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EVALUATING POST-ADOPTION SERVICES: KNOWLEDGE FROM THE PAST, PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

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Evaluating Post-Adoption Services: Knowledge from the Past, Plans for the Future

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As a result of a statewide campaign, the adoption rate in Connecticut has quadrupled in the past five years (Hamilton, 2000). With the implementation of the President's Initiative on Adoption and Foster Care and the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), which place a strong emphasis on finding permanent homes for children in foster care, it is expected that the number of adoptions will increase nationwide. We can expect, then, a growing need for programs to support adoptive families. Thus, it is important to have information on the issues faced by these families and on the services best suited to meet their needs.

Casey Family Services has recently completed an evaluation of its Post-Adoption Services (PAS) Program that can provide some insight in this area. At two recent meetings of the Casey Post-Adoption Workgroup, researchers from the University of North Carolina and the Research Triangle Institute presented the results of the analyses they had conducted on data collected by program staff. The findings have a number of implications for helping adoptive families and can provide useful guidelines for agencies interested in providing services to this group.

Research Questions

In collaboration with the Research Department, program staff designed an evaluation that would answer a variety of questions vital to the program, including: Who are the families served by the program? Why do they seek services? What services do they receive? In which areas do they show improvement? Social workers gathered needed information in the course of providing services to families. Information was gathered on families who entered services from 1997 through 1999. This resulted in over 400 families being included in the study. With the assistance of Sharon Napoli, administrative assistant for the Research Department, data errors were corrected and data entered into a computer database. The data were then analyzed to address the questions of interest to the program. This article highlights findings most applicable to practice in this area. A complete report of the results can be obtained from the Research Department.

Findings and Implications for Practice

- Nearly half of children (49%) were placed in their adoptive homes in early childhood. However, there was often a long time span (median = 5 years) between their adoption and when the family sought services from Casey. This suggests that adoption should be seen as a significant experience that has life-long effects for the family. Post-adoption programs should plan for

meeting adoptive families' needs throughout all phases of child development, not just the immediate post-adoption period.

- A large number of families--about half--had more than one adopted child. Adding multiple children to the family may affect family dynamics in ways that adding a single child doesn't. This stresses the need for post-adoption programs to take into account the fact that adoption experiences may vary for different children in the family.
- Nearly half of families also had non-adopted children. This suggests that postadoption support programs need to be prepared to help families incorporate adopted children into an existing sibling structure in the family. Services should be designed to strengthen both parent-child and child-sibling relationships.
- Families sought services because of issues related to children's relationships to others, child self-image, grief related to loss of birth families, and child behavior, with the most problematic concern being child behavior. Programs serving adoptive families should be prepared to deal with both relationship issues and difficult child behavior.
- Families reported great commitment to working through problems and strong confidence in their ability to maintain their adopted children in the family. The area in which they felt the least confidence was in dealing with the psychological and behavioral problems of their children. Because families receiving services from Casey's Post-Adoption Services Program may be a select group--those who have persisted the longest in the face of challenges--it is difficult to generalize from them to all adoptive families. But these findings do suggest that that families served by Casey may be a highly dedicated and devoted group with much perseverance in the face of challenges.
- The median length of services for families who received counseling was about 5 months. Half of families received between one and three counseling sessions. Thus, the PAS program generally seems to adhere to a model of time-limited services, with few families participating in long-term counseling.
- After leaving services, families often returned later for further help. Although it is unclear whether families returned to address new issues that arose or old issues that resurfaced, the return rate suggests that services should be provided on an "as needed" basis to accommodate a family's sense of need and timing. Programs that plan "canned" curricula or services may wish to consider creating a more flexible service arrangement to better meet families' ongoing needs.
- Families' greatest gains over the course of services, as reported by social workers, were in child behavior, understanding the impact of adoption on a child's behavior, and effective communication. Child-family attachment was the area of least change. Perhaps in a relatively short-term program we

should expect to see less change in this "deeper" area of family functioning than in other areas, such as parenting and child behavior.

- Families receiving services the first time and for longer periods of time had better outcomes. Although this may mean that families with greater needs were more likely to return for services, it might also suggest that the best opportunity for helping a family improve is the first time around, particularly with services that are long enough to address their needs. Further research will be needed to identify the families most in need of longer services.
- Families who received case advocacy services had stronger gains than those who did not. This would suggest that workshops and training aimed at increasing families' skills in dealing with community resources would be a valuable component to a post-adoption services program.
- Families reported that the benefits they received from the program included: support in a crisis, help negotiating the service system, and practical assistance with children's needs. The program components provided by Casey thus seem well suited to providing adoptive families with the social support, advocacy, and help with child management that they need.

Although this evaluation provided some needed information on the program, it also had a number of limitations. Because of issues with data quality, inconsistent data collection, and the limited information gathered in some areas, some key questions could not be addressed in the data analyses. More information on the families that benefit most from the program and the program components that are most helpful is greatly needed. Information gathered from the family's perspective when services begin, when services end, and after families leave the program is also needed to see families' patterns of improvement.

To help improve the information gathered on the program, a group has been formed that will plan the future evaluation of the program. Members include: Fran Porter, Hartford Division Director; Bob Hagberg, Team Leader in Rhode Island; Mary Anne Judge, Team Leader in Bridgeport; Kelly Smith, Team Leader in New Hampshire; Sharon Goedkoop, Social Worker in Vermont, Kathy Lenerz, Research Associate, and the consultants from the University of North Carolina and the Research Triangle Institute.

Questions about this evaluation or suggestions for future research can be directed to Kathy Lenerz (email link).

References

Adoption and Safe Families Act, 42 U.S.C. § 1305 (1997).
Hamilton, E. (2000, July 17). *Adoption rate quadruples: Many children still need permanent placement*. Hartford Courant.