



Maureen Heffernan, MSSW

Just in Time Training: Rethinking Adoptive Parent Education and Support in Utah

By Maureen Heffernan, MSSW
Lead Consultant, Regions V & VIII

Utah's adoption program is piloting a unique approach to prepare and build in support for adoptive parents. Challenged by the needs of adoptive families who feel so stressed that they are no longer willing to parent their adopted children, staff at Child and Family Services recognized that new strategies were needed to prevent a crisis and increase stability in these families.

The staff received research on the necessary elements of post-adoption support in order to identify the information and resources that would be most helpful to new adoptive families. The information they obtained guided the development of *Pathways to Adoption*, an early intervention, multi-purpose training series with built in opportunities for relationship building with post-adoption services staff and other adoptive families.

In this new model, families attend a series of psycho-educational classes shortly *after* an adoptive child enters the home. The idea is to give parents the information they need "just in time," when they can immediately apply what they are learning as they

begin to parent their newly-adopted child.

Marty Shannon, Utah's Adoption Program Administrator, notes that foster-to-adoptive parents generally complete initial training prior to their home study, at a time when they often do not have a realistic view of the challenges and behaviors they will face when a child is placed with them. Once they have a child in their home they are dealing with "real-life" situations and often need extra support and education. To meet this need, the *Pathways to Adoption* program was created to supplement pre-service training. The program is offered as a series of psycho-educational parent groups led by professional post-adoption workers and co-led by experienced adoptive parents.

As this new approach gets underway, the plan is that adoptive families will be required to attend *Pathways to Adoption* within 120 days of receiving their first adoptive placement. Ms. Shannon believes that the timing of the participation in *Pathways to Adoption* is the key to its

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NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
for Adoption

— A Service of the Children's Bureau
& Member of the T/TA Network —

at Spaulding for Children

16250 Northland Drive
Suite 120
Southfield, MI 48075

Phone:
248.443.0306

Fax:
248.443.7099

Email:
nrcadoption.org

Web Site:
www.nrcadoption.org



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preventative power. She observes, “Timing is often as important as content when helping adoptive parents raise children who have experienced complex trauma as a result of abuse and neglect.”

The classes are designed to reinforce the knowledge and coping skills needed to understand the trauma children and youth have experienced and address their survival behaviors.

The sessions also integrate information about resources so that families know where and how to pursue additional help when necessary. While the availability of a continuum of community resources is essential, parents must also feel willing and able to make use of services and supports. The *Pathways to Adoption* classes address resources from a multi-faceted approach which encourages parents to seek and use help before they reach a crisis point. As Ms. Shannon describes it, “An emphasis of the classes is to underscore the concept of the need for self-care and to seek resources early and often.”

Utah has established several goals for this new approach which are listed below:

- Increase the knowledge and skills of adoptive parents by helping them become trauma informed and understand how to deal effectively with children’s survival behaviors.
- Provide adoptive parents an opportunity to become familiar with and develop a positive relationship with their regional professional post adoption workers and their local peer support group leaders, so they “call often” and “call early” when they need help.
- Encourage adoptive parents to use each other as a support network and to share respite care.
- Help adoptive parents become familiar with community resources, such as support groups, peer/mentor parents, respite care, mental health providers, school advocacy, educational workshops and conferences, website resources, and Utah’s web-based lending library.

Ms. Shannon sees the strength of this approach arising from the fact that the classes are taught by people who are able to help parents when they are

struggling. Developing positive relationships with post-adoption workers and peer adoptive parents builds an important bridge to an effective support system. Parents know where to turn for help and support; thereby, reducing placement and adoption disruptions. As a result of attending these classes and the subsequent peer-to-peer support network, the families develop increased parental capacities to deal with the vulnerabilities and difficult behaviors adopted children may exhibit. The early intervention classes are expected to increase parents’ knowledge and understanding of a child’s needs, promote peer support and the use of respite care, and increase the parent’s knowledge of mental health and crisis-intervention services.

Class sessions are meant to reinforce and provide more depth to concepts learned in the initial pre-service training. Class topics include the following:

- how trauma affects early brain development
- survival behaviors in children who have been abused and neglected
- grief and loss in foster care and adoption
- importance of permanency
- how to use families’ strengths and community resources and supports to help children heal

Utah is just now rolling out *Pathways to Adoption*. Ms. Shannon and the adoption staff are excited to move from planning to implementation. They believe that reinforcing knowledge and parents’ coping skills at the time when they are dealing with their children’s survival behaviors will empower them and provide them with tools that will increase placement stability.

Helpful Resources

Much of the research that Ms. Shannon and the Utah adoption staff reviewed in developing this program is addressed in *Adoption Support and Preservation Services: The Sequel* authored by Susan Livingston Smith in a 2013 issue of the Center’s newsletter, *The Roundtable* at <http://www.nrcadoption.org/pdfs/roundtable/V26N1-2013.pdf>, and in the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute publication, *Keeping the Promise: The*

The Vermont Adoption Consortium: Building A Network of Family Support

By Sharon Knight, ACSW, LICSW
Lead Consultant, Regions I & II



Sharon Knight, ACSW, LICSW

Vermont is on the cutting edge of providing post-permanency services in the way the public child welfare agency has partnered with private partners in the state to pool their human and financial resources. This pooling has helped to create a robust continuum of care for adoptive/guardianship families throughout the state.

According to Diane Dexter, Adoption Program Manager, Vermont Department of Children and Family Services (DCF) recognized that families making commitments to provide permanency for children, especially those with traumatic beginnings in life, would likely need support throughout the journey.

DCF decided that this type of support could best be provided through foster care and private adoption agencies rather than the state child welfare or mental health system. As a result, the Vermont Adoption Consortium was established in 1996 (additional information about the Consortium can be obtained by going to <http://www.vtadoption.org>).

The Consortium's shared core values are evident in their mission statement: "The Adoption Consortium recognizes that adoption is a lifelong process with rewards and challenges at different stages along the way. Therefore, we are committed to partnering with individuals, families, and communities to further the knowledge and understanding of adoption and to ensure that all people whose lives have been touched by adoption have access to quality services throughout Vermont."

According to the Consortium Membership Information, the Consortium is a collaborative effort between the Department of Children and Family Services, private foster care and adoption agencies, and community mental health agencies. In addition,

auxiliary membership currently includes Good Beginnings, an infant/parent bonding organization; Camp for Me, a summer camp for children who have been adopted; private therapeutic associations; the University of Vermont; Vermont Foster and Adoptive Parent Association; Vermont Kin as Parents; and some of the smaller private adoption agencies that focus on international adoptions.

Full members are expected to designate a person to attend the quarterly meetings and participate in at least two committees/projects per year. The members share common core values relating to the practice of adoption and post-permanency services. The agencies agree to pay a membership fee of \$100 per two-year membership cycle. Auxiliary members are not part of the decision-making process and have more latitude in determining their level of participation in the Consortium. Members can change status for membership if they can no longer fulfill the requirements of Consortium.

The Department of Children and Family Services provides funding for the Consortium through Medicaid, family preservation and state general funds. The Consortium also receives assistance from volunteers who provide in-kind services. Consortium funds are used to pay a full-time coordinator and an administrative assistant. Funds are also used to hire paraprofessional individuals to team with a post-permanent services provider to facilitate parent support groups, conferences and training. The budget for the Consortium is appropriately \$164,232 per annum.

During this fiscal year, the Consortium conducted a two-day workshop for professionals and parents of adolescents. The training focused on activities that promote attunement and attachment, such as African drumming, art and music.

The Consortium also supports school-based training for teachers and guidance counselors working

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with children and youth who have been adopted and may have trauma and loss issues.

The Consortium provides a full-day workshop on transracial/transcultural adoption for families in the home study process. In addition to training, the Consortium has limited funds for respite services for guardians and adoptive families who do not receive a subsidy. There are two types of respite provided: (1) Traditional respite where children stay with caregivers for a designated amount of time or nontraditional or (2) Creative respite which can include any activity that gives parents a break and allows children to engage in activities that build social skills or self-esteem. Creative respite can also include an activity that allows parents and children to engage in activities that promote attunement and attachment.

Four of the full member agencies in the Consortium have contracts through the state totaling \$912,000 annually. These funds pay for 25 staff to provide post permanency, case management for in-home parenting support, advocacy, and assistance in accessing other services. Two of the agencies are part of the community mental health system—one is the largest adoption agency and the other is the largest therapeutic foster care agency.

In 2013, 173 children in Vermont achieved permanency through adoption and guardianship. Currently, 1,800 children and youth are receiving subsidies. On average, the agencies in the Consortium serve close to 500 children/youth annually. The cost is \$1,824 per child, per year or \$4.99 per day.

Any family adopting a child in Vermont is eligible to receive post-permanency services from the Consortium. The Consortium provides an array of services to guardianship and adoptive families throughout the state. These services include support groups for parents and children; information and referrals to community resources; education and training for children, youth, parents and professionals through the University of Vermont; and a lending library with recommended readings for parents and children. The Consortium acts as a clearinghouse for

new information, review of research, books, films and speakers.

Moreover, the Consortium offers creative services to families and children/youth to meet their specific needs. In-home services assist in stabilizing families during challenging times.

The Consortium can provide families with assistance in navigating the school system with IEP's, school meetings and understanding various psychological and therapeutic evaluations. A Triad Group, including the birth parents, the child or adult adoptee and the adoptive parents meet on a monthly basis to discuss the adoption process. Extended family members are invited to participate in the group process. Yoga was offered in a district as a therapeutic service to address children/youth and families with trauma issues.

Vermont has come a long way in recognizing that children and youth with traumatic beginnings in life are likely to have challenges in adolescence. We know that the teen years are very challenging for all youth. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that children/youth who were abused and neglected in the formative years will likely need support and intervention regardless of who adopts them.

According to Ms. Dexter, DCF is not done in their development of a full circle of care for adoptees, birth parents, guardians and adoptive parents. Vermont DCF continues to change and add to the supports that are offered to families in an effort to meet the identified needs. Ms. Dexter said that DCF would soon change its focus exclusively on post-permanency, to a focus that looks at permanency from the front end of the system.

The Agency is adding two new positions to the System of Care Unit, one contracted position and the other a State agency position. The Department of Children and Family Services is using the contracted position to hire a Coordinator of the Consortium. The other position is the Community Service Specialist. This position will focus primarily on all grants and contracts that provides services to foster, adoptive and guardianship families. These two positions will work

Nia Vardalos is an “Instant Mom”

By Janice King, ACSW, LICSW
Program Manager, National Resource Center for Adoption



Janice King, LMSW

Many of us have seen the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and remember the hilarious bride and her eccentric family. The bride, Nia Vardalos, is an Academy Award nominated actress and writer.

Her recent book, *Instant Mom*, is about her decision and journey to adopt from the public child welfare system. *Instant Mom* captures the pain woman encounter when they are wanting and waiting to be a mother, having invitro fertilization treatments fail as well as false starts with adoption providers. She shares the toll of waiting to become a mom on her emotions and the impact of putting career opportunities on hold while focusing on becoming a mom.

After looking into various adoption opportunities, Ms. Vardalos learns about the 120,000 children/youth waiting to be adopted in the foster care system. She shares the support and guidance of working with a Foster Family Agency (FFA) that leads to the

adoption of her then 3-year-old daughter. She sees the support FFA and the role of social workers as helpful rather than invasive, as she begins her new role as an “instant mom.” Ms. Vardalos is able to capture some of the struggles that adoptive parents face as they embrace children into their family system and routines. Although the book captures the difficulties that families face through this type of journey, she is able to intertwine humor in some of life’s most serious moments. Recognizing the need to find adoptive families for so many of the children in foster care, Ms. Vardalos provides an appendix that provides basic steps on how to adopt from the child welfare system.

Nia Vardalos is a 2013 recipient of an Adoption Excellence Award. She has worked with AdoptUSKids since 2008 to increase awareness about the need for families for children in the U.S. foster care system.

To read more about Ms. Vardalos as a celebrity voice for foster care, go to:

<http://www.adoptuskids.org/news-and-announcements/in-the-news/story?k=nia-var-dalos-ruth-mcroy-2013>.

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closely with Ms. Dexter to ensure that high quality, appropriate care is provided for children/youth and families along with timely permanency services for children just entering the system.

Ms. Dexter and her team are driven and committed to preserving and stabilizing families and ensuring the

well-being of the children/youth and parents in Vermont. It truly does “take a village” to support parents and children/youth and the Vermont Adoption Consortium is that village.



Adoption Stories Around the Nation

Adoption Tapestry is a project of the NRCA. Recognizing that adoption is a unique journey and that there is not one story that exemplifies the experience, Adoption Tapestry collects and shares adoption stories from various perspectives across the nation. It is our hope that these short audio clips will help to inform practice, strengthen the links between individuals connected through their unique permanency stories, enhance our

communities understanding of permanency and preserve our families' voices and insight for future generations.

The stories are intentionally not scripted so that participants can engage in a rich dialogue that provides a glimpse of their domestic child welfare adoption and guardianship experience. NRCA will continue adding stories to the map throughout the year so that there is eventually a story from every state in the nation.

To listen to these stories or if you or someone you know is interested in submitting their own story, please go to NRCA's website: <http://www.nrcadoption.org/map/>.

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Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed.

Other research sources cited by Utah in development of the *Pathways to Adoption* program are listed below:

Barth, R.P. & Brooks, D. (2000). Outcomes for drug-exposed children eight years post-adoption.

Barth, R.P., Brodzinsky, D., & Freundlich, M. (Eds.), *Adoption and prenatal drug exposure: The research, policy and practice challenges*. Washington, DC: CWLA & Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

Brodzinsky, D. (2008). *Adoptive parent preparation: Meeting the mental health and developmental needs of adopted children*. New York: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

Flynn, C., Welch, W., Paget, K., & Wright, L. (2004). *Field-Initiated research on successful adolescent adoption*. Columbia, SC: Center for Child and Family Studies, University of South Carolina.

McDonald, T., Propp, J., & Murphy, K. (2001). The postadoption experience: Child, parent, and family adjustment to adoption. *Child Welfare*, 80 (1), 71-94.

Reilly, T. & Platz, L. (2003). Characteristics and challenges of families who adopt children with special needs: An empirical study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 25, 781-803.

Smith, S. L., Howard, J. A., & Monroe, A. D. (1998). An analysis of child behavior problems in adoptions in difficulty. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 24 (1/2), 61-84.

Wright, L. & Flynn, C. C. (2006). Adolescent adoption: Success despite challenges. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28 (5), 487-510.

UPCOMING WEBINARS

Part 1 & 2 – “Understanding and Complying With Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, as amended”

(This webinar series will be recorded and the recordings will be posted as a resource on our website, www.nrcadoption.org. We will send out email notifications when the recordings are available.)

Part 1: Webinar took place on January 28, 2014

Additional policy guidance about MEPA may also be found at the following web link: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/cwpm/programs/cb/laws_policies/laws/cwpm/policy_dsp_pf.jsp.

Part 2: February 4, 2014, 1 to 3 PM EST. To register go to: <https://cc.readytalk.com/rv9airecq70t1&eom>

This presentation will focus on the following areas:

- Biological and Prospective Parents Request
- Respective Roles of OCR and ACF
- Enforcement of Title VI and MEPA
- Compliance Tips
- One State's Perspective: Oklahoma Experience

“Re-visiting the Adoption-Guardianship Discussion: Helping Caseworkers Better Understand and Communicate the Permanency Implications of Adoption and Guardianship”

(co-sponsored with the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections)

February 20, 2014, 3 to 4:30 PM EST

To register go to: <https://cc.readytalk.com/cc/s/registrations/new?cid=64c7twqlfret>

As of November 2013, 31 State agencies and 2 Tribes have adopted the Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP) since the passage of the Fostering Connections Act in 2008. A recent report published by the Children's Defense Fund and several partners, *Making It Work, Using the GAP Program to Close the Permanency Gap for Children in Foster Care*, indicates that States use GAP to varying degrees. While many factors contribute to the variation in use, the report found that a key element of utilization is tied to a professional's understanding of, and respect for, the value of kin placements. Successful use of the GAP is also contingent upon professional staff and caregiver understanding of the different permanency options available to them.

This webinar will summarize the foundation on which guardianship as a permanency option was developed, provide a comparative look at the qualities of permanency for adoption and guardianship, discuss the value of guardianship for kinship families, Native Americans, and older wards, and highlight strategies for the engagement and education of families in the decision making process. Tips and tools for engagement of families, educating families about the differences between adoption and guardianship, and documenting critical discussions will be shared.

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