Adoptive Family Identity Formation
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Adoptive Family Identity Formation can be defined as the way in which the family system transforms emotionally, spiritually, and physically from its pre-adoptive state to one that embraces and reflects the recently placed child. This transformation has to occur not only the first time a family adopts, but each time a child arrives. After all, each child brings new energy, new challenges, new expectations, new hopes, and new ideas; and, the family has to change as it integrates these into the overall system.

If the members of the family system don't make the shift to include the new child, then the child will be stuck in the outer limits of the family, never really belonging. And, if the family system resists transforming, then the child's adjustment behaviors will be interpreted as challenging behaviors and the child will not be able to move on with attachment.

Unfortunately, transformations are never easy because people resist change, even change they have invited. And, adjusting to a new person and resolving and absorbing their impact on the family system means that everyone has to shift and change a little, sometimes a lot. If the child has behavioral challenges, as most older adopted children have, then there is going to be more resistance to change as some members of the family system are confused about who the child is and what he needs in order to belong.

Here are some other challenges to family identity formation that come from the child:

1. the child has divided loyalties to former foster family or genetic parents

2. self-protection – the child is afraid of or expects rejection

3. the child has learned to live like a boarder due to many moves but lacks belonging skills

4. the child feels stolen from former family and is stuck with significant, unspoken loss issues

5. the child doesn't feel entitled to join new family

6. the child has pre-existing conditions such as FAS, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, etc that make it hard to attach and to belong

These factors can make it hard for the child to merge into the family and can be a barrier between the child and her new parents.

There are also some challenges to family identity formation that come from the family. These include:

1. family expectation too much and too soon from the child

2. some members of the family don't want to include the child because they are put off by his behaviors

3. some family members don't want to put out the effort to integrate the new child (ie a 15 year old who has an age appropriate disinterest in sharing a room or changing a routine or schedule for a new sibling)

4. the family doesn't have a full understanding of the needs of the child due to a lack of proper assessments or lack of information about the child

5. not all family members wanted the adoption

6. some members of the family system resent further sharing the parents' time and energy

The resistance to change by the existing family system can feel like rejection to the child who, in turn, responds by rejecting those members of the family (usually the parents) who are trying to claim the child and encourage attachment.

There are a number of strategies that a family can use to enhance family identity formation. These include:

1. Allow time – the transformation generally takes at least 18 months to 2 years. This is a process that can't be rushed.

2. Accept that the whole family must transform into something new, not just the newly placed child

3. Develop family rituals such as having pizza and a DVD every Friday night, or going to church together on Sunday, or a family swim every Saturday afternoon.

4. Teach the values of the family to the new child. Don't assume that they can pick up what's important to the rest of you simply by observing. Talk about your values and the meaning they have in your lives. It might be good for the children in your home to get a re-fresher course on what you value.

5. Take lots of family pictures and place them prominently. Let the whole family see pictures of all you together, including the new child.

6. Find and define a role for your newly placed child. If the child is musical, talk about them bringing music to your family. If they are athletic, talk about them being the sports guy in the family. This is a time where using a label (a positive one) can be very helpful.

7. Play together. Find activities that involve all, or at least, most members of the family system. Try some activities that you have never done before so that the recently placed child isn't the only one who is new to the activity.

8. Have family meetings weekly so that everyone can share in how things are going and add ideas and energy. Teach the child how your family meetings work and help the child to participate until she gets the hang of it.

9. At dinner time, ask everyone to say what they did to make the family stronger during the day. If any of the children can't think of something, the parents can suggest it. For example, a child can say that they joined a community group such as Cadets which reflects well on the family or that they volunteered to help at a school event.

Forming a new family identity can be a positive experience for all family members if they know ahead that change is expected, that change is normal after an adoption, and that change can be a benefit to all. They also need to have words for the experience so parents can use family meetings to talk about how the family is changing and re-forming and to identify the feelings that various family members experience as they go through the experience. Parents should use positive statements to discuss this and they should role model positive feelings about the change – even if they are struggling with the transformation themselves.

In other words, the formation of adoptive family identity is about belonging – the child learns to belong to the family and the family members learn to belong to the child. In doing so, they come together to form a group, the family, that is stronger and more capable than they were before the child arrived.