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Adoption Fears

Adoption is not something people go into lightly. From a prospective adoptive parent's perspective, adoption involves taking responsibility for a human life and committing one's self to doing the best that one can do to make sure that human life - that child - is raised in a loving home. It is a permanent commitment that is expensive in terms of time, money, attention, and energy. Things can go wrong, as they can with any child. It is normal for prospective adoptive parents to experience certain fears they must work through before they can reasonably move forward with the adoption process. Though each adoptive situation is unique, there are common themes that are worth summarizing here.

First is the issue of bonding with the child. For the child, bonding occurs when he or she gains trust in the caregiver and is reassured that his/her needs will be met consistently. For the parents, bonding means that the child reacts specifically to their presence, and that the child is reassured and calmed when the parent meets the child's needs. Many adoptive parents fear that because they are not the child's natural parents, or they are entering the child's life after early development has already begun, that the bonding process and establishment of the parent/child relationship may be difficult or impossible to achieve. While this is a legitimate fear, birth parents also experience this fear and may have difficulty bonding with their child immediately after birth, particularly in the case of mothers who develop post-partum depression or parents who have to be gone shortly after the birth of the child. In either case, this can be resolved through time spent interacting with the child, patience, and the expression of genuine love and caring that is shown through meeting the needs of the child.

Second, many adoptive parents fear the unknown health issues that may come with an adoptive child. This is becoming less of an issue in domestic adoptions, as birth parents are required to fill out medical background forms that are often available to the adoptive family. However, in other cases, and particularly in the case of an international adoption, there may be very little or no information available about the birth parents' health. This means that the adoptive child may be susceptible to various genetic, medical, or psychological conditions that may not become apparent until later in life. Any such illness will obviously present special challenges for the family.

Third, and of particular relevance when older children are adopted, there can be a fear that the adopted child will have behavioral issues. Adoptive parents may wonder if they are prepared to face such extra challenges. Often, older children have been living in institutional or foster care situations and have not had an easy life. Such children may act out, testing boundaries and rules until they are convinced that the adoptive parents are not going to change their mind and send them away. This sort of thing is legitimately difficult to handle.

In the case of unknown health issues and behavioral issues, fears that adoptive parents can have include worrying that they will not be up to handling those challenges, as well as fears that they might not love the child because of any "imperfections." These fears can be overcome in several ways, including talking with other parents in similar circumstances to gain a better picture of the possible conditions that the child may develop, or by taking classes about the special needs that such children may have. By educating themselves, adoptive parents will have more confidence in their ability to handle any circumstances that may arise.

A final common fear for many people contemplating adoption is the reaction that family and friends may have to their decision to adopt. The fear is that some family members and friends may react negatively to the adoption. Family members may express concerns about the race or age of the child who has been adopted, whether the child will fit into the extended family, and the financial and

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emotional strain that may be put on the adoptive parents. Family members may even express outright hostile attitudes, depending on their level of prejudice. There may be worry that family members will exclude adoptive children or treat them differently than natural children. In this situation, adoptive parents need to remain confident in the decision that they have made for their family. Prior to receiving a child for placement and after the child has arrived, the adoptive parents should be open to listening to the feelings of their family and friends, while making it clear that the decision has been made and isn't open for negotiation. They should let their family and friends know that they have carefully weighed all the positives and negatives, feel confident enough to parent the child, and hope those around them will help and support them. However, they need to be aware that some people may be unable to offer this support at the time and they may need to step back from the relationship for a while.

Adoption is a personal decision, but the impact of the feelings and attitudes of others should be considered in terms of how these will affect the new parents and child.