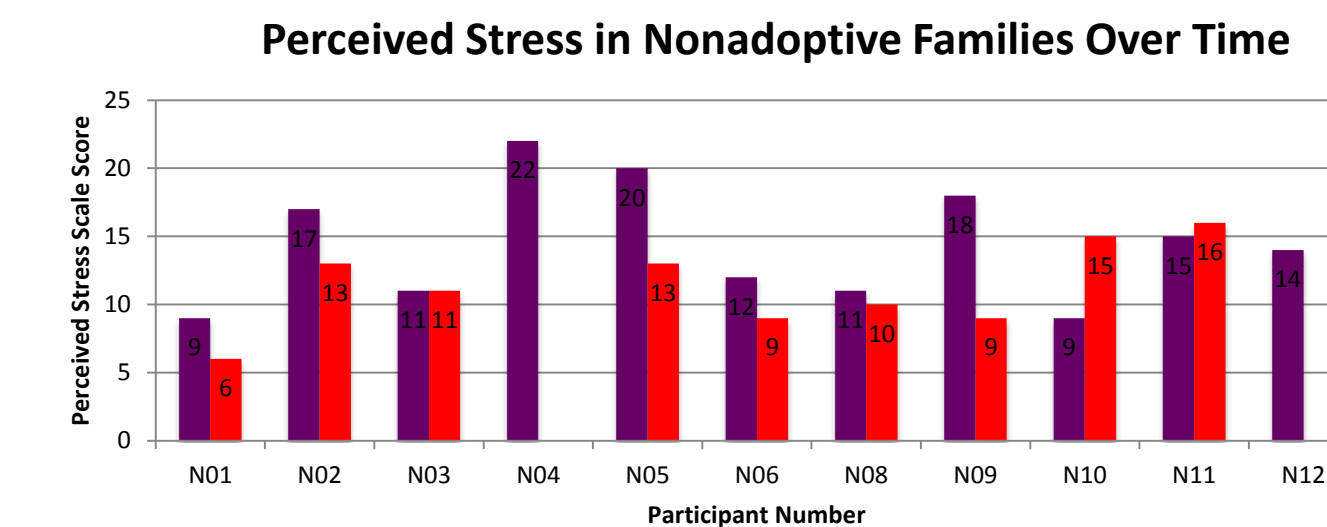
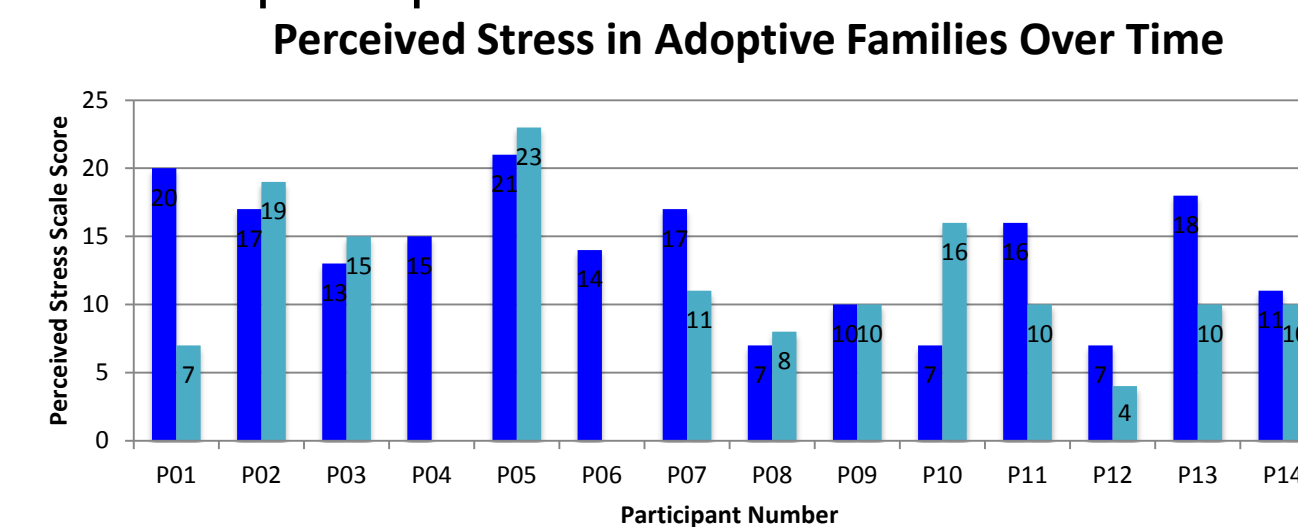
- ❖ Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 2002)
- ❖ Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1995)
- ❖ Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).



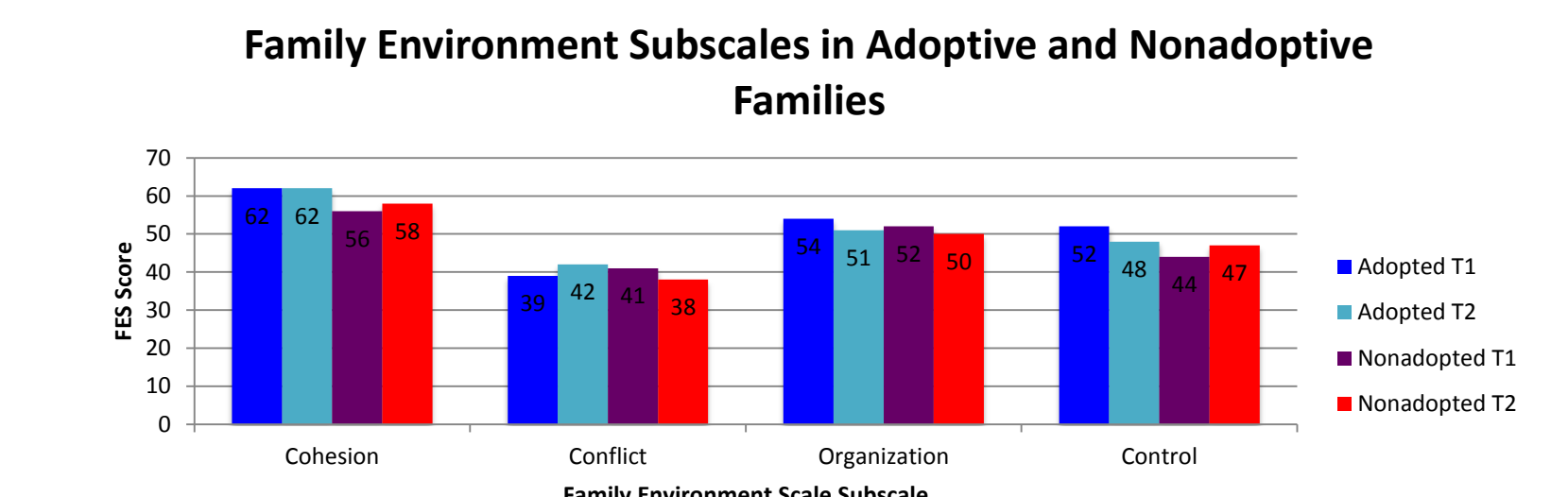
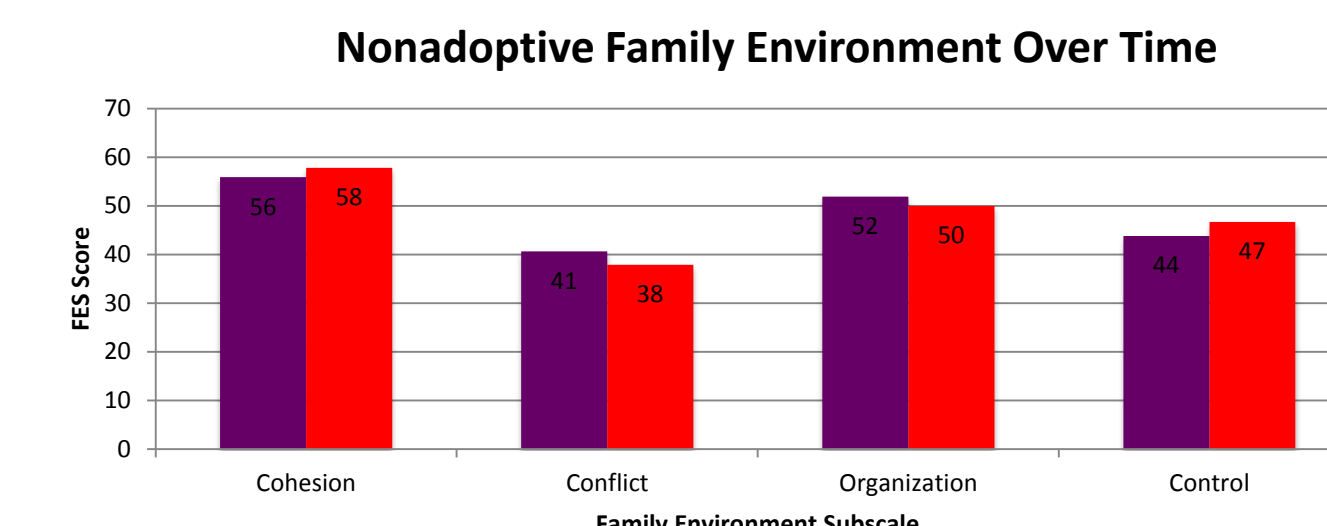
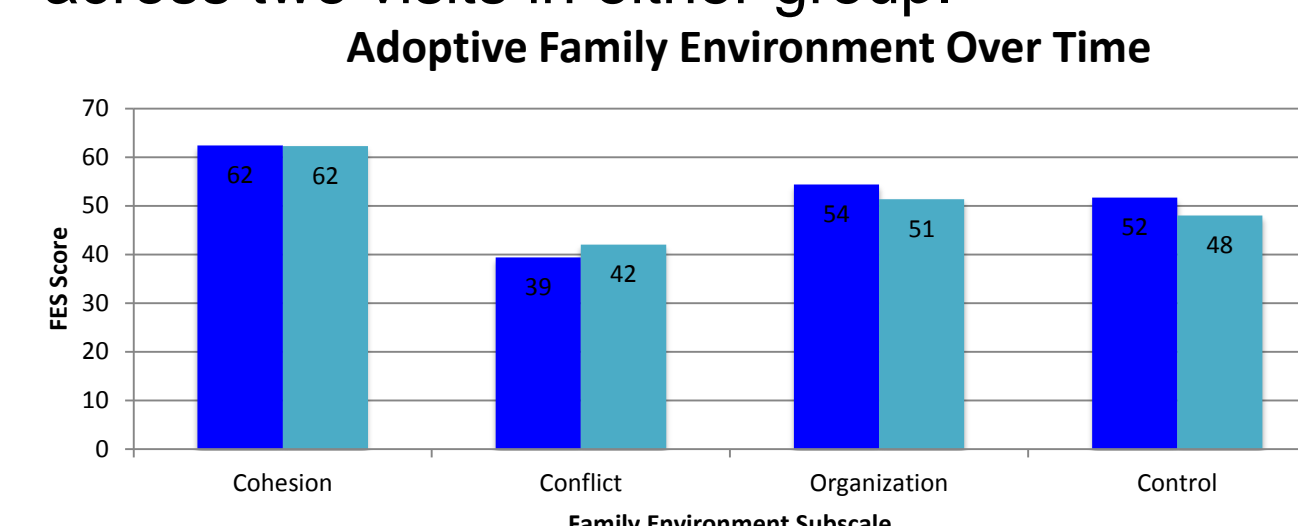
RESULTS

- ❖ At group level, patterns emerged in parental experiences and infant stress responsivity.

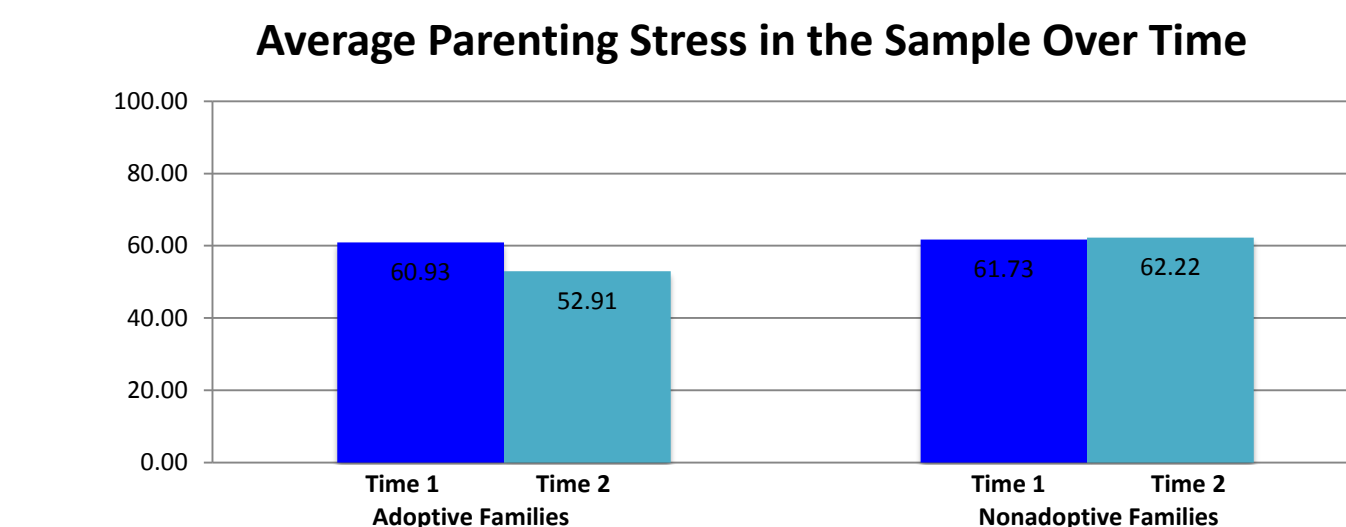
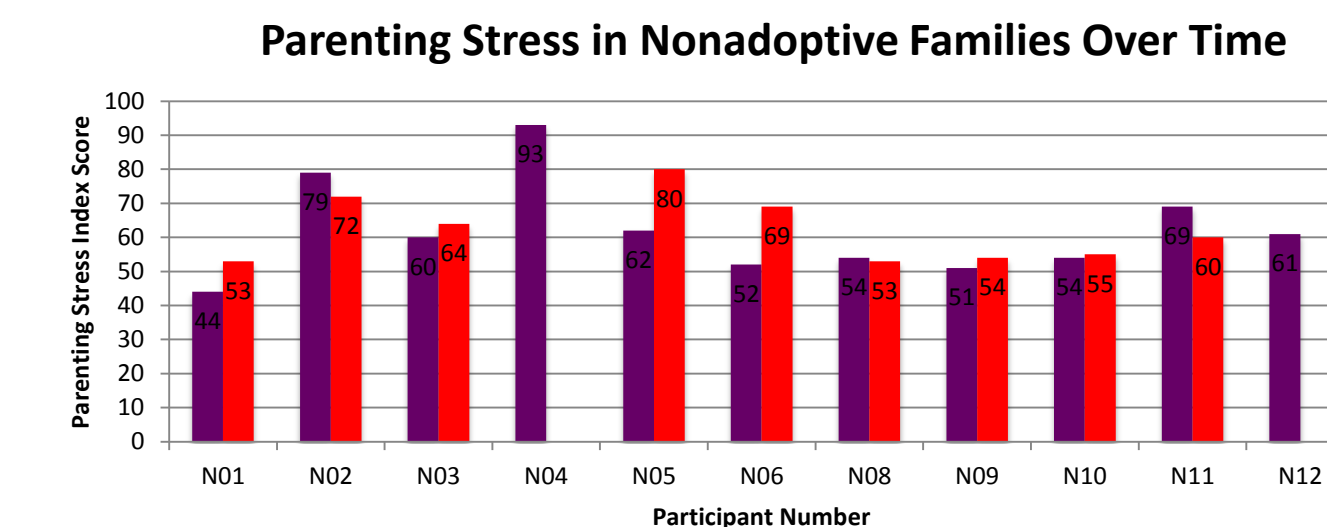
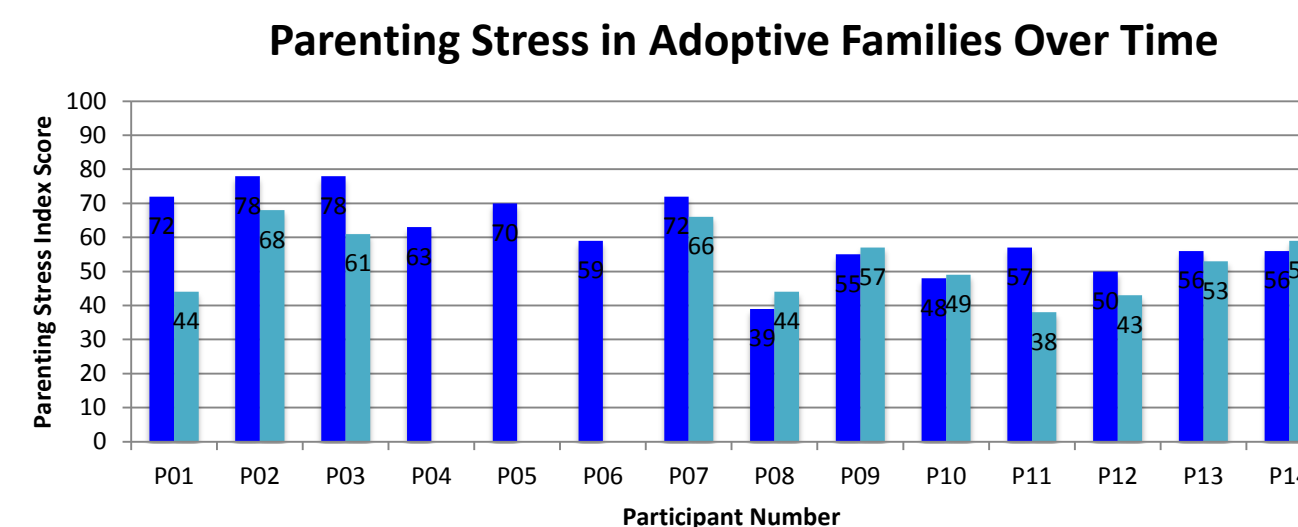
General stress: Both adoptive and nonadoptive parents showed similar perceived stress at Time 1 and Time 2 at a normative level. Across time, average stress levels for both the adoptive and nonadoptive parents decreased from Time 1 to Time 2.



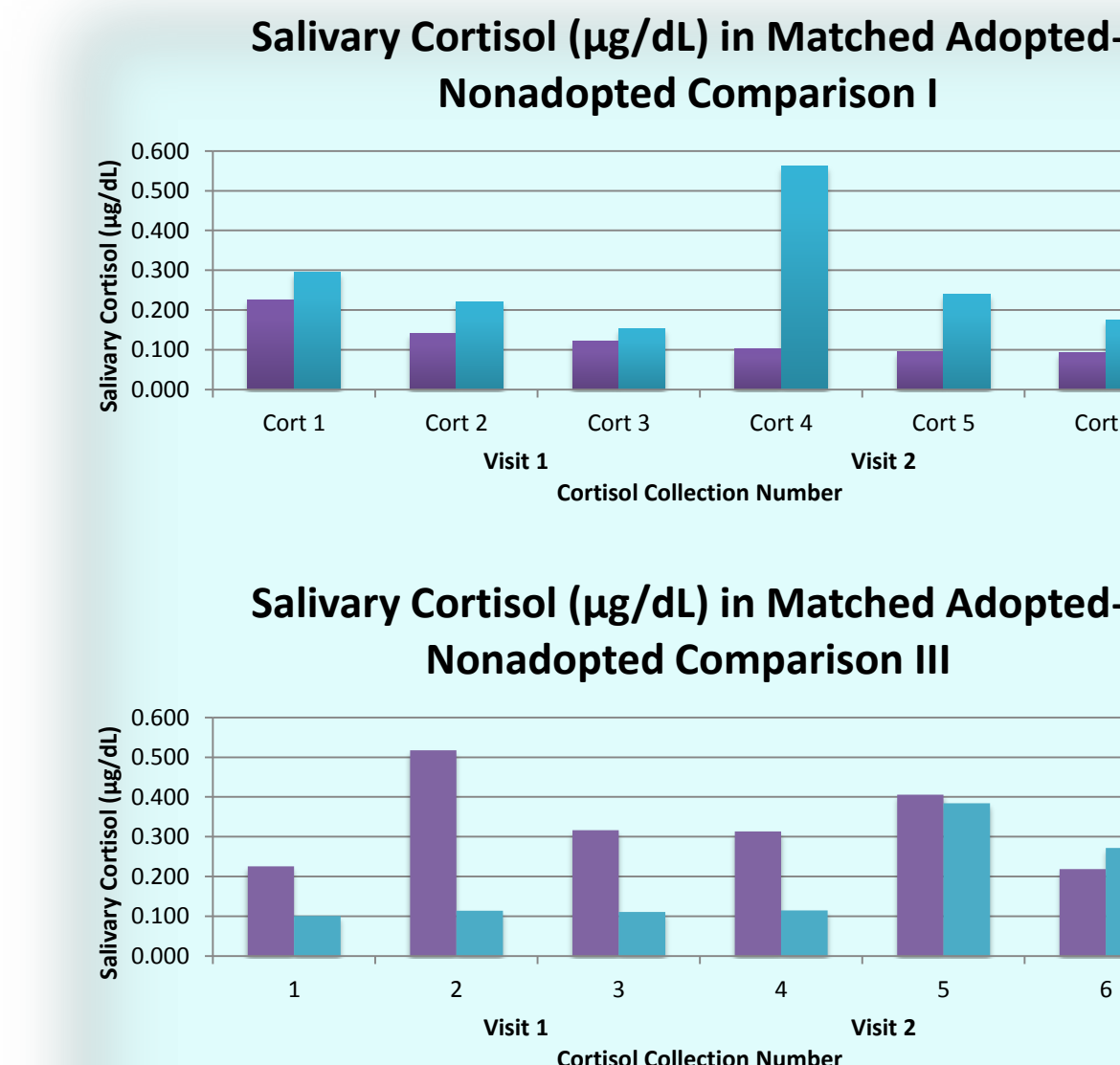
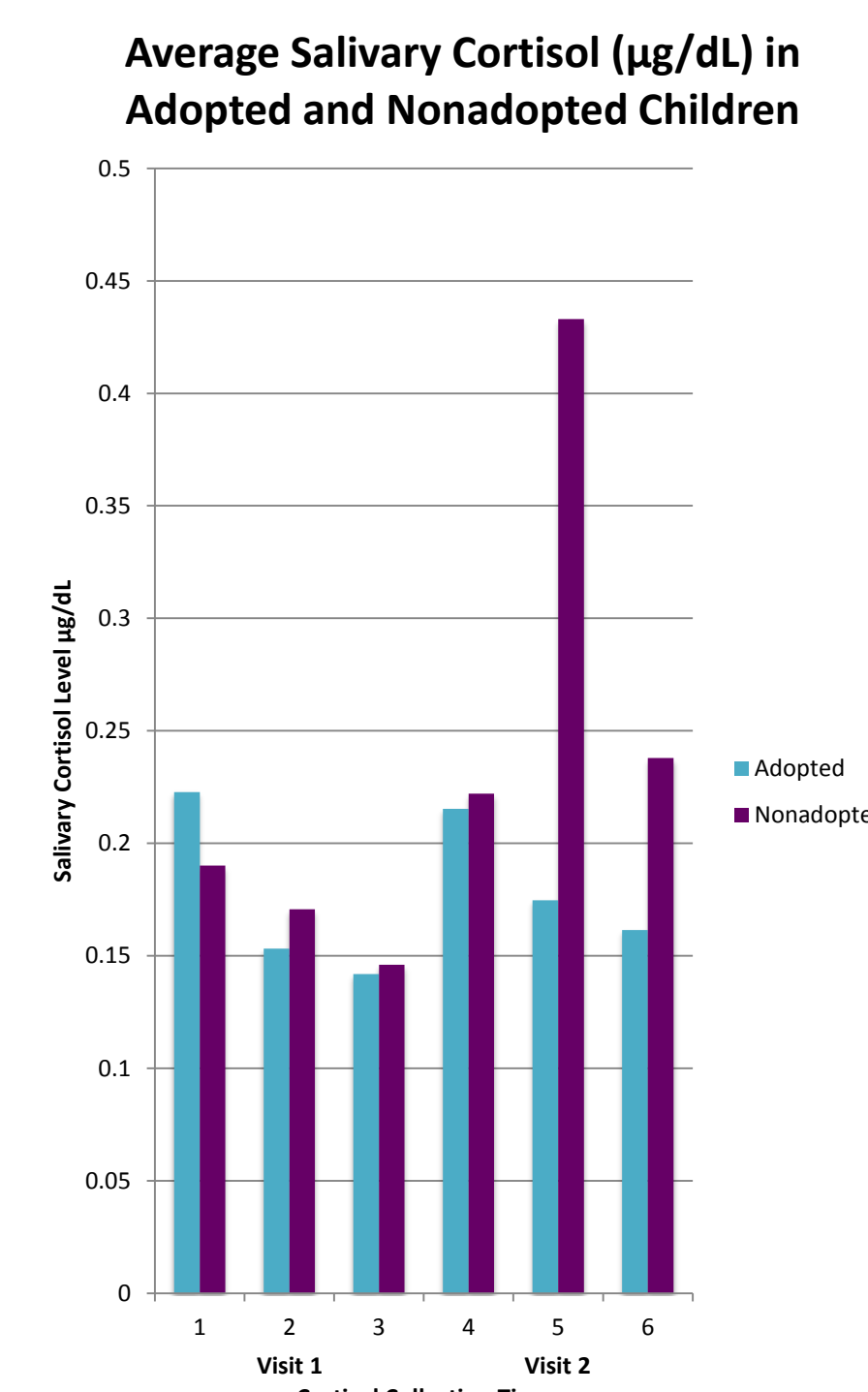
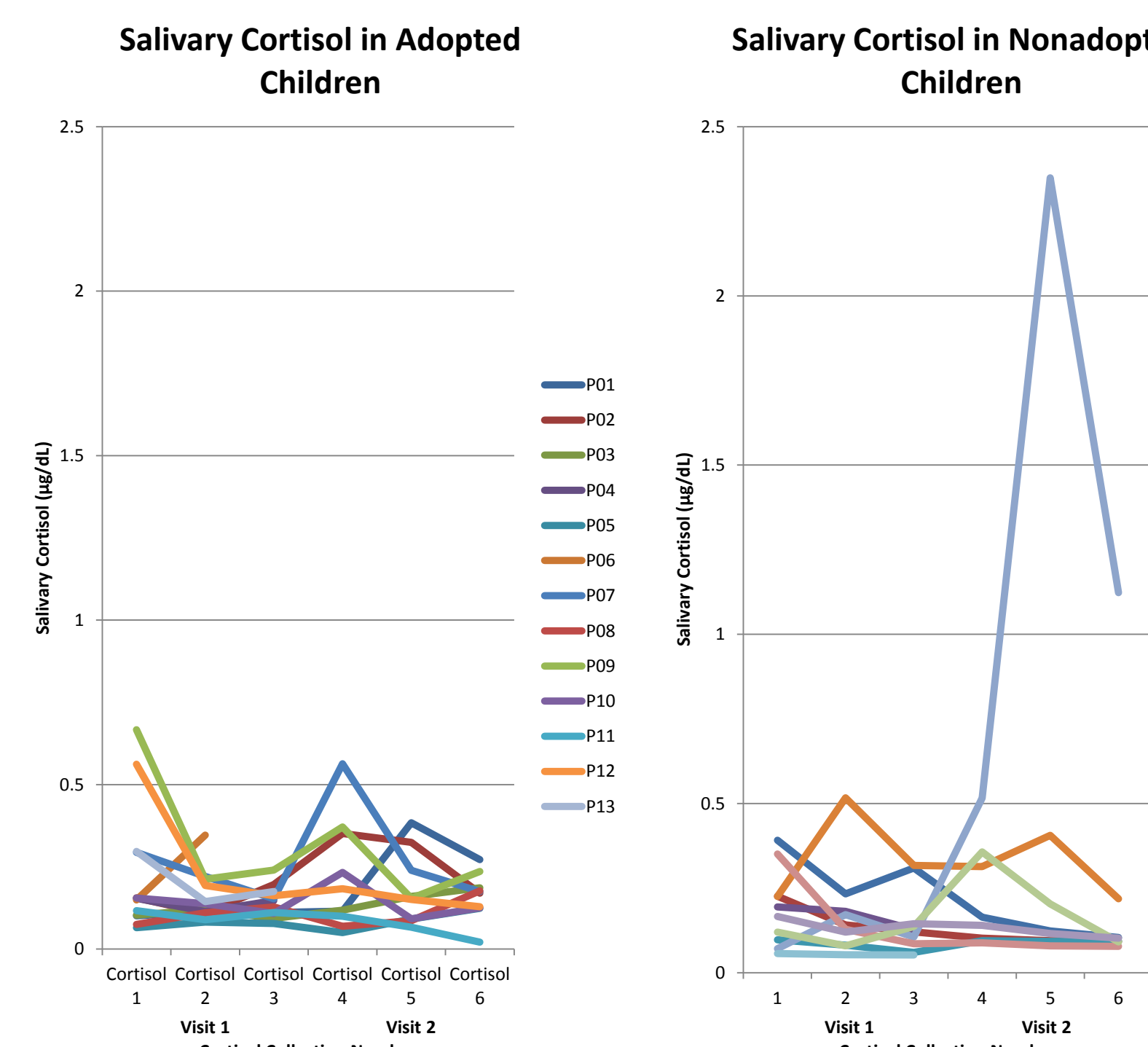
Perception of family environment: Both IA and NA parents reported positive perception of their family environments. On average, both groups expressed that their family members were supportive of each other with minimum conflict, and maintained structure and rules in the family. We did not see any significant changes in parents' perception of their family environments across two visits in either group.



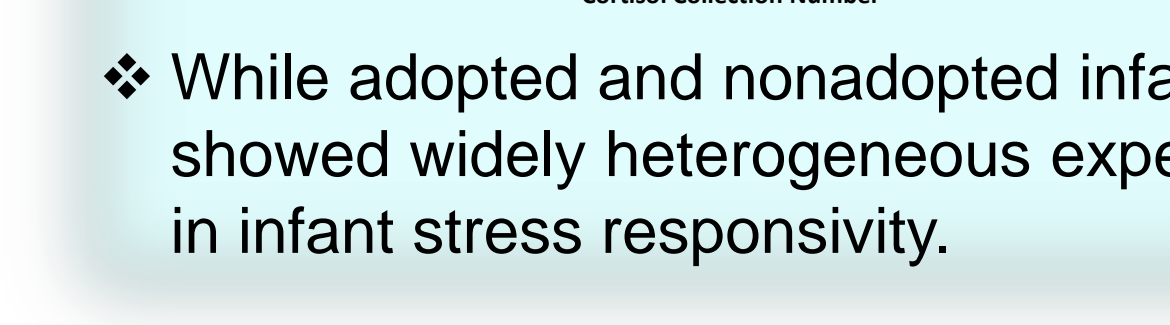
Parenting stress: A majority of parents from both samples experienced consistent levels of parenting stress between Time 1 and Time 2. Levels of parenting stress at Time 1 were similar for both adoptive and nonadoptive parents. However, adoptive parents showed *reduced* parental stress between Time 1 and Time 2, while nonadoptive parents remained at similar levels of parental stress across visits.



Infant cortisol: Adoptive and nonadoptive infants showed different patterns of stress responsivity. While on average, adoptive infants showed steady decrease in the cortisol level across three collection points at Time 1 and Time 2, nonadoptive infants showed changes in cortisol level pattern at Time 2, with a slight increase at the second collection and decrease at the third.



❖ While adopted and nonadopted infants are both age- and gender-matched, analysis showed widely heterogeneous experiences at an individual family level, particularly evident in infant stress responsivity.



DISCUSSION

- ❖ This study highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of internationally adopted infants and their adoptive parents, and contributes to a richer understanding of adoptive parents' transition to parenthood.
- ❖ At a family level, adoptive and nonadoptive parents show no significant differences in their stress level or their perception of family environment. However, when looking specifically at their parenting, parenting stress decreased for adoptive parents, showing a different pattern than the nonadoptive parents. Since adoptive parents have a unique preparatory process for parenthood, and may be prepared for or expecting worst-case scenarios in becoming a parent, they may feel less tense about their parenting within even a short time.
- ❖ Interestingly at individual level, the emerging pattern disappears, and each adoptive and nonadoptive parent exhibits unique family and parental experiences. Variability was particularly evident in infants' stress response systems. Given that each family possesses different constellation of family experiences (e.g., number of siblings in the house, number of months/years being parents, type of parenthood preparation, parents' age), experiences of parents and infants may be related to specific, individual family structures and characteristics.