

“...You Don’t Get Everything”: Foster-to-Adoptive Parents’ Child Preferences across the Transition to Parenthood

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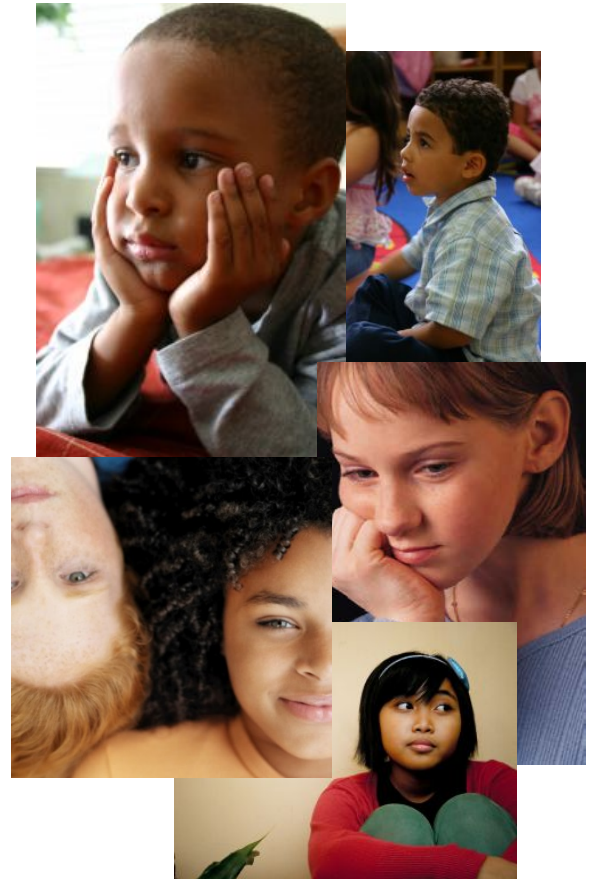


Transition to Parenthood: Stressful

- All foster-to-adopters
 - Background checks, parent training courses, CPR, First Aid certification, homestudy (Mallon, 2004)
 - Children adopted via foster care: Higher rates of health difficulties, attachment disorder, ADD/ADHD, and cognitive and educational problems than children adopted through private/domestic agencies and internationally (Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010)
- Same-sex couples
 - Potential discrimination
 - Receive the message: they *should* be open to children who are typically less preferred (Goldberg, 2010; Mallon, 2004; Matthews & Cramer, 2006)
- This study: Examined child welfare adopters' unmet expectations and how they adjust/cope during the transition to adoptive parenthood

Adoption from Foster Care: Preferences and Realities

- 108,000 children waiting to be adopted in the U.S. public welfare system (AFCARS, 2015)
- Parents' preferences (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Brooks, James, & Barth, 2002; Evan B. Donaldson Institute on Adoption, 2005):
 - Same race as parents
 - Under the age of 3
 - Ok with behavioral challenges, but not significant special needs



Research Questions



- **Are certain types of unmet expectations** (about the child's age, gender, race, and special needs) viewed by adoptive parents as **more stressful** than others? How? Why?
- How do adoptive parents **adapt** to unmet expectations? What conditions appear to facilitate and hinder parents' perceived ability to adapt?
- How do **adoption type and parent sexual orientation shape parents' experiences** of, or reactions to unexpected child characteristics?

Interviews

- 3 months after placement
 - What problems or surprises did you encounter with the adoption process?; How prepared did you feel for the adoption?; Explain
 - What is the [age, gender, race/ethnicity, special needs status] of your child?
 - Is this different from what you expected? If so, different in a negative, positive, mixed, or neutral way?



Sample



- Parents

- 90 individuals (30 gay men, 30 lesbians, 15 heterosexual men, and 15 heterosexual women); comprised 45 couples
- 38.18 years old, on average ($SD = 6.09$).
- Mostly White ($n = 85$)
- Annual median family salary was \$120,000 ($SD = \$82,000$)
- Geographically diverse; Highly educated
- 30 couples adopted via foster care; 15 couples adopted privately

- Children

- Age range: newborn-15 years old (Median: 4 years old)
- Racially diverse (57% White)

Unmet Demographic Expectations by Adoption Type and Parents' Sexual Orientation

Child Demographic	Adoption Type			Sexual Orientation		
	<u>Public</u> (n = 60)	<u>Private</u> (n = 30)		<u>Lesbian</u> (n = 30)	<u>Gay</u> (n = 30)	<u>Heterosexual</u> (n = 30)
Age	30 (50%)	1 (3%)		8 (27%)	13 (43%)	10 (33%)
Gender	8 (13%)	17 (57%)		11 (37%)	9 (30%)	5 (17%)
Race/Ethnicity	18 (30%)	9 (30%)		10 (33%)	11 (37%)	6 (20%)
Special Needs	21 (35%)	3 (10%)		9 (30%)	7 (23%)	8 (27%)
Number of individuals who endorsed at least one unmet expectation	54 (90%)	25 (83%)		26 (87%)	28 (93%)	25 (83%)

Parents' Affective Reactions to Unmet Expectations

Child Demographic	Reaction			
	Considerable Stress	Manageable Stress	Minimal or No Stress; Neutral Reaction	No Stress; Pleasant Surprise
Age (n = 31)	8 (26%)	4 (13%)	14 (45%)	5 (16%)
Expected younger	8	4	10	-
Expected older	-	-	4	5
Gender (n = 25)	-	12 (48%)	13 (52%)	-
Expected female	-	10	8	-
Expected male	-	2	5	-
Race/Ethnicity (n = 27)	-	6 (22%)	4 (15%)	17 (63%)
Expected a minority race	-	-	-	17
Expected a different minority race	-	6	4	-
Special Needs (n = 24)	11 (46%)	13 (54%)	-	-
Behavioral	11	1	-	-
Cognitive	-	6	-	-
Physical	-	6	-	-
Total	19	35	31	22

Adaptations to Unmet Expectations

- Conditions Contributing to Stressful Adjustment

- Lack of support (both formal and informal)

I can't tell you how many workshops and lectures, and classes, and anything you can think of . . . we've talked to you know, a bazillion therapists who deal with this. We get it, why she does what she does. What I keep going back to is, it's different living with it. And I think a lot of people in this profession don't get that, they haven't lived with them. -Jane, lesbian mom of a child with unanticipated special needs

- Perceived inability to “mold” the child

I was really hoping for a younger child in order to affect their personality. -Marcus, gay father

Adaptations to Unmet Expectations

- Conditions Contributing to Positive Adjustment

- Sufficient support (both formal and informal)
 - “Stepped up to the plate”
- Parents’ shift in perspective

Based on my experience, from two to three on up, you’re just dealing with a lot of things that I just didn’t think we were ready or willing to take on. But, you know, experience has proved me wrong. -John, heterosexual father

- Conditions Contributing to Neutral Adjustment

- Adequate pre-adoptive training
- Priority was parenthood; not preferences
 - *You know, that [our initial gender preference] was so secondary to having a baby. -Mandy; lesbian mother*

Conclusions



- Importance of *pre-* and *post-*adoption support
 - Adoption from foster care has unique challenges
 - Ability to be flexible can be an effective coping mechanism
 - Support from agencies, therapists, physicians, schools, family, friends is important
- Same-sex couples: seen as “less desirable?”
 - Preferences de-emphasized?
 - Awareness and proactive approaches from agencies, social workers, and therapists may help decrease stress for same-sex couples