Parenting adopted children through adolescence

What you need to know:
In BC, many adoptees are adopted prior to adolescence and experience pre-adoption issues that may manifest differently or resurge during adolescence. These issues intersect with common adolescent issues such as identity formation, peer relationships, dating and negotiating more independence. Adoptive parents may be unprepared for the possible exacerbation of issues that emerge for adoptees during adolescence.

What is this research about?
The Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) delegated adoption social workers place children under permanent care of the Ministry with suitable lifelong families and homes so that children may develop to their full potential. Currently, MCFD requires prospective adoptive parents to take a course on adoption called the Adoption Education Program (AEP), but this mandatory course does not address parenting adolescent adoptees who are adopted as infants or children.

The MCFD seeks to understand the ways in which adoptive parents can support their adopted children as they transition into and through adolescence in order to inform current policies on the mandatory training requirements and develop resources for preparing prospective and current adoptive parents for their future adolescent adoptees.

What did the researcher do?
The researcher performed a literature review exploring parenting adolescent adoptees. The researcher used the PsychInfo database to search for academic articles and book chapters published between January 2009 and March 2019. The researcher reviewed the abstracts and methods section of the literature, and if they met the inclusion criteria of a focus on parenting adolescent adoptees adopted prior to the age of 12, they were included in the review. The researcher summarized the main focus and findings of each source, then analyzed for key themes and recommendations for practice and research.

UVic researchers reviewed literature to inform policies and resources to prepare prospective and current adoptive parents for parenting adolescent adoptees.
What did the researcher find?

This review included 23 sources published in English. In the course of reviewing each source, four themes and sub-themes emerged:

1. Common adoptee issues in adolescence
   a. Adolescent attachment
   b. Communication about adoption including how and when adolescents find out they are adopted
   c. Understanding and coping with pre-adoption adversity
2. Parent-child dynamics
   a. Parent-child conflict
   b. Parenting styles
3. Parental context
   a. Parent stress
   b. Parent mental health
4. Diverse/intersectional adoptive families
   a. Intercultural adopted families
   b. Same-sex parenting and adoptees with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Recommendations for practice:

1. Workshops or resources should be developed for adoptive parents
2. Parenting approaches should be developed for internalizing (e.g., Major Depressive Disorder, anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, etc.) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, defiance, alcohol and substance use, and violence) adolescent behaviours
3. Prospective and current adoptive parents should be made aware of any known externalizing behaviours of the biological parents
4. Parents should receive immediate and continuous post-adoption support
5. Professionals working with adoptive families should be educated on adolescent-to-parent violence (APV)

Suggestions for future research:

• Experiences of adoptive parenting
• Adoptive fatherhood and motherhood
• Diverse adoptive families
• Evaluation of adoptive parent resources, materials and workshops
• Which parental factors constitute a training competency versus a screening criteria

How can you use this research?

This research will help practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders develop policies and resources for adopted parents, and for professionals working directly with adoptive families. The research is also useful to adopted parents who adopted children prior to adolescence.

About the researchers

Drexler Ortiz is a University of Victoria (UVic) graduate student supervised by Dr. Sibylle Artz and Ms. Thais Amorim. The researcher did this project for the Graduate Studies (GS) 505 course. Facilitated by Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization, GS 505 is a partnership between MCFD and UVic. The researcher gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Keywords

Parenting adopted adolescents; adolescent adoptees; parenting adopted children; preparing adopted parents; adoption

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