

Develop a Circle of Support

Social isolation can be a real issue for many foster/adoptive families. Liza Bingley Miller and Arnon Bentovim address in their book, *Assessing the Support Needs of Adopted Children and Their Families: Building Secure New Lives*, the impact of isolation on adoptive families. In the book, the authors state that the support network that adoptive families have at the time of placement can become seriously eroded over time as a result of the difficulties adopted children bring into their families. This erosion can be due to many things including a misunderstanding of the needs of the children and the changes in parenting styles that may be necessary to meet the needs of the children. Although often well meaning, family, friends, and acquaintances will sometimes offer unwarranted parenting advice, or worse, pass judgment, resulting in foster/adoptive parents questioning their abilities. This lack of understanding can be alienating and often results in social isolation for the adoptive family.

Heather Bench, founder of the New Family Tree, defines Circle of Support as the person or persons who represent the following traits of support in one's life: the Rock, the Wise, the Passenger, the Helping Hand and the Advocate. For foster/adoptive families, these stakeholders could include the following:

- **The Rock:** A person who remains in your life during the difficult times and continues to love you unconditionally.
- **The Wise:** A person who will always tell you the truth even when it is not what you want to hear.
- **The Passenger:** A person who learns alongside you.
- **The Helping Hand:** A person who understands your situation, is aware of when you may need a break, and steps in to assist.
- **The Advocate:** A person who will always stand up for you and continues to support you, regardless of the complexities of the situation.

In preparing and assisting families for the placement and adoption of children, it is pertinent that families develop and subsequently surround themselves with their own Circle of Support. This could include relatives, friends, church members, neighbors, etc. Most families will be able to easily identify their Circle of Support. However, this may be a difficult task for some families. As part of pre-service training and licensure, agencies should help families identify and, if needed, cultivate a Circle of Support. One tool that agencies can utilize to help families identify their stakeholders is called Identifying your Circle of Support. The tool was adapted from a concept originally developed by Heather Bench. The tool can be accessed at: <http://jayneschooler.blogspot.com/>.

Agencies can also utilize Ecomaps to help with this process. The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program. 208: Achieving Permanency for Children in Kinship Foster, Care provides one example of a basic Ecomap. <http://socialwork.msu.edu/koehler/docs/Ecomap%20Example.pdf>

Once foster/adoptive parents have identified members in their Circle of Support, they need to cultivate the members so that they can effectively support them in their parenting role. The members will need to have a basic understanding on attachment, trauma, and the difficulties foster/adoptive parents may encounter in parenting. Agencies can do this by offering training/information/services that engage the members and/or providing foster/adoptive parents with the capacity and skills needed to engage the members on their own. Either way, child welfare agencies need to continuously stress to foster/adoptive parents the importance of developing circles of support. In doing this, agencies will help foster/adoptive parents develop and strengthen their Circle of Support so that they have a natural support system to rely on throughout their journey. Examples of how agencies can provide this education are summarized below:



- Provide a module in pre-service training called Circle of Support. Encourage foster/adoptive parents to bring individuals they have identified as their Circle of Support to the training. The module should provide basic information about the child welfare system, provide an overview of the impact of trauma on children, highlight some of the struggles the foster/adoptive parents are likely to encounter, reinforce the importance of foster/adoptive parents having Circles of Support and identify ways that they can support the foster/adoptive parents. Agencies must make a conscience effort to expand their vision to include key stakeholders in parts of the training so that the foster/adoptive parents' Circle of Support have an understanding of the potential challenges and the importance of their support.
- Provide a document that foster/adoptive parents can share with individuals in their Circle of Support that provides information similar to what is discussed in the module mentioned above.
- Develop a web-based training/video that foster/adoptive parents can refer their Circle of Support to in order to obtain a basic understanding of the child welfare system, impact of trauma on children, and the importance of their role in helping the children heal.
- Provide training for foster/adoptive parents on how to work with teachers, coaches, relatives, and other individuals that are critical in the life of the children. Help foster/adoptive parents learn what information can be shared, how to appropriately share the information, and how to engage individuals to become advocates for their children.



Resources

Listed below are resources that agencies can utilize to help foster/adoptive parents build this vital system of support:

- Nancy Thomas, *Circle of Support DVD*: An educational video about attachment disorder and the importance of supporting parents who are caring for children with this condition. <http://www.attachment-store.org/circle-of-support.html>
- Karyn Purivs, *Attachment Why It Matters*: This video explores the critical role of attachment in a child's development. <http://empoweredtoconnect.org/new-dvd-attachment-why-it-matters/>
- Heather Forbes, *Issues Facing Adoptive Mothers of Children with Special Needs*: This book summarizes intensive interviews that were conducted with 14 adoptive mothers. The book sheds light on some of the challenges adoptive mothers face when adopting children with special needs. <http://jsw.sagepub.com/content/3/3/301.abstract>
- Daniel Hughes, *Building the Bonds of Attachment*: This book is a composite case study of the developmental course of one child following years of abuse and neglect. The book focuses on both the specialized psychotherapy and parenting that is often necessary in facilitating a child's psychological development and attachment security. <http://www.amazon.com/Building-Bonds-Attachment-Awakening-Troubled/dp/0765704048>

References

- Miller, L. B. & Bentovim, A. (2006). *Assessing the support needs of adopted Children and their families: Building secure new lives*. Routledge.
- Schooler, J. (2002). *The journeys of adoption*. Bergin & Garvey Trade. Retrieved from <http://www.jayneschooler.blogspot.com/>