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EDITORIAL

The thousand and one facets of communication as keys to unlock the mysteries of adoption and its unspoken aspects?

When communication, in its most varied manifestations, is used for the benefit of adoption issues, a multitude of paths open up expressing the deeper meaning of adoption beyond words and numbers, and help to make the unspoken evident, as this can be a source of much suffering.

Let us not forget: 80% of communication allowing people to connect takes place in the non-verbal sphere, the unspoken. Thus, the ISS/IRC invites you to explore the intention that lies hidden behind the unspoken. From the political world, to the art world, through to the most personal realms of family life, let us immerse ourselves again in the endless mysteries of adoption, this time from the perspective of communication.

Transparency in the face of the unspoken

To put transparency and politics side by side is not without irony: nevertheless, it is an ideal that we must never stop fighting for especially when the lives of children and families are affected by these decisions. The political dimension and the hidden agendas in adoption are multiple and sometimes far removed from the needs and rights of children. The absence of real efforts to speak openly about the challenges to be met and the mistakes made in the past bear witnesses to this. Each of us, as defenders of the rights of the child, need to continue our advocacy work in order to reclaim transparency and accountability from all the stakeholders in adoption. Let us not be shy in addressing sensitive issues, such as adoption breakdowns or even illegal adoptions, so that mistakes are not repeated (see p. 3). Let us also continue to work with governments so that decisions regarding the initiation of cooperation in intercountry adoption or even, for example, the imposition of a moratorium, are based on the interests of children, and are properly planned and communicated in a transparent manner (see p. 3). Communication in adoption begins when an intention of abandonment exists and in the process of informing, assisting and supporting the birth parents, whatever their choice. Complete knowledge, together with all traces of the first decisive stages, are essential to ensure transparency in the adoptive family and facilitate communication in the future.

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More knowledge to avoid fewer unspoken issues

Communication is surely the basis of all good relationships, communication that is honest and respectful of each other's personal experiences. Achieving this knowledge is necessary as a prerequisite: knowledge for the adoptive parents concerning the pre-adoptive experience of their child, knowledge for the professionals supporting the adoptive family about the specifics of adoption, knowledge of the child's environment, particularly school, and the implications of the adoption in this area of the child's life. Having this knowledge available is a first step, and it then remains to know how to convey this knowledge in an appropriate manner. Thus, it is necessary to counsel (see p. 13) and equip parents and teachers thanks to the development of handbooks (see p. 8) or guidelines (see p. 5) so that even the most sensitive and complex subjects, such as abandonment, neglect and abuse, can be addressed in confidence. This also applies to questions of origins at a time when new technologies proliferate (see Monthly Review N° 173 of June 2013); parents must take the lead, to the best of their abilities, and support their children on this journey (see p. 10).

Are words sufficient in explaining the unspoken issues of adoption?

Are words alone capable of expressing the deep meaning and shared perception of adoption among adoptees? Do they alone have the strength to release these unspoken words buried inside which erupt without warning? To convey authentically their own experience, to free themselves of internal sufferings and injuries, and to articulate what these are, some adoptees have demonstrated their considerable artistic talent. Writers, musicians, graphic designers, film makers, there is no shortage of artists in the world of adoption, as illustrated in the publication mentioned on p. 11. This path, which is also proposed by some post-adoptive support and counselling services for adoptees and their families (see Monthly Review N° 06-07/2010 of June-July 2010), is undoubtedly an incredible richness and opens up endless fields of communication and self expression.

Exploring the world of adoption is an endless journey during the course of which transparency, knowledge and creativity are major assets in coping with the unspoken, and sometimes the unknown. Let us listen to adoptees speaking, singing, shouting, rejecting or expressing satisfaction with their adoption; whichever way they express this to us shows us the way forward.

The ISS/IRC team
June 2016

ACTORS

- **Italy:** The statistics relating to the number of intercountry adoptions undertaken by Italy in 2015 are now available on the website of the Central Authority. These reflect an increase of 0.45% in comparison with 2014. Italy is the top receiving country in Europe in terms of the number of children adopted, and the second top receiving country at global level after the USA.

*Source: Commissione per le Adozioni Internazionali,
<http://www.commissioneadozioni.it/it/notizie/2016/dati-adozioni.aspx>.*

BRIEF NEWS

Australia: Conference on children and families across borders

International Social Service (ISS) Australia and its research partner, the University of Melbourne (Department of Social Work), recently presented the 'Children and Families Across Borders' conference at the University's Woodward Centre. The Conference – held on 4 and 5 April 2016 – was attended by practitioners, researchers, government representatives, ISS network members and interested members of the public. The overall conference theme was addressed through seven specific areas for discussion: intercountry adoption; international family mediation; international parental child abduction; surrogacy and donor conception; intercountry kinship care and child protection; unaccompanied minors and children coming to Australia under Orphan Relative Visas; and forced

marriage and child trafficking.

Most of the Conference presentations are now available for reading and download from the dedicated conference website at: <http://conference.iss2016melbourne.net> (see under 'Program'). For further information on the conference, please contact ISS Australia at: iss@iss.org.au.

Now available: Responding to illegal adoptions – A professional handbook

It is truly with great delight that ISS has the honour to disseminate the publication [*Responding to illegal adoptions: A professional handbook*](#). Without the commitment and perseverance of many professionals, colleagues and friends, who wrote freely for this initiative, ISS would not have the calibre of contributions that we have to address this challenging situation affecting thousands, particularly children. ISS is especially thrilled to have, for the first time, a publication that provides hope and potential avenues for moving forward in such difficult circumstances as well as lessons to prevent this situation from re-occurring. The handbook is available only in English for the moment, with Spanish and French translations in the pipeline. Print versions will be undertaken later in the year, funding dependent. ISS encourages all professionals working in adoption to use this tool to equip adoptees, families of origin and adoptive families to respond with courage to illegal adoptions.

PRACTICE

Moratoria: In the best interests of the child? (Part 1)¹

Nigel Cantwell, an International Child Protection Consultant, explains the purpose of moratoria and the need for best interest considerations, with a special focus on countries of origin. Receiving countries are the focus of a second article as well as recommendations for implementing moratoria.

Regrettably, too often, moratoria are hastily imposed, leaving adoption stakeholders in the unknown. Based on the excellent publication *The Best Interests of the Child in Intercountry Adoption*, the ISS/IRC explores the importance of clear communication lines and objectives in the implementation of moratoria to avoid conflicts.

Moratoria

A suspension or moratorium on intercountry adoption is designed as a temporary measure to respond to an actual or potential risk of a general and severe violation of the rights of children, who enter the process. Moratoria may be declared by countries of origin or by receiving countries, in varying contexts and with different scope and effects. The aim is to use the suspension period to secure conditions, under which adoptions can resume, with the necessary safeguards in place to protect children's rights in line with their best interests.

Moratoria are not unusual. Most of the 22 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) have invoked the measure at least once since the early 1990s, as have many other countries of origin, particularly in Africa and Asia. At the same time, the justification for and the aims of

moratoria are contested in certain quarters – particularly in receiving countries – as running counter to the rights and best interests of those children, who are, as a result, deprived of the opportunity of adoption abroad. In a 2010 statement, for example, the US Joint Council on International Children's Services (JCICS) stated: *'The history of suspensions clearly demonstrates that an ethical and fully functional intercountry adoption process is not the true goal of those calling for suspension. Of eight countries where the chosen route of reform included the suspension of intercountry adoption, not one country has effectively reconstituted intercountry adoption as an option for children in need. Suspension without a goal of achieving a full spectrum of permanency services, including intercountry adoption is not in the best interest of children and only replaces one abuse with abuse of another form'. [...]*

Moratoria and best interests

The JCICS stance does, however, highlight important issues that need to be addressed if the best interests of the child are to be ensured through moratoria. For example, they are bound to affect children, for whom intercountry adoption could be a valid response; but if the

system in place cannot safeguard their rights and best interests, the risk involved in continuing adoptions under such a system is too high. The time it takes – often years – to establish a system capable of safeguarding children can reflect the depth and extent of reform that is needed, demonstrating just how unacceptable the framework for intercountry adoption has been. This is certainly the case for countries such as Cambodia, Guatemala and Nepal: even after years of effort, including technical assistance, few receiving countries felt that conditions were good enough to lift the moratoria.

That said, it is also clear that a moratorium to protect the best interests of children must only be imposed with good cause and in a manner that takes full account of the situation of children already going through the intercountry adoption process (see Part 2 of the present article in a forthcoming issue of the Monthly Review next).

Why do countries of origin impose moratoria?

Moratoria declared by countries of origin are usually general in nature (affecting adoptions to all receiving countries) and may be motivated by a number of factors:

- Evidence that the adoption system and procedures in place have failed to prevent serious and widespread violations of children's rights. This may be on the basis of the country of origin's spontaneous concerns or at the suggestion of – and sometimes under pressure from – international bodies and/or receiving countries concerned about systemic problems. This is why, for example, Sierra Leone's Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs imposed a suspension on intercountry adoptions on 21 May 2009 – a suspension that was lifted on 13 April 2012 after more effective measures were put in place.

- Concerns that systems may lack the resources to cope with the level of intercountry adoption while protecting the rights of the children involved. There have been many examples of this since the 'free-for-all' that hit Romania in 1991, and Ghana is one of the countries that reacted to high demand in this way more recently (in 2013).

- The need for thorough legislative reform and establishment of procedures and structures with a view to becoming a state party to the 1993 Hague Convention or to implementing that

treaty. Carrying out such fundamental changes while continuing to process new applications compromises the efficacy and speed of the reform process. Rwanda, for example, applied a moratorium in August 2010, so that it could put in place the necessary infrastructure to protect the best interests of its children and combat their potential abduction, sale and trafficking, enabling it to accede to the Hague Convention in 2012.

- Fears that proven malpractice elsewhere may compromise adoptions from the country. One example was the moratorium imposed by the Republic of the Congo in 2007 and 2008 to avoid problems like the *Arche de Noé* episode in neighbouring Chad, when an illegal attempt was made to remove 103 children for adoption in France.

- Fears of malpractice in the wake of disaster or emergency situations. Examples include the moratorium imposed by Sri Lanka following the December 2004 tsunami.

- Temporary refusal to accept new applications from prospective adopters because of a significant backlog and the relatively few children in need of intercountry adoption. In some cases, this may apply only to applications to adopt children in particular age groups. For example, on 1 May 2009, the Central Authority of the Philippines, the Inter-Country Adoption Board (ICAB), announced a moratorium on accepting new applications from those wishing to adopt a child under the age of 25 months with or without medical or developmental concerns. It stated that this was 'due to the large number of unmatched approved adoption applications for prospective adoptive parents wanting to adopt children' in this age group and the relatively small number of such young children in need of intercountry adoption.

ICAB indicated that it would lift the moratorium once it had processed at least 50 per cent of its current cases – and it did so, subject to a quota system, in September 2012. In many such instances, exceptions are made for one or more categories of hard-to-place children (those with a disability or serious illness, sibling groups and/or older children).

Suspensions by countries of origin sometimes target specific receiving countries. This has been the case for Ukraine, for example, which in September 2005 halted – but later reinstated –

adoption procedures for Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the USA on the grounds that many adoptive parents there had

failed to comply with post-adoption reporting requirements.

Given the preceding analysis, the ISS/IRC notes the importance of ensuring moratoria are implemented with the best interests of the child in mind, given a myriad of factors such as current child protection frameworks, pipeline cases, etc. Clear policies, communication strategies and expediency are needed as discussed in the forthcoming second part of this article.

Reference:

¹ This text can be found in Cantwell, N (2014). *The Best Interests of the Child in Intercountry Adoption*. Innocenti Insight, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research. The publication and all relevant referencing are available at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/unicef%20best%20interest%20document_web_re-supply.pdf.

Guidelines for adopted students' right to study: A goal achieved in Italy

Anna Guerrieri, Vice President of the Italian organisation CARE¹, presents hereunder the elaboration process as well as the content of the guidelines² that have been adopted by the Italian government in 2014, in order to improve the educational system, the dialogue and the inclusion of adopted children in their school environment.

Both domestic and intercountry adoption is largely widespread in Italy. From 2000 to 2003, over 42,048³ children entered Italy for the purpose of intercountry adoption. During 2013, 2,825 children coming from 56 different countries entered Italy with an average age of five years and five months. There are approximately one thousand domestic adoptions per year⁴.

Based on this data, the attention paid to the wellbeing of adopted children has enhanced, even in the school environment. In response to these numbers and the specificities that each child has, the Ministry of Education (MIUR) has finally decided to listen to the voice of civil society, and start a project where the words 'adoption' and 'school' are considered together. It has neither been a simple nor an immediate path, and it is the outcome of a story that began over 10 years ago.

The school: The entry into society of adopted children

School is one of the environments that is particularly significant to adoptive families, as it represents the entry of children into society. Such an entry often coincides with the building of the family in itself. For several years, Italian adoption-related associations of families have worked with the school, aware that adopted children need to feel accepted, welcomed in their new and unknown world without causing surprise.

Above all, adopted children need 'time' and 'space' to understand their new world. It is therefore necessary to give them particular attention that does not underestimate their history (*'they are only children and children are all the same'*) and that does not take into consideration differences as something to fear (*'adopted children always have a pile of problems'*); lastly, it is necessary to have a mindful approach.

Genesis of the Guidelines for the right to study of adopted students

It has always been useful for teachers to know the challenges highlighted by families:

1. Management of the phases of the first entry: Possibility of integration during the school year; choice of class; possibility to remain one more year in nursery school.
2. Management of sensitive data relating to children who, in the period of pre-adoptive placement, continue to suffer from 'legal uncertainty', as they continue to have the surnames of their biological parents for potentially long periods of time.
3. Talking of adoption in class and managing the personal history of adopted children.
4. Potential learning and behavioural difficulties.
5. Alleged age.
6. Management of phases of transition across the various educational systems. Periods of crisis during adolescence.

Based on these aspects, first *Genitori si diventa*, subsequently *Coordinamento CARE*, started an institutional dialogue in 2010 that led to the signature, in December 2014, of the Guidelines for the right to study of adopted students. In July 2015, the Guidelines were incorporated into Law 107 that reformed the Italian school system. The clarity of the objectives, the determination of the families, as well as the willingness of the Ministry to listen, have been fundamental to this success. The work took place with the incorporation of local realities. The planning and drafting phase – that saw the involvement of professionals trained on the issue – took place by including good practices developed at provincial and regional level. Nothing has been made up; it was rather taken from the best of previous proven experiences.

Structure of the Guidelines

The document is divided into four parts with three appendices. It begins with an introduction that quantifies the phenomenon. Despite the Guidelines avoiding generalisations since each story is different, it nevertheless captures the main peculiarities of adoption with a particular focus on potential difficulties. Particular attention is paid to the psycho-affective and cognitive consequences of traumatic experiences or pre-natal exposition to alcohol and drugs, by highlighting the special needs of adopted children and adolescents.

The second part entitled 'Good Practices' deals with each administrative aspect concerning the first enrolment, choice of class and phases of academic admission. It allows admission of adopted children during every period of the year as well as extension of the time of admission for those, who are of school age and may need an unexpected admission to school. Above all, it allows, when necessary, an additional year in nursery school based on appropriate documentation, as opposed to having to provide a medical certificate of disability as in the past.

With regards to domestic adoption, a management strategy of sensitive data relating to

children has been established. This applies in phases, in which the adoption process has not yet been concluded, *i.e.* the child still has their original personal data but, at the same time, is already living with their adoptive parents. Without this management strategy in place, the identification/tracing of the child could be at risk.

Promotion of the school-family dialogue and education

The main concept of the document is to facilitate the school-family dialogue, as well as the support network of children by looking after relationships between families, the schools, public and private services. A suggested good practice is the identification of representative teachers on adoption issues, who should be the point of contact for families and colleagues, trained on the peculiarities of adopted students. Lastly, thorough attention is paid to linguistic issues, emphasising how the realities of intercountry adoption are completely different from immigration. It then addresses issues of continuity, clarifying some points about the growth of adopted children and issues that might arise during adolescence.

There are then two chapters about the role of the various actors (national and regional institutions, schools, directors, teachers and representative teachers, families) and the main aspects of a future educational programme for teachers (in particular representative teachers).

The first two appendices contain samples of model school-family interviews, which are intended as potential suggestion for representative teachers. The third appendix starts with a detailed analysis of potential strategies for the first enrolment at school, followed by actions on how to address adoption in class, and the personal history of children. There is also a focus on the complexity of intercultural elements and the use of books that too often neglect the existence of adoptive families or its stereotypes.

As of now, the Guidelines have been sent to all Italian schools, which, by consequence, have informed all families. The challenge now is the widespread training in schools to concretely put into practice all strategies described in the latter. This is the second crucial part of this work. First, we put on paper what we needed, then we designed the 'framework'. Now, we need to paint the picture to bring the Guidelines to life. We will need time, but we are aware that a process of this type is, by now, relentless.

References:

¹ This body is made up by 33 associations of foster and adoptive families.

² *Linee di indirizzo per il diritto allo studio degli alunni adottati: un traguardo raggiunto in Italia*, available in Italian at: http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/Linee_di_indirizzo_per_favorire_lo_studio_dei_ragazzi_adottati.pdf.

³ Commissione per le Adozioni Internazionali.

⁴ Dipartimento per la Giustizia Minorile, Statistical data on adoption for the years 2000-2013, <http://www.giustiziaminorile.it>.

Examples and reflection on the impact of labour migration on children, who remain in their communities of origin (Part II)

Following up on last month's article on examples of situations of children 'left behind' and the impact of labour migration on these children, who remain in their communities of origin, whilst one or both parents have left the home or country to search for better economic, social and professional opportunities, we will now focus on the existing international legal framework available to respond to their needs and some examples of actions undertaken by the ISS network in their regard.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (Guidelines) provide comprehensive provisions as to how to provide adequate care to children temporarily deprived of parental care, by giving priority to family-type and community solutions and by promoting family contact and pursuing family reunification.

How to address the needs of these children and ensure the respect for their rights?

In this regard, ISS is often faced with such situations through its casework and works towards providing the support required to ensure that families are in touch, meet and are reunited, whenever possible and in the children's best interests, by connecting the services, authorities and organisations involved in the latter (see attached box).

It has also become clear that the 1996 Hague Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in

Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children may provide a solid framework of cooperation to ensure that those child protection measures that have been decided and their implementation and recognition amongst Contracting States are in the children's best

interests.

Prospective guidelines and framework to address the needs and ensure the rights of 'left-behind' children

The UNCRC and the Guidelines, as well as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, provide a solid legal framework to ensure the rights of the children affected by separation due to labour migration. In this

The experience of the ISS network in the protection of 'left-behind' children

In **Moldova**, at least one in five children has a parent abroad. The **Association for Child and Family Empowerment "AVE Copiii"** (ISS Member in Moldova) works to facilitate contacts/relations between parents/enlarged families and children.

ISS Hong Kong, as part of their international child protection programme in Mainland China, regularly undertakes tracing and locating efforts for Chinese children, whose parents are living and working overseas (so-called international family investigation reports) in order to facilitate the child's welfare report for decisions made in the best interests of the concerned child, including considering the placement of the child with his kin abroad.

regard, it is worth mentioning that the Committee on the Rights of the Child, together with the Committee on Migrant Workers, is currently in the process of drafting and consulting stakeholders for the development of a joint General Comment on the Human Rights of Children in the Context of International

Migration. This document will undoubtedly provide further guidelines as to how to implement these international instruments in order to ensure the rights of those affected by such a situation, including the children 'left behind'¹.

Thus, when addressing the care of children in the context of migration, we should also take into account the needs and rights of those children, who remain in their places of origin whilst their parents have moved for labour purposes. Indeed, this situation entails some specific factors: the absence of parents for long periods and potential feelings of abandonment in the children despite the ultimate objective of the parents being to provide for their children and wishing to be reunited and, on the other hand, the potential strain on the extended families and communities to provide adequate environments for the care of these children.

In this context, existing international instruments provide a number of provisions and guidelines to respond to these situations and mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure cooperation between the services, authorities and organisations involved to ensure the rights of these children. The ISS/IRC, through its casework and its advocacy efforts, is fully committed to supporting both. Thus, in its contribution to the above-mentioned Joint General Comment, ISS recommended that '[w]hen children are separated from their parents, whether in the country of origin, in the country of destination or in a third country, [to] further the efforts of all professionals and bodies involved to address the particular consequences of the absence of the parents and family in the children's lives, and therefore promote family-type and community solutions, family contact/communication and specific programmes and services'².

References:

¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, CMW-CRC Call for submissions on its Joint General Comment on the Human Rights of Children in the Context of International Migration, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CMW/Pages/JointGeneralCommentonChildren.aspx>.

² For ISS's contribution to the development of this Joint General Comment (February 2016), see: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CMW/JointGC_CRC_CMW/InternationalSocialService.docx.

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESOURCES

Talking about adoption even when it is difficult to do so: A handbook to face sensitive questions

This guide, led by CORA¹ and developed by the Grupo AFIN², provides elements and resources when facing questions relating to 'sensitive' or 'delicate' adoption-related issues within the family environment. Beatriz San Román³ – one of the authors of this guide – offers us here a preview of what may be found in the latter.

Whereas, in the past, adoptive parents, without any major explanations, were advised not to provide too many details, and to wait for their children to ask questions, for some years now, it has been recommended to address the subject 'in a natural way'. However, what does that mean? When and how should available information be shared? How should 'delicate'

topics be addressed in conversations with children?

Talking about adoption: what, who, how, when

To talk about adoption with an adopted child is not only about telling them about the encounter between the members of the family. To talk about what happened prior to this encounter is often more difficult, but nonetheless necessary. As complicated as it may be to assume what

happened, it is worth taking into consideration that it is all the more complicated to build oneself on the basis of a void of unanswered questions. In the story of the adoption process, in addition to the events experienced together by parents and children, there must be room for what happened prior to this encounter, including the existence of the biological family and its loss, the reasons for which it was not possible to remain within the latter, the potential institutionalisation, etc.

To know and absorb one's own story is a process that is not free of difficulties and feelings that are hard to manage. The parents, who are the persons who know their child best, must be those responsible for supporting them in this process, by adding nuances and details in accordance with the increase in their capacity to understand, and by resisting the temptation to embellish their story.

The manner, in which children understand the process of adoption and the story prior to the encounter, varies throughout time, raising sometimes feelings of anger, pain or sadness. It is just as important to share information as it is to support children in their elaboration, by validating the feelings raised by the latter.

It is important that delicate issues are shared and are talked about at times when there is harmony, in order for those emotions that are generated to be received with empathy and kindness.

Adoption procedures with signs of irregularities

Currently, the news relating to fraudulent adoptions or those, which link adoption to the sale or trafficking of children, are widely reported in the media, and may be the source of concern amongst adopted children. To avoid talking about it or trying to conceal it is usually a strategy doomed to failure.

Questions such as 'did you buy me?', 'how much did I cost?' must receive a clear answer. Children are neither sold nor bought, the money spent during the process was meant for the

'Sometimes, we do not choose what happens to us. When we do not have the resources – whether money or education to be able to work – we enter a circle, which is difficult to get out of... You must have many questions. I may not have answers to all of them, but I am here to try and understand them with you'.

proceedings, the paperwork undertaken by the professionals, who helped with the latter, the trips, the stay in hotels, etc. – similar to the expenses that families with biological children have

during pregnancy and childbirth. When faced with news relating to child trafficking or the theft of babies, it is important to place them suitably, by mentioning them as offences that violate the rights of individuals and by separating them from a generalisation.

At times, even years after the adoption, families receive information that contradicts the story that is stated in the official documentation they were provided with, and that questions the legitimacy of the adoption. Some other times, when examining the decisions that were made at delicate times in the process, doubts arise as to whether they contributed, through their actions, to a business that did not meet the child's best interests. The handbook also addresses this issue, by providing arguments and resources to talk about it. To recognise, before a child, that we made a mistake even though at the time we did

not know or were not able to see it, is an exercise of honesty, which recognises not only the right to know, but also to make a mistake, to recognise it and to repair it.

'Your mother was ill, she was not able to control what she was drinking, and she did not benefit from the needed support to stop her doing so. When this happens to someone, when they cannot take care of themselves, it is very difficult for them to care for someone else, in particular a child'.

'Delicate' circumstances: addictions, maltreatment, abuse, prostitution...

Families face particular difficulties when talking about some circumstances that led to the adoption, which are sometimes recorded, such as some of the parents' prostitution or addictions, as well as information about abuse, maltreatment or serious neglect by the biological families or others. In the case of alcohol and drug addiction, it is recommended to consider them as the illnesses, which they are, remembering that they affect the capacity of those, who suffer from them, to control their health and that of those around them, which may make it impossible to care for a child.

With sensitivity and honesty, the guide addresses the contents of common conversations, thoughts, fears and doubts amongst parents and children, and which go beyond the scope of the generic aspects of adoptive parentage. Based on the outcomes of

'At the time, I did not know all that we know now about (...). In addition, I longed for a child so much that I did not see (or maybe did not want to see) beyond that wish. Despite the fact that we did certainly not want to be part of something like this, we have to assume the mistake, which we participated in without wanting to. To talk about this with you is painful and makes me anxious, but it would hurt me more to lie to you about it'.

research and the experience in post-adoption services and clinical practice, it offers elements of reflection and practical resources to face the more 'delicate' questions in adoption-related communication and what

surrounds it.

The ISS/IRC welcomes the drafting and dissemination of these guides, which contribute to offering tools to adoptive families with regards to how to inform and support adopted children when faced with questions or times of great complexity.

References:

¹ *Coordinadora de Asociaciones en defensa de la Adopción y el Acogimiento* (Spain), <http://www.coraenlared.org/asociaciones-cora-1/>.

² *Grupo AFIN* (Autonomous University of Barcelona). For further information, see: <http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/afin/>. The guide may be downloaded at: [http://www.proadopcion.org/media/adjunto/ADJUNTO_20guiacora_hablar_de_adopcion-\(1\).pdf](http://www.proadopcion.org/media/adjunto/ADJUNTO_20guiacora_hablar_de_adopcion-(1).pdf).

³ Master's Degree in Social Psychology and PhD in Psychology, Researcher, Lecturer within Grupo AFIN (Autonomous University of Barcelona) and Head of the Family Assistance Service.

Bubble wrapped children: How social networking is transforming the face of 21st century adoption

Through this valuable and helpful publication¹, Helen Oakwater – an adoptive parent, coach and trainer – offers practical solutions for all involved with adopted teenagers, who have reconnected with their birth families via Facebook.

Helen Oakwater, mother of three adopted children, explains how much many adopted children have suffered before adoption. They have been exposed to a world where adults cannot be trusted. These children have 'wrapped themselves in bubble wrap for safety'. The duty of adoptive parents is to slowly remove the bubble wrap. The author expresses the fear that social networking could destroy thousands of adoptive placements, because children reconnect with their birth families without any preparation, support nor supervision. The impact of a simple e-mail may be devastating on teenagers' schooling, relationships and mental health and can even blow adoptive families apart. The author's children received an unexpected email via Facebook from a birth parent and she had to, as an adoptive parent, deal with this huge shock and its consequences.

Pre-adoption issues

The book focuses on children, who have been removed from their birth families by social services against their parents' wishes. It presents many issues linked, in particular, to the causes of the separation, the needs of the children through time, the problems linked to the parents, the principles of contact and the adolescents', adopters' and birth parents' perspectives.

The birth parent's perspectives during the removal process are well described: birth parents cannot envisage their child being removed. Birth parents, mostly mothers, go through phases including humiliation, low self-esteem and guilt. Thus, networking may be a solution to reduce the pain. The book also explains how the fact that the child was traumatised must be addressed to adoptive parents. Both, children and birth parents, have unconscious sensory memories, which will be triggered by the possibility of linking or by the reconnection. An unprepared reconnection may have a very devastating effect on vulnerable people, especially teenagers.

Post-adoption issues

The adoptive parents face the challenge to parent traumatised children, and to provide them a safe and loving home. Thus, the idea that their adoptive children, when teenagers, may reconnect with members of their birth families is terrifying. The author describes the necessary qualities of parenting, and the fact that children need to know all the truth regarding their story, of course with support, the presence of a neutral party being essential. She explains that contact generates many discussions and contradictions. Post-adoption contact must help the child to better understand their past and to feel better.

Contact needs differ from one child to another, from one family to another, and careful preparation is essential. Of course, contact via social networking offers no preparation, emotional security, honesty or physical protection. The chapter on adolescence describes the various phases teenagers go through and in particular, the adolescent idealism, which may mean that the teenager wants to be rescued by

Contact in adoption is a delicate matter, and contact via social networking may be extremely harmful without serious support. As mentioned by the author, 'Facebook should be aware of its consequences on adoption and should be encouraged to make a massive contribution to adoption and fostering world funding structured contact'.

Reference:

¹ Oakwater, H (2012). *Bubble wrapped children, how social networking is transforming the face of the 21st century adoption*. London, UK: MX Publishing.

READERS' FORUM

When art and adoption meet...

Pascale Lemare has launched a publication on art as a means of expression and liberation for adopted people, who have suffered from abandonment¹. She very kindly provided us with the interview below about this fascinating adventure.

1. How did the idea of this project come into being?

My daily life in a service which 'produces' adoptive families means that meetings take place with adopted children, adoptive parents or people, who are separated from their parents or abandoned... Several issues relating to their life paths continue to concern me: the effect of abandonment, the driving force, which transcends this dramatic

their birth family. It is too early to know the long-term consequences of these new ways of reconnecting. However, the author predicts likely scenarios and draws up action plans and strategies.

Recommendations

Eight recommendations are offered, in particular the fact that birth parents should benefit from independent counselling and support services. The adopters' preparation should be improved and an ongoing training should be put in place. It is essential to support adopters to provide therapeutic re-parenting for their children, to educate therapists in trauma, trauma-triggered behaviour and the healing process. Finally, supervised contact between adoptees and birth parents should be facilitated and encouraged. The main desire of the author is that 'traumatised children learn new ways of being, thinking and behaving, build a solid sense of self and develop a more empowering belief system'.

rupture, the sense of identity when a forename has been changed, living over time with the intense absence of their birth mother, the sense of self over and above the lack of knowledge about one's origins... Furthermore, theatre productions, visual arts exhibitions and reading novels cultivate my personal life.

So, by connecting the two fields that inspire me, I contacted some

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artists, who had been abandoned and adopted in their childhood in order to collect their stories. I had the feeling that they spoke better than others about all the hurdles they encounter, because they were close to their feelings but also able to distance themselves.

2. What meaning and what place does art play in the life of the adoptees, who contributed to your book with testimonies?

13 artists agreed to reply to my questions and tell me about their journey, and very conveniently, all artistic fields are represented in the book. Of course, whether one is a writer, actor, artist, documentary maker, graphic artist, or filmmaker, to make a living from art is not easy economically. However, creation is the main activity of these present artists, it focuses their mind and their production. I noticed that a work, often their first, was directly linked to their story, whether in symbolism or in the dedication to adoptive or birth parents.

3. Do you think that adoptees have a special ability for creation that is linked to their background and its mysteries?

From Charles Juliet to H  l  ne Jayet, most observers are convinced that all artists draw on their childhood and their wounds, and one of these is their abandonment. ‘I think all stages of life are difficult for adoptees. It is something, which will never go away, there is always the suffering of the small child deep within us, and I think that when one is an artist, that gives us our sensitivity, it enables us to reach out to people and try to express what we feel’... ‘I think it is my innermost self that is drawn to art. For me, it was about art, so that was fine with me because it was about myself’, they confided to us.

4. In your opinion, should art be offered to adopted people, within the framework of post-adoption follow-up, in order to help them articulate the potential wounds left by abandonment (indeed, artistic workshops are offered to adopted people in several countries such as Spain, Switzerland, etc.)?

In order to support the launch of the book, two actors, who were inspired by the richness of these narratives, are performing extracts in the form of readings for two voices. This proposal – artistic in itself – provides emotion and reflection, and is a precious moment (of about one hour).

I have not experienced this, and I have never practiced this therapeutic mediation as a psychologist, but it seems to me that the narratives of artists inform us as to how to build a harmonious personal identity over and above the composite identifications between adoptive figures and figures of origin. For adoptees, the imaginary becomes a means to survive abandonment, a resource and a tool to connect personal historical elements and fill the void. This investment in the imaginary is clearly a route towards creativity and artistic expression. I will let the writer Charles Juliet tell young adoptees! ‘It is through writing that I could free myself from this guilt, face it and liberate myself by writing it down in black and white. I was mindful of everything that had happened to me and, when I could, I infused it into words’.

5. Do you have other publications/materials/experiences in this field that you would like to share with the readers of the Monthly Review?

Based on my professional practice, I have co-written a work (*L’adoption en 150 questions-r  ponses – L’adoption   tape par   tape, parce que (s’)adopter n’est pas si simple*, Larousse, 2013), which explores adoption from the point of view of the child and not solely from that of the adoptive parents. Thanks to clinical examples, it may help in understanding the different stages of the personal experience of children and their parents.

I hope that *Art et abandon – Des artistes racontent* will create the opportunity to share the testimonies of adult adoptees – which also suit adolescent adoptees, who are sometimes ‘in crisis’. This book was made with them in mind, so that they benefit from the illumination obtained through understanding and the creative force, a real aspiration towards positive prospects. Similarly, young adoptees born abroad will identify with the actions of Dida Guigan or S  bastien Bertrand, which encourage a responsibility to archive files that monitor abuses relating to obtaining certain adoption consents. Then – and why not – join them in their actions?

Reference:

¹ Lemare, P (2015). *Art et abandon. Des artistes racontent*. Paris, France: L'Harmattan, <http://www.editions-harmattan.fr/index.asp?navig=catalogue&obj=livre&no=48677>. For further information, please contact: Pascale.lemare@seinemaritime.fr.

Talking about adoption: To whom, for whom, why and how

Fanny Cohen Herlem, a Psychiatrist, Child Psychiatrist, Psychoanalyst and ISS/IRC Associate, shares her experience regarding communication in relation to adoption: 'to help parents and prospective parents to communicate "easily" with their child about their adoption, their origins and beyond the adoptive family, considering what information they can give to the child and the immediate or broader entourage'.

The first answer to this question is another twofold question: what information do we want to give and why? What are the expectations of the child and ourselves about the information given? If we agree that, nowadays, every adopted child should have answers available about their birth parents, the reasons for their abandonment and their pre-adoptive life, then what should we share and how? In the interest of the child, we need to tell 'the truth', but what 'truth'? Is it necessary, for example, to talk straightaway about the dramatic circumstances surrounding their conception? Will this 'truth' help the child in rebuilding their background and help with their positive development? Furthermore, what do we know of the circumstances of conception? Do we ask our parents how we were conceived? Thus, we need to be able to respond to questions in accordance with the age of the child, while, at the same time, protect them from a possible disastrous vision of their 'origins'.

Listening to the child

By asking question(s) about their pre-adoption background, the child is more or less consciously trying to understand where they came from in accordance with their development, what hopes were behind their arrival into the world, what driving force enabled the pregnancy of the mother and the child's birth? Without embellishing the story, there should always be time to read the child's file together and to find within it the supposedly 'true' elements. An adolescent, who becomes aware of difficult things during this reading, needs to be supported by the adults they trust and, who they know will not lie to them, even if 'all' has not been said beforehand.

And when one knows 'nothing' or very little, it is for the child or the adolescent to be able to

imagine and visualise what could have happened, either alone or with an adult. Adolescents and children are sometimes capable of imagining the 'worst' or the 'best'. What matters is to listen empathetically and therapeutically, enabling them to develop their own background, even if they really know nothing about it, or even to create as they see things at the time they are talking and to return regularly to the story as and when they mature along their life journey.

Long-term support

Many parents imagine that all the 'problems' and 'issues' are resolved once the answers are given or the story is told. However, this is not the case. The short or long-term effects of these narratives are not predictable, and the children hear only what they want to hear and as much as they are able to. They come back regularly to question their parents. Sometimes, this can take a long time for them because they do not dare to ask for fear of being hurt. In consultation with children or adolescents, I see that even when they know about their background, they question again and again: 'Could my mother have been a prostitute?', 'In fact, my grandfather was coming to find me but my (adoptive) parents came before him'.

In preparing to discuss the adoption, there is therefore the need to question and reflect, to put yourself in the place of the child. Try to remove yourself from principled positions and, at least in part, from the child's own personal conflict (preferring to know nothing rather than being overwhelmed, for example), and not to avoid this by fear of pain or 'causing suffering'. Preparing to talk to the child is, first of all, listening, listening to their question and, perhaps, to what is hidden behind this question.

To speak or to remain silent before the entourage?

With regards to close or more distant relatives, remember that, whilst we can understand each other's curiosity, the story of the child belongs to them and to their parents, who are indeed the provisional holders of this. Is transparency necessary for the child? Whom is this interesting for? How will what we know, often before the child themselves is aware of these details, help the child? Without recommending absolute secrecy, we should not, on the other hand, advocate for absolute transparency.

Silence, in particular, cannot be a response! Indeed family, friends, the social environment can get caught up in popular assumptions, and we should help them shed these ideas. When a parent wishes to share the fact that their child is adopted – when this is not evident at first sight – to a teacher or a third party, they must consider the purpose of the information given and question the potential effects, both on the short and long term, that this will have on the stakeholder.

In what we recount, or what is said, each person hears or could hear what they want to hear, as such, they are projecting their own perspective on things. It is therefore essential to build on the strengths that we have seen in the child, aside from the difficulties, to focus on their abilities or potential. There is no handbook with a ready-made answer. Questions and answers are *per se*, and are formulated through the child's personal story and that of the other person or people.

Some of the background information provided could help to better care for the child. These are elements which, without giving details, could explain why the child has difficulty reaching out to others, or on the other hand, why they need a close and continuous presence, that it is better to not shout in their presence, why 'loud noises' frighten them, why a large group (or a very small group) is intimidating, to explain the difficulties of not knowing the language or not understanding instructions.

Thus, we should ask the person asking questions 'what', in fact, they are asking! What are their possible concerns? Talking about adoption to other parties also means understanding who is asking and why. Information given should be reassuring, simple and sufficient. Indeed, the child was abandoned because the birth parents were unable to look after them. Illnesses? The medical checks carried out are reassuring. There may be brothers and sisters but we do not know whether they lived together...

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES AND TRAININGS

- **Austria:** *Join our Forces in order to Work for the Rights of Children and Young People at Risk*, 33rd FICE Congress and 2nd CYC World Conference, Vienna, 22 – 25 August 2016. For further information, see: http://www.betterworld2016.org/images/FICE_english_Website.pdf.
- **Canada:** *Protecting our Children, Protecting our Future*, 21st International Congress, International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), Calgary, 28 – 30 August 2016. For further information, see: <http://www.ispcan.org/event/calgary16>.
- **Switzerland:** *Local to Global: How will we influence policy?*, Child and Youth Participation, CATS Conference, Caux, 26 July – 1 August 2016. For further information, see: <http://www.eurochild.org/events/upcoming-eurochild-events/>.

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