

## The Value of Adoption Groups:

*Supporting Parents, Supporting Kids, Supporting Families*

Adoption brings special issues to a family, and adoptive parents often seek other people who understand their children, their families, and the unique challenges and rewards that adoption has brought to their lives. Parents know firsthand the problems that families and children face, the support needed, and the structures and relationships that can help. Parenting children whose lives have been affected by neglect, abuse, institutional care, separation and loss, and multiple moves is like no other kind of parenting. Families may have to draw on skills they never knew they had or needed. They may need to turn to others who have experienced similar challenges.

By bringing together people who have been touched by adoption, a parent group can:

- Validate parents' experiences and frustrations
- Celebrate the joys and triumphs unique to adoptive parenting
- Enable parents to share resources, suggestions, and success stories
- Identify and solve problems
- Guide parents to a better understanding of adoption's impact on child development
- Reduce feelings of isolation and self-doubt or guilt when problems arise in the family

*"We need to stabilize  
the people who  
stabilize the child."*

*James Mahoney, therapist*

Most importantly, parent groups offer encouragement and hope.

There is no clear and absolute definition of adoptive family support. It is whatever any group of adoptive parents needs in order to be empowered and further enable them to parent their children. It's a place to go and not be judged. Sometimes it's an organized group; sometimes it's simply a list of people to call for help. It can also take the form of on-line support, for families who can't leave their children for the time it takes to go to a meeting away from home. Mutual support is therapeutic—but not therapy—and often is the very factor that keeps a family together and averts disrupted adoption.

## HOW DO SUPPORT GROUPS FORM?

Groups can form in a variety of ways:

- Some adoption support groups are formed by adoptive parents. Parents make the decision that they want to be independent of agencies, so that they feel free to discuss frustrations and challenges related to their agency.
- Sometimes an agency decides to develop a group and may either continue to facilitate it or turn things over to the parents. Whether a support group begins under the initiative of parents or agency workers, the ultimate goal of the group should be to operate independently, with parents having responsibility for the group.
- Other groups are developed with kinship care providers or foster-to-adopt parents to enable them to get together and talk about the parenting challenges they face.

Some people like to connect with adoption support groups even before they adopt a child, when they first begin to consider the idea of building their family through adop-

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tion. It helps them through the information-gathering phase, the adoption study process, and begins the process of building their own awareness.

Others seek out a group as they're adjusting to a new family system and helping their child "fit." For some, the support group helps them determine what are adoption issues and what are normal child development issues and how to keep both in perspective. It's a safe place for those just discovering that they may need more than their own resources to meet the parenting demands to which they've committed themselves.

## FIVE KINDS OF GROUPS

Adoptive parent groups can take many forms and operate on a variety of levels. Below is a brief outline of a continuum along which groups often fit. Individual parent groups rarely operate at a single level; they are often working at several levels at the same time. Additionally, individual parents may prefer one level of activity over another, and so it is important to recognize that some group members may wish to participate in lobbying activities, while other members may wish to focus on providing post-adoption services to other parents. Whatever form a group takes to meet the needs of its members is right for that group.

### Frustration or Ventilation Group

- Venue for parents to resolve personal issues, discuss problems
- Informal structure
- Short-term involvement, often just during a crisis period; parents often leave the group once their personal problems have been addressed

## **Support Group**

- Parents with similar children coming together for mutual assistance and encouragement
- Semi-formal structure
- Information exchange among parents
- Validation of adoption and parenting experience

## **Service Group**

- Parents working to fill in gaps in the current system
- Formal structure
- Providing services to other parents, including classes, parent recruitment, resource manuals, and photolisting books

## **Advocacy Group**

- Parents see children not being served by the system and seek remedies
- Formal structure
- Focus on system change to help all children; lobbying and advocating for legislative changes
- Often have limited resources and react to crises rather than anticipate them

## **Political Group**

- Parents making proactive efforts to change the system; proposing new programs and legislation on behalf of children
- Very formal structure
- Seen by policymakers as an important group to involve and have as a base of support for changes that will affect children and families

## *Thoughts about Support Groups*

- Common bond of all adoptive parents—loving, caring for, and parenting a child born to someone else.
- Someone who's been there, offering empathy and support—before placement, during placement, after placement.
- Encouragement and affirmation—of children as well as parents.
- Place to go and not be judged.
- Creative solutions and effective strategies.
- Resources, access, networking.
- Groups form in different ways and around different issues; may spin off from an agency, another group, or focus on a special interest.
- No right or wrong way to be a support group—it can be whatever is necessary to meet participants' needs at a particular time, in whatever way enables them to connect with and support one another.
- Groups can exist over a long period of time, for a relatively short while, or wax and wane depending on members' needs and desires.
- Groups may evolve into higher levels of activity or advocacy, taking some members or losing others.
- Group members may remain with the group for a long time or move in and out based on family dynamics and developmental needs of their children.
- The measure of effectiveness of a group is its impact on member adoptive families—its ability to sustain successful adoptions—not the number of members, activities, or finances.

Judith Anderson  
January 2001

An adoption support group may identify other kinds of resources as well, not just adoption-specific ones. It may be part of a broader coalition of organizations serving families and children. Many self-help groups formed by and for those parenting kids with attachment issues or attention deficit disorder, for example, attract adoptive parents whose children share similar special needs. There may be a sub-group of adoptive parents within the larger support organization.

*“In all this world,  
Charlie Brown, there is  
nothing more frightening  
than the getting together  
of a group of parents.”*

*Linus  
(by Charles Schulz)*

### **BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN**

Groups may also include separate gatherings for adopted children and teens. Many of the children joining families through adoption today have had a pretty rough start in life and have considerable healing to do. Children adopted by relatives or kin may have divided loyalties and difficulty sorting out family dynamics. Children who have been in the foster care system often do not understand the transition from foster care to adoption. Even those who joined their adoptive family shortly after birth may experience feelings of confusion, ambivalence, or abandonment. Children coming from other countries face the realities of adoption as well as loss of many aspects of their culture, including language, food, and ethnic connections.

Adopted children also benefit from adoptive family gatherings. Through support groups they:

- Meet and interact with kids who've had similar experiences
- Gain insight into some of their own behaviors and reactions to family issues
- Meet other children who look like them (for transracially adopted children)
- Feel less isolated and alone
- Increase their self-esteem

Just as adoptive parents have, adopted children realize some of their expectations have not been and will never be met, but that some things have turned out better than expected. Like their parents, children in support groups can find acceptance and learn to manage expectations.

### **CONCLUSION**

A group of like-minded people who share the experience of adoption can go a long way together, and these support efforts are an essential part of the journey. It's about continually learning together and knowing you can be there for someone else as well as call on others when you need help. Adoption is a lifelong experience, and it's good to know you're not alone.

### *For More Information...*

For more information on NACAC's resources for adoptive parent groups, please contact Diane Martin-Hushman, parent group coordinator, at 651-644-3036 or [hushman@nacac.org](mailto:hushman@nacac.org).