

# THE LARGE ADOPTIVE FAMILY: A SPECIAL KIND OF “NORMAL”

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## Introduction

The percentage of families with four or more children has been decreasing steadily, as reflected in Census Bureau reports dating back to 1900. Rational decisions about the number of children one will parent is thought by some to correspond to a concept of “costs” or what parents must sacrifice in order to obtain what they perceive as benefits to be derived from having and raising children. Those families who go beyond the range of two to four children are assumed to have special reasons for doing so. One of these “special reasons” seems to be a trend in large adoptive families that have been created by choice in recent years.

One resource that reflected this trend was *Because We Care So Much* (Tremitiere, 1973-1988), a newsletter distributed without charge by Tressler Lutheran Services to adoptive families across the United States who had five or more children. By 1988, the circulation of this newsletter grew to over 2,000 families. Many of these families had adopted after having several birth children and asked to adopt children who were not easily placed and for whom there might well have been no other home readily available.

Because they were unusual, both in family size and in request, these families often had negative reactions from the agencies to whom they had applied for children, as well as from their families, friends, and communities.

As these adoptions continued to occur, two very specific situations began to develop. First, many agencies seized this opportunity to place waiting children as quickly as possible into adoptive homes, often without adequate pre-placement planning and/or post-placement support. Second, in many cases, problems began to surface in families as the children grew older

and their difficult areas became more evident. Some families found themselves with children whose mental health problems intensified, often requiring temporary placement outside the home. Others discovered that severe attachment problems could cause chaos in a family situation. For some, this even led to false child abuse charges being made against the parents. Questions began to arise, from agencies and families alike. How were large families and large adoptive families both alike and different? What could be learned from the qualities and experiences that appeared to be similar? What new understanding would be needed in order to comprehend and impact the perceived differences?

This paper briefly addresses and explores these questions and discusses crowding, sibling interaction, the applicability of systems theory, the significance and implications of the multi-cultural makeup of many of these families, projects and suggestions for enhancing successful experiences in large adoptive families, and conclusions and implications for agency and family decision-making.

## Large Families/Large Adoptive Families

In comparing large families and large adoptive families in our society today, there are many interesting similarities. Are there times when the interests of some members of the family must necessarily be sacrificed to satisfy the interests of others, both emotionally and financially? This appears to be true in both groups of large families. Whether referring to parent-time, energy, demands, economic constraints, the endless tasks of maintaining a household, or the daily struggle for survival, families reported learning to live with “imperfection” or “learning to strike an effective compromise with reality.” This compromise often included sharing



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household duties and child-care responsibilities with children in the family.

While the logistics of parenting a large adoptive family are often quite similar to those of parenting a large biological family, there are some notable differences. One of these differences is the composition of the majority of the large adoptive families. Many of these families had integrated children into their family structure who were older, had mental or physical disabilities and/or behavior problems, and were of different ethnic or racial backgrounds.

Another difference is that society tends to see large adoptive families as different than large birth families and to impose value judgments on them. For example, birth families don't have to convince caseworkers or judges that they can handle more children before adding to their families! Large adoptive families are always judged and evaluated by other people's family size limitations and rarely are given the opportunity or credit for the ability to impose their own. Many families resented this restrictive situation. The imposed restrictions and the quality/quantity debate still permeate large adoptive family decisions, even though the stability that these families have been able to provide for many waiting children is documented beyond debate.

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the differences that arise when a child joins a family in other ways than being born into it. For example, children in large adoptive families often have to cope with siblings who come into their family out of birth order, often pushing them out of their own perceived status and role. They often find themselves in the role of caretaker child for siblings that they have little idea of how to control.

Large families also tend to initiate and perpetuate "crowding" effects. Often used as a last desperate resource for a stressed agency with a difficult child to place, these families tend to grow in unplanned ways. Often children are placed who are the same age as children already in the family. Most times it is necessary for rooms and

personal space to be shared. Sharing of turf and possessions becomes a control issue. Privacy, even in the bathroom, becomes a luxury. Children seldom have an opportunity to be alone. Tension, discomfort, anxiety, irritation, anger, and aggression may well be their responses. Parents need to be aware that each child reacts differently to the effects of crowding. For some children, crowding is a blessing, as they can blend into the group and their actions and responses are less closely monitored. For others, it brings out very negative responses. Creative solutions, such as subdivided rooms and locked areas for children's possessions, can be effective. In both birth and adoptive families, many of the effects of crowding problems are very real, both for parents and for children. Complexities are created for everyone when families elect to add more children and opt for large family living.

## Systems Theory

When one accepts the position that the fate of the individual is inexorably bound to the destiny of the intimate social network of which he or she is a part, the argument between individualism and familism melts away. One cannot consider the individual apart from his or her intimate environment (Hartman, 1979, p. 7).

Any family system, then, is composed of connecting relationships. To study the family as a system, one must see the various connections between the individualized persons and how they interact. Each person within the system has his own unique systemic individuality as well as carrying an imprint of the whole family system. I am my family as well as whatever uniqueness I have actualized as a person. I am individual and group simultaneously (Bradshaw, 1988, p. 28).

Looking closely at large families and how they interact and function, through the eyes of family members, Bossard (1956) concluded that large families, by their very nature and complexities, had distinguishing characteristics totally unlike any other type of identified family systems. These characteristics, in Bossard's estimation, included:



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1. Children added “as they happen”—not planned or scheduled.
2. Parenthood tends to be more extensive than intensive because of the sheer weight of numbers and demands.
3. One learns to live in a very real world and to deal early with the realities of life. Not much is a crisis!
4. The emphasis is on the group rather than the individual.
5. Group functioning calls for organization and leadership. This tends to put parents and/or siblings in very dominant roles.
6. Emphasis on qualities of behavior which are group essentials. Conformity is valued above self-expression. Cooperation, duty emphasized. Family functions as a group to do group chores.
7. Rules of conduct and procedure are a necessity.
8. Specialization of task, role and function among the children is necessary.
9. The greater the degree of such specialization, the greater the degree of interdependency that results.
10. Parents develop detached, objective attitudes toward child problems.
11. One comes to terms with life.
12. As a system, the large family seems not to perpetuate itself. (Bossard, p. 305)

Bossard concluded that when a family has over six children, it clearly has a “distinctive pattern of living” (p. 16) and becomes what he called in his book title *The Large Family System*.

In my documentary study, I used, as Bossard did, a questionnaire sent out to 2,000 large families all over the United States and Canada. My questionnaire, with minor alterations, duplicated his so that I could determine whether or not large adoptive families replicated the large family system as he defined it, in spite of the variables of being multicultural and not genetic in origin. As Bossard did, I used the first 100 responses returned from families that had six or more children. After adjusting for inflationary and societal changes that have occurred since 1956, I found that the picture of the large family and the large family system appears to have undergone

little change. Bossard’s characteristics are also characteristics of the large adoptive families in my study. Both of us went into detail, describing how these characteristics played out and how they were seen as both positive and negative through the eyes of both parents and children.

Obviously, more work needs to be done. I plan to do a longitudinal study. Much of this work will need to be qualitative, not quantitative in nature, perhaps much of it even in the context of oral history. Unfortunately, it appears that much of what is done from this point on in the documentation of large family history and systems may well need to be approached more from a historical than a current lifestyle perspective.

Further exploring the application of systems theory to the large adoptive family system also moves into the predictability of success and/or failure of children with certain personality types who enter into an existing large family system. We can look also at the impact of certain children or ages and number of children on the functioning of present family systems. For example, during the formation of many large adoptive families there is a prolonged period of disequilibrium. This happens when a family barely achieves, or doesn’t quite achieve, a state of comparative family balance following one placement before another occurs. What are the effects of such chronic disequilibrium on family functioning and well-being? Perhaps, up to a certain point, you end up with parents and children who are more flexible and adaptable because of such extensive practice! At what point, however, does the stress of such a demand for adaptability cause dysfunction in both marriage and family relationships? How does a family realize when this is beginning to happen? Can such awareness help to prevent family crisis? Adopting sibling groups adds to the complexities. Now two competing systems, the adoptive family and the incoming sibling group, are both seeking some sort of balance. Again, can awareness of process help to avert crisis?

It has become imperative for us to explore some possible ways of preventing disruptive tragedies by the use of relevant and possible treatment tools such as those that are a part of family



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systems theory. In adoption, I am not sure that the complexities of the collisions of systems of birth parents, foster parents, unrelated sibling groups, and children coming into families at a variety of ages and stages, lend themselves well to the treatment tools that are normally used to produce change. Also, in regard to large families, “Arithmetic increase in the number of persons in the group is accompanied by a markedly increasing acceleration in the number of relationships within the group” (Bossard, 1956, p. 117).

Where, then, can intervention start? What, in fact, constitutes change? As Minuchin (1974) states,

In all cultures, the family imprints its members with selfhood. The human experience of identity has two elements: a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate. Every member’s sense of identity is influenced by his sense of belonging to a specific family (p.14).

Which family “imprints”? Birth? Adoptive? Both? All? Which family influences the “sense of identity”? To which does the child feel “a sense of belonging”? What can be done to assist such families in their adjustment and/or make their chance of success or failure more predictable?

Here, I believe, family systems theory plays a crucial, predictable, and influential role. If we know how family systems work and understand their quest for balance, we can educate families in the real issues of adoption that may well impact on this balance, and help them to make well-thought-out, educated decisions, after much soul searching, as to “how and how many” they might wish to adopt, and/or whether adoption would even be appropriate for their situation. If we understand changes in transactions or subsystems when major changes occur and a new balance must gradually be established, we can prepare families to recognize and meet these expectations. For example, a large family may well need to prepare itself for the reality that it may not have a child who truly attaches or bonds to their family. The collision of systems may be prolonged for years. Family balance may well involve giving a child a sense of family identity and belonging—a sense of

stability in the consistency of relationships—but little more. This may well become an altered state of balance with which both family and child can find comfort—a realistic altering of expectations. In actuality, large families seem to have many of the characteristics that might make such an alteration of expectations quite possible.

For example, Bossard’s (1956) findings show more detachment and less intensity in the parenting role in large families with the “emphasis on the group rather than the individual” (p. 141). For the child with bonding/attachment struggles who needs desperately to simply stabilize, the pressure is off. But what does this say to the placement of extremely disturbed and destructive children into these families? Perhaps predictability as a preventive tool might be very much in order. If there could be some knowledge of what to expect and potential problems to look for, then family systems theory, as set forth in Bossard’s study and conclusions, could be of enormous help in the assessment of a family’s chances of success and of how much disruption a particular placement might cause in an established large family system. Predictable properties that can and do influence a person’s and a family’s *present* and *future* functioning I believe to be applicable, necessary, and often crucial elements in the entire adoption process.

## Conclusion

The unquestionable fact is that large adoptive families and the systems they function within often appear unusual by the standards of a society with a small family focus. It is also a certainty that many children who otherwise might have gone unplaced, or whose placements might not have lasted in a more traditional-sized family, have often thrived within the uniqueness of large adoptive family systems. Placement stability rates have been excellent. Although actual numbers of large adoptive families may be small, their impact on the future of the numbers of children to whose lives they have given stability is beyond measure. No wonder that their story needed to be told—from past and present perspectives, and to prepare for future challenges.

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