



The journey to adopt a child who has special needs: Parents' perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 December 2010

Received in revised form 23 March 2011

Accepted 24 March 2011

Available online 30 March 2011

Keywords:

Adoptive parents

Adoption preparation

Adoption process

Special needs adoption

ABSTRACT

Many of the children eligible for adoption from the public child welfare system are considered to have special needs. Given the importance of securing adoptive families for these children, knowing more about the adoption process as it is experienced by prospective parents who complete (or are in the process of completing) their adoption pursuit and those who discontinue it are critical. Using qualitative inquiry, prospective adoptive parents in nine families were studied in an effort to learn more about their motivations, expectations, preparation, and experiences. Although the adoption outcome (continued versus discontinued) was different, the process, including negative experiences, was quite similar. Programming implications and suggestions for future research are offered.

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1. Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) (2010), in 2009 approximately 115,000 children in the United States were waiting to be adopted from the public child welfare system, a decrease from the 2002 total when 134,000 children were awaiting adoption. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), other adoption legislation, and incentive programs have resulted in an increase in adoptions from the child welfare system, accounting for 68% of all adoptions in the United States, rising from 31,030 in 1997 to 57,466 in 2009 (Festinger & Maza, 2009; Houston & Kramer, 2008; Ryan, Nelson, & Siebert, 2009; Smith, 2010; USDHHS, 2010).

A substantial portion of the children adopted from the child welfare system are considered to have special needs, estimated to be approximately 89% (Smith, 2010). Sibling groups, older children, children with disabilities, children of color, and children with mental health issues define current special needs groups within the foster care system, a vast change from prior times when “special needs” defined children with “specific medical, mental health or other conditions” (Smith, 2010). Not only do many of the children in foster care have some form of “special needs” they sometime fit into more than one of the special needs categorizations. For example, of the more than 100,000 children waiting to be adopted in 2008, almost 60% were children of color and over 20% were children 13 years of age

or older (AFCARS, 2008). Children who have special needs are considered “hard to place” and they have risk factors associated with high adoption disruption rates (Smith, 2010, p. 32). Despite these challenges, some prospective adoptive parents are willing to adopt a child who has special needs (Geen, Malm, & Katz, 2004).

The characteristics of adoptive parents have changed over the years (Rosenthal, Groze, & Curiel, 1990; Schwartz, 2008; Wright & Flynn, 2006). Adoption legislation and policy have allowed for an increasingly more diverse pool of adoptive parents (Rosenthal et al., 1990). Single parents, same sex couples, minority parents, and unmarried live-in partners have all become a part of the prospective adoptive parent pool for special needs children (Schwartz, 2008).

Despite legislative mandates that aim to promote adoption and what is known about the characteristics of adoptive parents, there remains a lack of understanding of the manner in which parental experiences and challenges affect the adoption process. We conducted a qualitative study of parents seeking to adopt a child specifically with special needs with the purpose of understanding the motivations, expectations, experiences, and sense of preparedness of the parents to discover why some of them complete the adoption process while others do not. Discoveries about the reasons why parents seek children with special needs and knowledge of what sustains the parents' interest and what supports them through completion (even when facing extreme frustrations) can lead to effective methods for identifying, recruiting, and retaining more of these types of individuals. First, we present a literature review, which was shaped by the study's six major research questions as explicated in the methodology section. Existing studies pertaining to adoptive parents' motivations, expectations, experiences with the adoption process, and preparedness were analyzed. Second, we describe the methodology including a detailed summary of the manner in which

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the data were analyzed. Third, we present the findings, organized by the research and participant interview questions. Fourth, we discuss practice implications that were framed by the differences discovered between parents who complete (or are completing) the adoption process versus those who discontinue. The article concludes with a discussion of study limitations and direction for future inquiry.

2. Background and literature review

2.1. Motivating and sustaining factors

What motivates a prospective adoptive parent in wanting to adopt a child who has special needs, especially considering the fact that research (Nelson, 1985) suggests that adoptive parents are less satisfied with at least one category of special needs adoption (i.e., children with behavior problems)? Research indicates that child behavioral problems have been associated with adoption disruption and dissolution (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992; Smith & Howard, 1994). Even when adoptions are not disrupted, the behavior exhibited by children with behavior problems has a negative effect on family functioning (Leung & Erich, 2002; McGlone, Santos, Kazama, Fong, & Mueller, 2002). Despite these challenges there is a population of prospective adoptive parents who are motivated to care for a child with special needs and to provide that child with nurturance, love and stability. Reilly and Platz (2003) examined the parental characteristics and experiences of 249 special needs adoptive families and discovered that the primary motivation for adopting a child with special needs is that parents had previously cared for the child through a foster parenting relationship. Parents who adopt from the foster care system (where a majority of the adoptions are children with special needs) cite wanting to provide permanent care for a child as their primary motivating reason. The second, third, fourth, and fifth most frequently cited motivations for adopting a child from the public system are, respectively, wanting to expand their family, infertility, wanting a sibling for a child, and having adopted the child's sibling (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009).

2.2. Prospective parents' expectations

Using data generated from the 1995 *National Survey of Family Growth* (NSFG), Geen et al. (2004) reported that those prospective adoptive parents who would accept a child from the public foster care system are willing to adopt older children (56%), children with disabilities (83% would accept a mild disability and 33% would accept a severe disability), sibling groups (66%), and minority children (79% would accept a Black child and 90% would accept other non-White children). Prospective adoptive parents seem to have some degree of willingness to accept the conditions and risk factors that children face, but what seems less clear is the extent to which parents' expectations match the reality of the adoption process and the effect that unmet expectations have on their desire to continue in their adoption pursuit. There is insufficient literature that explores the extent to which prospective parents enter the adoption process expecting the conditions (e.g., frustration, stress, disappointment, feelings of inadequacy, interpersonal conflicts) they may eventually experience. Also, the literature does not reveal the extent to which unmatched expectations play a role in parents' decisions to discontinue the adoption process.

2.3. Prospective parents' experiences

Despite the intricate design of child welfare adoptions, many are successful, although difficult (Ryan et al., 2009). Some of the factors that contribute to the success of adoptions, even for children with special needs, include the characteristics of the adoptive parents and strong pre-adoption and post-adoption services (Berry, Barth, &

Needell, 1996; Brooks, Allen, & Barth, 2002; Groze, 1996; Ryan et al., 2009). Notwithstanding what is known about adoption success, parents who adopt children from the public child welfare system are less satisfied with the adoptive experience (including the adoption agency) than other types of adoptive parents (Vandivere et al., 2009). Adoption successes coupled with the recent increase in adoptions may overshadow those adoptions that end in disruption or dissolution (Gibbs, Sienbaneler, & Barth, 2002; Ryan et al., 2009). Therefore, learning more about the special needs adoption process as it is experienced by prospective parents may provide a pathway toward retaining more parents and decreasing eventual disruptions.

2.4. Sense of preparedness

Nationally, adoption disruption rates in general are thought to be between 11% and 13% (Barth, 1999; Barth & Berry, 1988, 1991; Rosenthal & Groze, 1992; Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006). However, adoption disruption rates for children with special needs are even higher. It is estimated that 10% to 16% of adoptions of children with special needs conclude in disruption or displacement (Barth & Berry, 1988; George, Howard, & Yu, 1996). For example, there is a 15% disruption rate for children with disabilities. Also, there is a 6% increase in risk for disruption with every 1-year age increment (Ryan et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2006) and the disruption rates increase based on the total number and severity of a child's behavior problems (Barth & Berry, 1991; Partridge, Hornby, & McDonald, 1986; Smith & Howard, 1994; Smith et al., 2006). What then accounts for high disruption rates?

In their study on adoption preparedness, Wind, Brooks, and Barth (2005) examined child- and family-related risk factors concerning children with special needs. A significant number of special needs adoptions that result in "disruption or displacement" are due to a multitude of "child-related" risk factors, including a history of abuse or neglect, mental health issues, and advanced child age at the time the adoption occurred (cited in Wind et al., 2005). Wind et al. (p. 46) cited McDonald, Propp, & Murphy (2001) who noted that the presence of overlapping child-related risk factors appeared to be a greater indicator than the type of risk factor with regards to "family adjustment to adoption." Family-risk factors were also weighted heavily with special attention paid to "parental beliefs, feelings and demographic characteristics" (Wind et al., 2005, p. 47). According to Wind et al., parents who adopt children with environmental risk histories feel less prepared.

Research suggests that prospective adoptive parents are best prepared when they were provided with accurate and comprehensive information about the adoptive child, when they were provided general education materials (Barth, Gibbs, & Siebenaler, 2001; Brooks et al., 2002; Farber, Timberlake, Mudd, & Cullen, 2003; Reilly & Platz, 2003), and when there is a good relationship between the parents and the adoption agency (Egbert & LaMont, 2004).

2.5. Adoption supports and hindrances

The adoption process is complicated by adoption legislation, individual state policy, permanency timelines, and risk factors for children with special needs. While legislation and incentives have been enacted with the intent of removing obstacles from child welfare adoptions, the adoption process as experienced by parents may not have been adequately addressed so as to retain appropriate prospective parents. Prospective parents who continue the adoption process and those who discontinue it are similar in characteristics, motivations, the type of child they desire, and their opinions about agency barriers (Barth & Miller, 2000; USDHHS, 2007). However, there is some suggestion that what distinguishes those who discontinue from those who eventually finalize an adoption are such factors as family preparation/expectations, parent-child match, change in personal circumstances, agency emotional support, family dynamics, and

availability of services. Those who discontinue the adoption process report these issues to be barriers more so than those who finalize the adoption process (USDHHS, 2007).

More qualitative examinations are needed of the nuanced meaning that prospective parents associate with the adoption experience relating to supports and hindrances. Thus, the study described next expands the existing literature base by seeking to qualitatively define motivations, expectations, preparation, and experiences in an effort to better understand why some prospective adoptive parents of children with special needs discontinue the process while others do not.

3. Method

3.1. Design overview

The authors' interest in the topic of adoption grew out of their personal and professional involvement with children and families who are engaged in the child welfare system. Child welfare research has long been the authors' passion and focus and they have aspired to translate empirical knowledge into sound practice and policy approaches. The authors are personally drawn to the plight of children who have special needs given their life commitment as parents, caregivers, and advocates. As a result, the authors undertook a university Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved qualitative study of prospective parents seeking to adopt children who have special needs. The study was conducted in a moderate-sized (1.8 million population) urban county located in the southwestern portion of the United States. The sample was drawn from the state-administered but county-operated major public child welfare agency in charge of child abuse and neglect investigations, foster care placement, and adoption services. During the time of the study the county had approximately 1330 children in foster care who were eligible for adoption. Annually, approximately one third of the children awaiting adoption are adopted. More than 50% of the children had at least one condition or characteristic that would make them eligible for the special needs categorization.

In order to understand more fully those parents who seek to adopt children who have special needs, this study sought answers to six major research questions. The questions were:

- (1) What motivates and sustains parents' interest in adopting children who have special needs?
- (2) What are parents' expectations concerning the child they hope to adopt and the adoption process itself?
- (3) What are parents' experiences with the child welfare system, including their contact and involvement with child welfare and adoption workers?
- (4) What are parents' perceptions of the training programs that they complete?
- (5) To what extent do prospective parents feel prepared to parent a child who has special needs?
- (6) How does the adoption process promote or detract from the adoption of children with special needs?

3.2. Sample

The study was a collaborative effort between university researchers, the public child welfare agency, and foster and adoptive parent advocate groups. A study advisory board directed the research efforts and served as the liaison between the university and the child welfare agency. The advisory board comprised public adoption officials who facilitated the research team's access to the sampling frames. Working cooperatively with the state-administered adoption agency, we generated four lists of parents in various stages of the adoption process. We aggregated the lists as follows: (a) those parents

Table 1a
Demographic characteristics of prospective adoptive families.

Characteristics	Count
Average age	39 years
Gender	
Male	5
Female	4
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	6
African American	2
Latino	1
Annual income	
\$35,001–\$40,000	1
More than \$50,000	8
Marital status	
Single–Never married	1
Married	7
Living with a partner	1
Adoption status	
Adoption is final	2
Home study is completed/Child is currently placed with me or us	2
Screening, paperwork and training completed	2
Discontinued the adoption process	3

in the pre-adoption phase (i.e., expressed interest, initial screening and paperwork completed, initial pre-service classes completed)³; (b) those parents in the adoption phase (i.e., core training completed, licensed, home study completed, child identified, initial placement has occurred); (c) those parents who have adopted (i.e., legal adoption has occurred); and (d) those parents who discontinued the adoption process (i.e., discontinuation occurred after training classes and initial certifications completed but no child had been placed). A total of 238 prospective adoptive parent names were contained in the combined lists. Fifteen numerically coded names were randomly generated from each of the four lists. In order to protect the research participants' identity and confidentiality, the university team prepared recruitment letters that explained the study to prospective participants and sought their voluntary participation and hand-delivered the letters to the county child welfare agency representative, who in turn mailed them. The participants' identity and demographics were not known to the research team until the participants voluntarily replied to the recruitment letters that directed them to phone the researchers at the university.

Interviews were completed with nine families, totaling 17 individuals. Married couples and domestic partners were interviewed conjointly. Tables 1a–1d contain a listing of the demographic characteristics of the families who participated in the research. The families are described in terms of the parents' characteristics, the adoptive children's characteristics, the background and experiences of the adoptive parents, and the expectations that the prospective parents had as they embarked upon the adoption process. The group is nearly evenly split by gender. The majority of the sample are European American, married, and have annual incomes of more than \$50,000. In terms of the adoption status, two families had their child placed with them and they were awaiting the process to become finalized. For two families the adoption was final. Two families had completed their training and were awaiting a child to be placed in their home, and three families had made a decision to discontinue the adoption process. For the families who had adopted a child or who had the prospective adoptive child currently residing with them, the average age of the child was 7.8 with a range of 2–14. For the most

³ The prospective parents underwent a pre-service and a training program which was adapted from the Child Welfare League of America's Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) Program. The pre-service program focused on preparing and assessing prospective adoptive parents and the training program addressed the basic core competencies required of parents. The pre-service sessions and the core training modules were co-facilitated by agency training staff and current foster and adoptive parents.

Table 1b
Demographic characteristics of the children who were adopted.

Characteristics	Count
Child's average age	7.8 years
Age range	2 to 14
Child's gender	
Male	3
Female	6
Special needs status	
Child has one special need	1
Child has multiple special needs	8

part the children were girls who had more than one special need. Three of the families had already adopted a child prior to the current adoption. One of the participants had previously had a failed adoption and a few had previously attempted to adopt but discontinued the process. For the families who had completed their adoption, the process took an average of 10 months and those still waiting to finalize the adoption had been engaged in the process for an average of 11.8 months.

The sociodemographic tool was devised in order to obtain information about the parents' expectations about the adoptive child prior to the start of the adoption process. In terms of the desired age for the child, the group is evenly divided. One third expected to adopt a baby or a very young child, one third wanted the child to be over the age of 3, and the remaining third did not have an age preference. Most of the respondents did not have an expectation with respect to gender but some did want a female child. The majority of the respondents in this sample did not have a preference with respect to the child's ethnicity but a couple did prefer that the child be the same ethnicity as themselves. Finally, when asked about special needs, the majority of the respondents did expect that the child would have some special needs or it did not matter to them but one respondent did enter the process with the expectation that the adoptive child would have no special needs but later changed his or her mind.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The study entailed one-on-one qualitative interviews that were de-identified, recorded, and later transcribed. The interviews were typically held at a site of the research participants' choosing (e.g., private study carousel of a library). Following the completion of a brief sociodemographic profile, respondents were presented with the interview questions shown in Table 2. The questions derived from a review of the literature, study research questions, an analysis of an earlier adoption study conducted in the same state, and the guidance of a study advisory committee that comprised professionals and adoptive parents. The purpose of the qualitative analysis was to generate knowledge about common patterns and themes within the human experience in relation to the adoption process for children

Table 1c
Background/experiences of prospective adoptive families.

Characteristics	Count
Adopted prior to current adoption attempt	3
Yes	6
No	
Experience failed adoption or adoption disruption prior to current adoption attempt:	
Yes	1
No	8
Previously attempted to adopt but discontinued process	
Yes	2
No	7
If adoption is complete, months to complete adoption	10
Months currently waiting	11.8

Table 1d
Expectations about the child to be adopted.

Characteristics	Count
Desired age	
0–3	3
Over the age of 3	3
Did not matter	3
Child's gender	
Male	0
Female	4
Did not matter	5
Ethnicity	
Same as my own	2
Different than my own	0
Did not matter	7
Special needs ^a	
No special needs	1
Some special needs	7
Did not matter	1

^a The respondents were asked whether they had an expressed desire for a child with special needs before they made the final decision that they would be open to adopting a child with special needs.

with special needs. The qualitative database for this study consisted of interview transcripts from open-ended questions deriving from the exploratory interviews. To analyze and reduce the data, inductive reasoning processes, pattern analyses, and thematic coding to interpret and structure the meanings that could be derived from available sources were done.

The general approach used, called “constant comparative analysis,” evolved out of the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The strategy involved first reviewing all interviews in their entirety, and then taking one question or topic at a time, comparing individual responses and accounts with all others, looking for similarities and differences. In this form of qualitative content analysis, an inductive category development process was used, wherein data analysts formulated categories and outlined emergent themes as they perceived them while revising and formulating new categories as more details appeared throughout the review of materials. Analysts worked through the text, summarizing and interpreting notes and reducing the results into several major conceptual categories. These key themes with an outline of main categories and subcategories are presented in question order in the Findings section of this article as well as in Table 3. Using “thick description,” in the Findings section a more detailed summary of each topic is followed with direct quotations from participants supporting the interpretation and categorization of results.

Table 2
Interview questions.

1. What originally motivated you to adopt a child from the foster care system (and a child with special needs)?
2. What factors sustain your interest in the adoption of a child from the foster care system (and a child with special needs)?
3. What are (were) your expectations concerning the child you hope (hoped) to adopt?
4. What are (were) your expectations concerning the adoption process?
5. Describe your experiences with the agency and your involvement with adoption workers.
6. Describe your experiences with the training program.
7. Describe the degree to which you feel (felt) prepared to assume parenting of a child from the foster care system (and a child with special needs).
8. Describe the degree to which you feel (felt) prepared to assume parenting of a child from the foster care system (and a child with special needs).
9. What factors support (supported) your completion of the adoption process?
10. What factors contributed to your withdrawal from the adoption process?

Table 3
Outline of key themes.

Primary theme	Original motivation	Sustaining factors	Expectations about the child	Expectations about the process	Experiences with child welfare agency and adoption worker	Experiences with training program	Sense of preparedness	Factors that support adoption completion	Factors that contribute to withdrawal from the adoption process
Primary theme	Situational or personal issue (e.g., infertility, sexual orientation)	Situational or personal (e.g., infertility, sexual orientation)	Expectations are based on previous experience with children and/or with the foster care system	Based on basic knowledge (experience adopting, foster parent)	Negative experiences (e.g., overloaded, judgmental, misleading information)	Extreme approach and methods (i.e., "Scared Straight" approach)	Foster care experience helpful	Involvement of a caring and competent social worker	Poor performance of a social worker
Secondary theme	Concern for well-being of children	Concern for well-being of others	Looking for the "best fit" (desiring a child's whose personality, characteristics, etc., best fit our family)	Inadequate knowledge, misconceptions, or disappointments	Positive experiences (e.g., understanding, empathic, professional)	Provided just basic information and some information was not applicable	Can never be fully prepared	Presence of supportive family and friends	Daunting and time consuming nature of the adoption process
Tertiary theme	-	Belief in parenting abilities	Expected behavioral problems and the need for specific adjustments to be made on our part	Had a set of expectations about the workers and the agency (e.g., trust, efficiency, courtesy, advance preparation, nonjudgmental)	Frustrations (e.g., slow processing of paperwork, staff turnover, inconsistencies, inadequate records on the child)	-	Use of personal counseling and involvement in support groups was very helpful	Involvement in personal counseling /parent support activities	Search and placement parameter too rigid

Generalizability is not typically the major purpose of qualitative research. Instead, this study particularized (Patton, 1990) emergent themes so as to enhance the degree to which participants' viewpoints, thoughts, perceptions, and experiences were understood. The data analysts feel that the analytical techniques used here have been successfully used to deepen understanding of complex social and human factors pertaining to adoption in ways that cannot be fully understood with quantitative methods and numbers alone. Moreover, the researchers believe that the insights generated here may be applicable to other prospective adoptive parents and thus by learning more about adoptive parents' experiences, adoption practices can be improved.

In addition, trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (the quantitative reliability and validity equivalent) were attended to in this study. In order to establish trustworthiness, we gave extreme care to the design of the project. The design of the study was directed by a university–community collaborative team comprising a majority foster and adoptive parent membership. The research team shared in the design of research questions, data collection procedures, and discussions that defined the parameters of the sampling frames. Trustworthiness was also established by conducting member checks. Parents were given drafts of their transcripts for review and correction and they participated in previewing the interpretive report. Finally, credibility was enhanced by prolonged engagement (extended interviews, engagement of the parents in environments comfortable for them), peer debriefing (methodological consultations provided by faculty research peers), training of the research team including the use of a study manual, and adhering to structured and rigorous data collection methods.

4. Findings

Research question #1: What motivates and sustains parents' interest in adopting children who have special needs?

4.1. Motivation

Although the participants in this study seemingly had little in common other than a desire to adopt a child from the foster care system, many commonalities emerged in relation to their original motivations and their various experiences with the adoption process. Two themes in particular are most pronounced: (a) situational/personal experiences; and (b) concern for the well-being of children. When reflecting on their reasons for wanting a child at this point in their lives, prospective parents often spoke of reproductive-related issues ranging from infertility to the women being past normal child-bearing age. Some were childless; others already had biological children but were unable to become pregnant again. Also, financial considerations were a factor for some who felt they would not be able to adopt through a private agency. Another personal factor concerned marital status or sexual orientation. Some participants were single parents or same-sex couples and some preferred to adopt an older child in order to create the best fit for their own family situation. One couple expressed their motivations as follows:

"We decided we wanted to adopt an older child so that we would not have the basic problems of an infant. We are older ourselves (in our 50's) and we did not want to go through changing diapers – we have done that already."

Concern for the well-being of others was a recurring sentiment that all the participants shared in relation to their motivation to adopt children with special needs. Many had seen the adoption campaigns in print and televised media outlets and were saddened to learn about the large numbers of children who had suffered in some way and were

in need of caring families. Others had worked in the system as volunteers and/or foster parents and became interested in adoption along the way. Being an adoptee or knowing someone who was raised in the foster care system strongly influenced the decision of one participant. Sincere eagerness to share their time and lives with a child in need was evident among all prospective adoptive parents and most seemed to feel a strong desire to make a positive difference in the life of a child. Below are two quotes indicative of the expressions shared by respondents regarding the issue of motivation. (Some quotations in this article have been condensed, revised, or collapsed for clarity of meaning and ease of reading.)

“What started us was we just figured that there were a lot of kids in need out there for adoption, most of them, I mean we could have gone through the regular process but we thought that the special need was kind of a more unique way to go. Some of these kids have been through so much and we wanted to give them the opportunity before we pursued other avenues.”

“We looked into going overseas and it was the same, if you wanted to wait longer you paid less, if you would take a Black baby you paid less. If you wanted a newborn White baby now and you had the money you can have one. We talked all along about adopting siblings because at least the kids would be related. Then understanding there aren't a lot of people willing to take those kids and then feeling like the other way is very much like buying a life. All the other options just didn't sit right because we know how many kids are just waiting.”

4.2. Sustainability

The same factors that originally motivated prospective parents to consider adopting a child with special needs were also important in sustaining their interest throughout the adoption process. Their past experiences led many to strengthen their resolve whenever setbacks occurred during the lengthy approval process and when intense frustrations were felt that thwarted their diligent efforts along the way. Some expressed sympathy for the older and/or special needs children because these children were often passed over when prospective adoptive parents preferred to adopt infants. For some, their determination and concern for the well-being of the children in need in fact seemed to grow the longer they had to wait for the process to be completed. These prospective adoptive parents exhibited personality traits such as patience, tenacity, and hopefulness and they strongly believed in their decision to adopt a child. Most had emotional support from their extended families and close friends who helped them endure the process of waiting and wondering. In some cases, the desire to please their spouse was a strong motivating factor when, for example, a husband perceived how important adopting a child was to his wife. The following quotes capture the respondents' expressions.

“It has been a year and a half and we had to initiate the majority of the phone calls for each next step. We wanted children and I refused to buy a baby and that is an awful way to put it but that is how it felt to us. I just wasn't giving up on the thought of having kids and I can just be very stubborn and determined and I think the other part of it is a bit of faith. There was a reason we waited this long, there was a reason we couldn't have kids, and there is a reason these kids are here and I can't answer any of them.”

“Actually, it's just the knowledge of giving a good home to a kid who hasn't had a real great life up to that point by no choice of their own, just because of circumstances. What keeps us going is that it will happen, and it's starting to happen. We have been going through the process for two years and you kind of give up after a while. In fact, we

had given up keeping the option open just because we thought we could be good parents, but it was so slow. We just had the belief that when it is meant to be it would be.”

Research question #2: What are parents' expectations concerning the child they hope to adopt and the adoption process itself?

4.3. Expectations concerning the adoptive child

Prospective adoptive parents' expectations concerning the child they hope to adopt cluster along three primary themes: (a) expectations based on previous experiences; (b) expectations based on “best fit” for their family; and (c) expectations about the child's potential behavior. Adoptive parents sometimes based their expectations upon their past experiences if they already had children or had worked with children with special needs through teaching or volunteering in the social services field. Some also had experience being a foster parent and expressed their understanding of various possible outcomes because of their exposure to children with differing and special needs. Often the parents assessed their own family situations and expected to adopt a child of a specific age, gender, or race that they felt would fit in best with their family structure and characteristics. One specifically preferred to keep siblings together so that the children could feel they were biologically related to someone. The participants seemed prepared to face potential adjustment or behavioral problems with the child such as nervousness, lying, bed-wetting, hoarding food, loneliness, and attachment or abandonment issues. Parents tended to view these potentially negative problems as challenges that they hoped to help the child overcome. They were positive in their desire to see them through it and help the child grow to become a self-sufficient and happy adult. Participants expected to be able to cope with whatever situation might arise through offering love, counseling, and appropriate medical care. Next are two quotes symbolic of the data that were generated in relation to questions about expectations.

“You expect them to hoard food, wet the bed, to be nervous, and take a lot of your time. I expected behavioral challenges like lying and being scared and lonely, needing counseling probably a couple times a week and I just kind of hoped that we could help them past it. We have to figure out what we're in for, the fact that we might very well end up with kids that may never say thank you and may never appreciate it, may never say mom and dad — something we expected could happen.”

“There are certain parameters you would be willing to work with and situations you wouldn't. Our biggest expectations or hope was the child would be able to as an adult sustain themselves. We know there is the possibility of these kids being both physically and emotionally abused. We just wanted to be able to know that through love and counseling and nurturing we could see them through.”

4.4. Expectations concerning the adoption process

Three themes concerning the adoption process emerged: (a) self-preparation and advance knowledge about adoption; (b) knowledge inadequacies, misconceptions, and disappointments; and (c) trust placed in adoption officials. First, some parents hoping to adopt had basic knowledge of what to expect before entering the process due to prior experiences with adopting a child or being foster parents. Some knew people who had gone through the process before, either as adoptive parents, foster children, or who were themselves adopted. Most said they did research to learn about the process and one expected the process to be even lengthier and involved than it actually was. Second, many had misconceptions or inadequate knowledge about the adoption process in advance and were unclear about how to

begin or how the system works. Most thought the process would be faster or progress more smoothly than it actually did for them. They expected more training and guidance along the way regarding the stages involved and more explanations as to why it took so long. They often expected certain things like more visits with the child prior to placement, more education with specific directions, and in general, more structure for the entire process. The following three quotes are representative of what was conveyed during the interviews.

"We thought we were going to be considered highly because we are willing to take an older child, that we're prepared for some of the psychological problems since we have had experience with my son, we were more prepared than other parents have been prepared for. I believe some discrimination has occurred. We were fully licensed and really ready and we were being held back for some reason."

"Our new worker was very informative, if I had a question we would get an answer right back, but it wasn't like that with the first one. Feeling a connection with the social worker is important in the adoption process."

"The powers that be need to be aware of their workers' mentality — it takes a special kind of person to do this and it's not just a job, I mean we're talking about people's lives. You have to take a vested interest in the work. I mean I've truly heard a social worker say 'I am just here because I have to be.' That is not what an adoptive parent wants to hear, that the worker is burned out and needs a break."

Third, some parents conceded that they placed their trust completely in the adoption professionals assigned to work with them and they expected that adoption workers' experiences and professional judgment would help them. With regard to their social worker, prospective parents wanted someone they could trust to find the best fit for the child and their family. They expected better communication and more timely contact with their social workers and wanted to feel a personal connection to them and feel that they understood their situation and could empathize. All participants expected professional behavior from their social workers, including efficiency, courtesy, teamwork, and being well-prepared and nonjudgmental. They expected to be made to feel important and to not experience any form of discrimination against them as parents with regard to age, religion, or sexual orientation. Many also mentioned they thought the social worker should have a personality that was well-suited to their job and be able to motivate prospective parents to be prepared and in effect act as an advocate for them during the process. These findings are best expressed by the two quotes that follow.

"I expected the social worker to be more informative because we were so naïve and didn't know anything about the process. I don't think we're the only parents that find the slowness of the system a problem and we have no clue or understanding about why it's so slow."

"One social worker acted like the money you get from the state for the kids was hers and tried to say the federal subsidy for these children was based on our income instead of the special need of the child. She wasn't even going to let us apply."

Research question #3: What are parents' experiences with the child welfare system, including their contact and involvement with child welfare and adoption workers?

4.5. Experiences with the agency and child welfare system

When asked to discuss their experiences with child welfare agencies and describe the nature of their contact and involvement with their workers, participants' responses are best categorized by two recurring themes: (a) negative experiences; and (b) positive

experiences. Overwhelmingly, reflections of negative encounters surfaced but there were quite a few positive experiences shared as well. According to prospective parents, some social workers and supervisors were very professional and seemed to know what they were doing because they responded well to their phone inquiries, were always helpful and available, and understood the process and timing of the various stages. Some even took extra time and went out of their way to help and were able to resolve conflicts and problems effectively. Two participants who were particularly impressed with their worker expressed their experiences as follows:

"I appreciate the teamwork between our social worker and the child's case worker and them being very open and honest about what we need to know about the child."

"The _____ [name deleted for confidentiality] social workers are wonderful, they know what they're doing and their supervisors and managers know what they're doing. They are totally looking out for the needs of the children. Now there are some social workers we found that really know how to get things done."

4.6. Involvement with adoption workers

The other side of the experience involved problems with social workers including being curt/rude on the phone or in person, seeming to disapprove of parents over the age of 50, seeming to prefer foster care rather than adoption, being unprepared, lack of knowledge about the job or process, seeming to be buried in work or overloaded with responsibilities, providing misleading information or not enough information, not returning phone calls in a timely manner, and not appearing to enjoy their job or care about the outcome. Personality conflicts were evident with two of the prospective parents, which caused them to have more stress than necessary during the process. In general, the process was felt to be very slow, needlessly time-consuming, and repetitive in some instances. There is a perception among some participants that sometimes workers seemed to go slow purposefully and seemed uninterested in their jobs. They experienced delays due to worker turnover, understaffing, and lost paperwork and often had to stay on top of the workers to get things done throughout the process. Some parents suggested a need for more consistency, better communication, and the need for there to be only one person assigned to lead them through the process, like a personal liaison who really understood their situation. Parents often felt unimportant, abandoned, and frustrated because the setbacks they experienced seemed to be mainly caused by inefficiency within the system itself. The decision to discontinue the adoption process was devastating for one participant because she felt the agency was not truthful with her in the beginning about the process, potential delays, setbacks, and problems. The following quotes capture some of the participants' sentiments.

"The whole process was just government slow."

"It seemed like she was overloaded and her responses to us were basically hold your horses, calm down and if you don't like it you can call my supervisor, here's her number. So we called the supervisor and said there seemed to be a personality conflict and they said this is the person assigned to you and you just have to work with them."

"The classes and training and everything to get licensed were pretty efficient and the handouts were good. The home study and all that stuff seems like they have that down. But once you get the home study done it's just like a fog, like a chasm. You don't hear from them for a year and then all of a sudden they call and say we have a kid for you...what happened to the last year?"

Research question #4: What are parents' perceptions of the training programs that they complete?

4.7. Adoption training courses

When participants talked about their experiences with the training program, they each got a little something different from the classes. Overall, the training was helpful to them although the approach was seen to be somewhat extreme, yet necessary. They felt the training was similar to “Scared Straight” tactics in the criminal justice system and often described it as gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, and emotionally draining. Although these tactics may have frightened some prospective parents away who were not prepared to deal with children who may have had these types of traumatic situations, it helped prepare them for the worst case scenario. Participants felt the trainers were good because they seemed like they wanted to be there and were knowledgeable. Learning new forms of effective discipline methods for the children was seen as important and the exercises were helpful. It was also beneficial for them to be able to learn firsthand from other parents' experiences.

Some critiques of the training program included that it was not very substantial, just the basics, did not apply to actual situations parents might face, did not teach enough parenting skills, and was more focused on foster care than adoption. Some said the training did not match reality and needed to extend into the transition period as new problems might arise with the child in the home. Often parents had to research other sources for more specific details and to get answers to technical or medical questions. In their own words, the following quotes tell of the experience.

“I think it scared some people away, which is good, because it is a lot of work dealing with special needs kids, and a lot of people don't realize what kinds of needs these kids have. It's very emotional going through the training and understanding what these kids have been through and what kind of issues they have.”

“They didn't sugarcoat anything – they pretty much told us the worst case scenarios.”

“They couldn't give us the wealth of information we needed in a three-hour class but they gave me enough information to raise some more questions in my mind. Fortunately my sister is an RN so I called her about the technical medical questions.”

“Their classes were well done, heart-wrenching but well done. If I wasn't sure that I wanted to do this before, I am now. I really wanted to help these kids even more now.”

Research Question #5: To what extent do prospective parents feel prepared to parent a child who has special needs?

4.8. Preparedness

Participants were asked to describe the degree to which they felt prepared to assume parenting of a child with special needs. Those who had been foster parents felt that exposure to various children with different special needs was an advantage to them in preparation for adopting a child. They also felt more prepared to navigate through the system since they had gone through similar processes before that helped them have more patience during their adoption process experience as well as with the children. Some participants gained parenting knowledge in other ways such as through teaching, helping foster kids who were friends, being a parent before, or volunteering in the social services field. It was the feeling of a few that prospective parents can never be fully prepared for this type of role and may simply have to learn as they go along, allowing the child to teach the parents their own routines and what works best for them as well as what does not. Reading material from outside sources (like articles, books, and the Internet) was important for many in preparing

themselves as parents, while others relied somewhat on help from counselors and support groups. Next are three quotes that depict the responses generated from interview questions concerning preparedness.

“We are more prepared because we have been foster parents for so long and got a lot of exposure to children with different kinds of issues. Nothing will surprise us based on behavior just because we have seen so many different things. Also we know what the system is like, how it works for the kids. Someone coming in off the street that never experienced anything like this – it is a shock. A lot of times the perception is that they are going to get this perfect little kid and we already know that these kids come with some serious baggage. We know we have to have more patience.”

“We were doing our best to prepare for the worst and hoping for the best.”

“I don't know if anyone is ever prepared for that. You know I completely understand that it is an entire lifestyle change for me and I am okay with that even though it may be hard.”

Research question #6: How does the adoption process promote or detract from the adoption of children with special needs?

4.9. Conditions that support adoption completion

When asked to discuss what exactly it was that encouraged these prospective adoptive parents to complete the adoption process and not give up, three themes emerged: (a) involvement of a caring and competent social worker; (b) the presence of supportive family and friends; and (c) involvement in personal counseling and/or parent support activities. Parents felt that when adoption workers took on the role of “mentor” as opposed to “inspector” the support they derived from those contacts and interactions guided them through the process and helped them to remain hopeful. Likewise, several respondents credit their extended family, friends, and each other for providing the necessary reassurance that the adoption process would be successful. Finally, several parents disclosed that they actually sought out personal counseling above and beyond the support activities that were encouraged by the agency and it was the counseling process that provided them with much-needed support to see the adoptions through to fruition. One of the more revealing remarks made by one of the families is below.

“What kept us going is the love we have for each other and wanting to give that to somebody else, wanting to give somebody a stable home, a place where they really become a family.”

4.10. Conditions that contribute to adoption discontinuation

Factors discouraging completion of the adoption process coalesced around the following three categories: (a) poor performance of a social worker; (b) the daunting and time-consuming nature of the adoption process; and (c) search and placement parameters being too rigid. First, the most prevailing themes concerned problems experienced with the structure of the system itself as well as poor job performance of certain individuals. Social workers sometimes appeared to be overworked or overwhelmed with cases and were perceived as being inefficient. Lack of communication with workers was often an issue as many did not return phone calls promptly, thus leaving prospective parents feeling as if they were lost in the system, forgotten, or forced to keep the process going through their own persistent efforts. A few said their paperwork was lost, there were redundancies in the requirements, and the details and timing of the stages in the process were not adequately explained to them. Some

social workers were described as unprofessional, having a bad attitude toward their job, or exhibiting rude or judgmental behavior resulting in serious personality conflicts. The process itself was described as vague as well as too lengthy and time-consuming by most who were frustrated because they saw so much evidence of inefficiency. Each of the three families who discontinued the process suggested that they were pushed to narrow down their search parameters too much and they should have been given the opportunity to consider children who only partially fit their list of acceptable characteristics. The way in which the matches or selections were made was felt to be a mystery and this perception led to the process being even more stressful for some. The single quote below seems to capture the emotion expressed by many of the participants:

"I mean it's totally all the lack of communication — I don't know whether the social workers are overworked or what but to me it's an excuse and being in our situation you know, we really want to adopt and I am sure there are lots of other people who are in the same situation, but we don't know what the process is because nobody has ever explained it to us."

5. Discussion of findings

The parents in this study reported being motivated to adopt a child with special needs not only because of their personal situations but because of a larger intrinsic desire to provide care for a child whom they perceived as being forgotten or unwanted. The parents conveyed a level of commitment to their prospective child that they believe is sustained because of their convictions and personality traits. The literature seems to support the level of doggedness seen in this sample of parents. For example, Perry and Henry (2009) found that parents who chose to adopt children with special needs expressed a high commitment level. As it relates to parental expectations, parents desiring to adopt a child who has special needs have expectations about the child and the adoption process that are firmly rooted in their previous experiences, perhaps as a foster parent, their understanding of potentially challenging child behaviors, the need to self-educate, and some sense of the type of child that will fit best within their family dynamics. It seems that the parents in this study approached the process with some degree of forethought and attempted to make calculated decisions based on both their needs and the needs of a child. Similarly, Glidden (1990) notes that given the fact that adoptive parents choose to adopt such special needs children as those with disabilities, they may not experience the initial reactions of shock, denial, despair, and depression at the rate that other parents might. The findings here coupled with the Glidden study suggest an informed and practical type of decision making used by adoptive parents.

According to Molinari and Freeborn (2006), preparing prospective adoptive parents leads to success, satisfaction, and familial adjustment. In this study, several parents expressed that one may never feel fully prepared to parent a child who has special needs. However, to the extent that a parent can prepare, some of the participants in this study felt that the sense of preparation comes from previous experiences as a foster parent to a child who has special needs when they learned to anticipate the child's needs and then plan accordingly. Geen et al. (2004) also found that when parents have a level of familiarity with a child, such as that derived from being the child's foster parent, a commitment to providing the child with permanency is there. Adoptive parents of children with special needs are able to use more problem-focused coping strategies in response to their children's needs than are other parents (Glidden, 1990).

The parents in this study conveyed a strong sense of confidence, preparation, and adequacy about their impending role as parents. Also, like the Geen et al. (2004) study, although some parents in this study felt that the training program mirrored the "Scared Straight"

approach and overemphasized the negative aspects of raising a child who has special needs, some did cite the training program as being helpful with what they phrased the "reality check." Also, a resounding theme with respect to preparedness concerned the strength derived from familial and informal relationships. These findings are supported by the existing literature. The best strategies for preparing a prospective parent desiring to adopt a child with special needs include providing informal support because of its benefits in increasing parental self-confidence and competence (Molinari & Freeborn, 2006), and imparting coping strategies for difficult situations (Glidden, Billings, & Jobe, 2006; Sar, 2000), given their ability to foster adjustment and successful adaptation.

Those prospective parents who continued the adoption process and those who suspended it report very similar negative and positive experiences concerning their interactions with the adoption agency, workers, and training program. The frustrations associated with lack of agency/worker contact and communication, being made to feel inappropriate or unwelcomed, and receiving inadequate or inaccurate information reported by the parents in this study are very similar to those found in other studies (Geen et al., 2004). Aside from the general frustrations (e.g., lengthy waits) and interpersonal conflicts with adoption workers, probably one of the most significant findings from this study is that prospective adoptive parents withdrew from the process when they perceived the child placement parameters to be too rigid. Like the Geen et al. study, some of the parents who discontinued the process in our study felt that it became clear that the workers were not actively trying to place a child with them, and that the process of matching children and parents should have involved discussing with parents the possibility of accepting a child even if the child only partially met those characteristics a parent sought. Parents felt that the process of listing criteria or so-called desirable child characteristics is shallow and does not allow for potential connections. These parents' sentiments are echoed by Ward (1997) and Schweiger and O'Brien (2005) who promote a paradigm approach where children and parents are assessed on a case-by-case basis and there is a match of family strengths and child needs and not a match of the presence of requested characteristics.

6. Practice and policy implications

6.1. Placement parameters

In this study it was discovered that one of the major considerations for discontinuing the adoption process (even after having become qualified and passing the home study process) was a parent disagreeing with the manner in which the agency "matched" a child to a family. Parents took exception to the process of requiring prospective parents to list child characteristics and then the agency deciding what child would be presented to a family based on those characteristics and subjective conclusions made by an adoption worker. Certainly, adoption agencies are well within their rights to assess a prospective parent for fit and appropriateness. Adoption officials are charged with the delicate responsibility of protecting the well-being of children and ensuring that the best possible placement occurs. Notwithstanding these realities, a plausible policy direction might be a re-examination of the process and criteria that are used to match children with parents. Specifically as it relates to children with special needs, there should be an investigation into whether it is more reasonable to place greater weight on parental attitudinal and readiness measures as opposed to such characteristics as demographics (e.g., age, income, and existing family composition). The parents in this study expected that adoption decisions would be made based on the best fit between the family and child and that best fit would not just be defined along the lines of physical attributes but would also factor in the parents' experiences and motivations.

6.2. Parent support

Many families adopting children from the child welfare system have established an intricate support network of friends and family, in addition to agency supports (Houston & Kramer, 2008) prior to adoption. Given findings concerning elevated stress levels among parents who adopt children with special needs (McGlone et al., 2002), strong support systems are indeed needed. In this study we found that it was the familial-initiated support strategies (e.g., personal counseling) that kept qualified and licensed parents from not giving up but continuing to persevere. Prospective adoptive parents could be presented with the idea of the benefits of seeking personal counseling (above and beyond agency-facilitated support groups) during the adoption process. Agencies could provide resources (e.g., financial, information, and referral) to support parents' acquisition of personal counseling. The process would have to be handled with the normal care given to safeguarding confidentiality and parents would need to feel that their therapeutic sessions are conducted with a trusted and competent practitioner.

6.3. Worker-parent alliance

Dissatisfaction with the social service experience and conflicting interpersonal experiences between adoption workers and parents are thought to have negative consequences for the parent–child relationship (Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005). In this study, conflicting relationships between workers and parents were cited as one of the reasons that qualified and licensed parents discontinued the adoption process. Given the potentially detrimental effects of poor relationships, a plausible practice direction might be to designate the adoption worker's role to be that of a lead mentor and point of contact and reserving much of the assessment, training, and licensing role to that of other adoption officials. Lead adoption workers could be selected based on their desire to teach, support, encourage, and guide. Alliance-building activities could frame the worker-parent relationship and the mentor relationship could be characterized by support, advice giving, and reassurance.

6.4. Workforce training, supervision, and coaching

Some of the parents in this study conveyed stories of very disturbing experiences with regard to their interactions with adoption professionals. Although not all of the encounters between prospective adoptive parents and adoption workers were negative, the recurrent themes associated with frustration, lack of professionalism, and interpersonal conflicts do warrant additional elaboration. Based on the encounters of the parents in this study, a re-examination of the training, skill-level, and general conduct and comportment of the adoption workforce may be reasonable. Those adoption personnel who are professional social workers are required to practice in accordance with social work core values and ethics. Therefore, agency-based worker training curricula should be tailored to adoption practices as they relate to specific aspects of the *National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics*. For example, *Principle #1 - Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Clients* serves as a reminder about the level of commitment that professionals make to clients. Prospective adoptive parents should be viewed as clients and embraced with all of the rights and respect given to any other client group. Likewise, worker training that is steeped in *Principle #4 - Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals*, would reinforce the importance of competence and integrity in the delivery of adoption services.

Supervisory practices and coaching approaches that validate and reinforce competence and commitment on the part of workers should be the rule of thumb. Periodic supervisory-led values assessments performed by adoption workers may be useful in helping some to

reconcile their biases against practice standards and expected work performance. Supervisory coaching could be used to help workers gain greater insight into their performance so that they see themselves as others are experiencing them.

6.5. Adoption services evaluation

As a standard practice, adoption administrators may want to consider the use of a multi-level evaluation system of adoption workers as a means to increase professional growth and development. Ideally, the work performed by an adoption worker could be evaluated by (a) prospective adoptive parents; (b) immediate supervisors; and (c) relevant collateral contacts and agency representatives. Performance reviews could be weighted so that they fairly incorporate the relative degree of significance (defined by involvement and frequency of contact) of each evaluation source. Evaluations performed by parents, colleagues, and other collaterals could be treated as confidential communications and used in a constructive, not punitive, manner. The outgrowth of the evaluation could be a tailored supervisory plan that reinforces the worker's strengths and abilities while simultaneously focusing on those areas that require correction.

6.6. The use of parent advocates and liaisons

Qualified, appropriate, and committed adoptive parents are a commodity to the child welfare system. As such, every effort should be made to retain such parents and support them so that they are successful in their efforts to provide and care for children who have special needs. Given what was learned about the reasons why some parents discontinued the adoption process, agency officials could explore the use of parent advocates and ombudspersons as one method to safeguard the interests and rights of prospective adoptive parents. Advocacy efforts could include incorporating parent representatives on hiring boards, grievance panels, or advisory committees. Likewise, parent mentor programs or ombudspersons positions could be established and given authority to assist in mediating conflicts so that children's interests are foremost while simultaneously recognizing agencies' mandates and prospective parents' rights to be treated fairly and respectfully.

7. Limitations

In this study we found unexpected similarities in the experiences (including the frustrations) reported by those parents who completed the adoption process (or are still actively pursuing adoption) and those who discontinued. However, the major difference that seemed to separate the two groups of parents was the fact that those who discontinued the process were disheartened by the "match" process used to determine which child would be placed with a particular family. A limitation in the study is that those parents who completed (or are completing) the process were not asked whether they would have discontinued the adoption process if they felt that the "match" process was not handled properly. Given this limitation, we are left with this question: Could those parents who complete the process also take exception to the match process but are able to overcome their disapproval and complete the adoption? Likewise, the discoveries made about the factors that support adoption completion were not presented to the group who discontinued. Therefore, a second question remains: Could it be that those who discontinue the adoption process also enjoy some of the same benefits and supports observed with the completers but those supports proved not enough given the frustrations about the match process? Given the limitations, the results garnered from this study should be used as a basis for understanding some of the potential variables that may define the experience of adoptive families who complete versus those who do

not, but the emerging themes should not be treated as completely discrete differences.

8. Conclusion and future research

Securing permanent adoptive placements for children with special needs can be better achieved when adoption officials are fully aware of how the adoption process is perceived from the vantage point of the prospective adoptive parent. Prospective adoptive parents who complete the process and those who do not have very similar views as it relates to their motivations, expectations, sense of preparedness, and experiences with agencies, adoption workers, and training programs. However, from the perspective of those parents who complete the adoption process, we learned that the presence of a supportive adoption worker, the use of a supportive network of family and friends, and access to personal counseling and support groups aided them through the frustrations often associated with the adoptive process. In contrast, prospective adoptive parents who discontinue the adoption process cite conflicts with adoption workers, rigid child placement parameters, and unacceptable time delays and lengthy processes as the main reasons why they gave up their pursuit to adopt a child with special needs. The conditions experienced by both groups of prospective adoptive parents are important because they provide insight and direction about how adoption officials might consider implementing program strategies useful in retaining acceptable adoptive parent pools.

It should also be noted that given the fact that parents who completed the adoption process raised the same concerns about the process as did those who discontinued it, a programmatic response to the negative experiences might positively influence post-adoption dissatisfaction and disruption risks. In other words, the drawbacks associated with the adoption process are considered to be valid, even by those who are successful in completing the process. A direction for future research might be a study that uses exit surveys to predict which families experience dissatisfaction and disruptions based on the presence of factors associated with completion and not those factors associated with the process, because the adoption process as reported in this study was similar for those who completed it and those who did not.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank all of the individuals who devoted their time and talent to the research efforts that supported the development of this article, including Constance Brooks, Susan Mears, Nancy Downey, Renee Brown, and Chris Kordus. Funding for this study was provided by the State of Nevada Division of Child and Family Services. A special thank you is extended to the parents who so graciously shared their stories with us.

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