

Lifecycle of the Adoptive Family (Stages and Tasks)

Intimacy vs. Idealization/Disillusionment

- The first phase of forming the couple relationship: achieve intimacy based on realistic versus idealized perception; learn to negotiate conflict and find mutually satisfying ways to nurture and support each other.
- When the couple decides to start a family and must confront the emotional, physical and financial impact of infertility, their marital dyad is stressed. Many decisions have to be made and they are usually in unfamiliar territory. The couple may not be in agreement.
- Their friends are experiencing success and joy while they are grieving their fantasy child. Each failed fertility treatment and each adoption that does not reach fulfillment retriggers this grief.
- Their support system may not know how to support the couple. There may also be cultural and religious considerations that need to be addressed.
- The prospective single parent may run into prejudicial comments and concerns and lack the necessary supports.
- How these crisis are addressed sets the tone for the unfolding of the family unit.

Replenishment vs. Turning Inward

- These are the childbearing years: they begin with the first child entering the family and end when the last child enters school. The tasks are development of nurturing patterns between family members and learning how to replenish resources while letting the child into the marital dyad.
- For the adoptive family, the stress of going to “strangers” to meet their goal of parenthood and sharing of private information is difficult. Loss may become a dominant theme for this family.
- The transition to adoptive parenthood can be tricky with several new skills that need to be learned.
- Parenting children who enter the family with a history of trauma and attachment challenges may add significant parenting challenges that require learning new parenting techniques and the opening of the home to the use of therapists, wrap-around supports and advice from caring friends and relatives that may not be helpful.
- The adoption of a sibling set complicates these stages.
- Secondary infertility and integrating children both by birth and adoption is another task.

Individuation of Family Members vs. Pseudo-mutual Organization

- The pre-school years, family members progressively achieve independence and freedom. The stress of letting go and trusting others with your child vs. overprotection as a response to parenthood is a skill to be learned.



- The adoptive family is achieving an identity as an adoptive family and must contend with intrusive questions from outsiders. They have to address the issues of wanting to overprotect their children from the child's own background history; explaining open adoption relationships and defending their decisions and learn how and when to share adoption information with their children and outsiders such as teachers. They must address issues of privacy vs. secrecy. They have to create a family environment that supports the child's exploration of their own adoption information. This may also lead to helping the child cope with loss.

Companionship vs. Isolation

- These are the teen years and therefore the need to address sexual issues, separation, and the development of companionship outside the family while staying close to those inside the family system.
- Adoptive families must help the teens develop a positive self- image and identity where information needed may or may not be available. For some teens, the issues of search and reunion may need to be addressed. Fear of emancipation may keep the child setting up failure to stay home or finding an excuse to leave too soon. Families' fears about whether the child feels attached enough to come back to the family when they leave may keep the children bound too long.
- Parents must address their lives outside of the family system

Regrouping vs. Binding Together

- Allow the departure of the children and redefine the self and the marriage.
- Families may wonder if they should adopt or foster again and again to deal with this part of the life cycle as they may not have another identity to embrace.

Rediscovery vs. Despair

- A return to the marriage as the most important relationship; development of intergenerational connections and the incorporation of new family members.
- Learning to share our relatives and seeing that our Grandchildren still do not resemble us can re-trigger infertility loss.

Mutual Aid vs. Uselessness

- The time from the parents' retirement to their deaths; the task is to develop a mutual aid system and not feel useless.

****Developed by Sharon Roszia from an article authored by S. Rhoads and published in the May 1977 issue of Social Casework***

