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Research Review: In a rush to permanency: preventing adoption disruption

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s, US, UK and Canadian policy have increasingly focused on improving permanency outcomes for looked-after children. Although the ideal permanency outcome of reunification is attained for about half of the children entering out-of-home care, an increasing number of children are adopted each year. The vast majority of adoptions are stable and secure, but concerns about adoption disruption haunt child welfare workers when making this important permanency decision. Despite a variety of definitions employed in the literature, adoption disruption is a general term used to describe the failure or breakdown of an adoptive child's placement. Studies dating back to the 1970s have reported adoption disruption rates and the characteristics associated with those involved in such cases. This paper reviews available research, principally from the United States, and offers possible explanations for the wide range of reported disruption rates in the literature. After reviewing the research, practice implications for improving adoption outcomes and suggestions for future research are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, US, UK, and Canadian policy have increasingly focused on improving permanency outcomes for looked after children. Although the ideal permanency outcome of reunification is attained for about half of the children entering out-of-home care (Wulczyn 2004), an increasing number of children are adopted each year. UK policy has focused on adoption, with goals to increase dramatically the number of adoptions from public care (Rushton 2003). The 'Adoption 2002' goals established by the Clinton administration also set a framework for a renewed emphasis on adoption in the United States (ACF News 2000). The US Adoption and Safe Family Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) continued to promote the theme of timely permanence for foster children through the reduction of birth parent reunification time frames, the mandate of developing concurrent plans and the creation of performance-based financial incentives to reward states for increasing their adoption rates (Wulczyn & Hislop 2002). Based upon reports from the United States Depart-

ment of Health & Human Services (2003), the number of children adopted from foster care increased from 1998 to 2002, from 36 000 to 51 000, and the number in England rose from 2200 to 3500 (Selwyn *et al.* 2005).

Along with increases in adoption rates is a heightened concern about adoption disruption (Festinger 2002). Some have speculated that disruptions may increase based upon the more recent inclusion of special needs children (previously considered 'unadoptable') into the pool of adoptees (Barth *et al.* 1988), and the speed with which the child welfare system is moving children into adoptive homes (Barth & Miller 2000). Although researchers have not documented a change in the disruption rate, the increase in the overall volume of adoptions from public care will likely translate into an increase in the number of children and families affected by disruption.

Because other countries frequently look to alternative permanency options outside of reunification, including kinship care, inter-country adoption or even long-term foster care, we narrow our focus to countries with more significant interest in domestic

adoption. Specifically, we review and synthesize the extant research on the topic in the United States, examining disruption rates, predictors and associated characteristics.¹ Adoption disruption – whether it is a relatively rare or more frequent event – is an unintentional outcome of national policies geared towards promoting permanency for children who desperately need it. A synthesis of the research examining the characteristics associated with disruption may prove an effective tool for helping adoption professionals in their important work. We therefore conclude with practice and policy implications that may generalize to other countries, and recommended research that may be necessary to reduce disruptions in the push to permanency.

ADOPTION DISRUPTION

US state policies require that a child be placed in the home of his/her prospective adoptive parents for a period of time before a family can legally finalize the adoption (McNamara 1975). The placement is supervised by an adoption social worker, and this time period serves as a transition point for the family and the child. It is during this time, before legal finalization, that *placement disruptions* are most commonly documented and reported in published material (Festinger 2002). The frequency of adoption *dissolution* subsequent to finalization is more difficult to track because of confidentiality laws and because adoption cases are closed upon finalization and, if reopened, would be so under a new name and identification number (Festinger 2002).

Determining the adoption disruption rate is not a straightforward task because of wide discrepancies in definitions of the term. Some researchers define adoption disruption as the return of the child to the agency at any time between placement and legal finalization (Kadushin & Seidl 1971; Schmidt *et al.* 1988; Smith & Howard 1991; Valdez & McNamara 1994). Other definitions include children returned to the adoption agency before or after the legal finalization of the adoption (Barth *et al.* 1988; Berry & Barth 1990). Still, other researchers gather disruption statistics based upon whether or not the child is physically living in the adoptive family's home at the time of data collection (Lahti 1982; Block & Libowitz 1983).

Table 1 includes a brief summary of studies in which adoption disruption rates are cited. Included in the table are the sample size, follow-up period, disruption definition and disruption rate. Some studies, of course, are dated, and some have significant meth-

odological limitations. Bearing these discrepancies and limitations in mind, the reader is cautioned against comparing studies directly. Our goal, however, was to be as inclusive as possible in order to examine trends over time and to assess similarities across studies.

In 1971 the adoption disruption rate in the United States was estimated at 2.8% (Kadushin & Seidl 1971); almost two decades later, Barth & Berry (1987) estimated adoption disruption rates between 7% and 47%. The majority of studies since the early 1990s have shown adoption disruption rates ranging from about 6% to 11%. This range of disruption rates may reflect the different ways researchers operationalize the term adoption disruption, as well as demographic differences in their samples. It should be noted that no recent national US estimates of adoption disruption are available; the paucity of information in this area and the fact that there are no data collection mechanisms currently in place to study the issue may be a cause for concern.

CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH ADOPTION DISRUPTION

As agencies are compelled to consider adoption for children with a wide range of characteristics and needs, public policy has shifted previous notions about children who might otherwise be considered 'unadoptable' into a fresh optimism about the potential of adoption for all children (Avery 2000). This recategorization has expanded the characteristics of an adoptable child to include older, special needs children of a variety of ethnic backgrounds – children for whom, in the United States, it is more difficult to find an adoptive home (Kemp & Bodonyi 2000). This expansion of the definition of an adoptable child might well be a factor contributing to an increase in adoption disruptions.

In an attempt to more fully understand the scope of the problem, we review available data regarding the characteristics of children and families experiencing adoption disruption. Table 2 summarizes reviewed studies that address the child and family characteristics correlated with adoption outcomes. In addition, we consider the role that the adoption agency might play in adoption disruption.

Child characteristics

We know a good deal about the characteristics of children who are more likely to experience adoption

Table 1 Adoption disruption rates

	Method	Sample size	Sample	Length of exposure to disruption (follow-up period)	Adoption disruption definition	Disruption rate
Barth <i>et al.</i> (1988)	Review of case records	1155	Adoption cases of children over 3 years old from northern California between the years 1980–84	7 years	Placements that end and in which the family returns the child to the agency or ceases to assume responsibility for the child	10.2%
Berry & Barth (1990)	Review of case records	99	Adoption of children aged 12 years and over from Northern California between 1980 and 1984	7 years	Placements that end and in which the family returns the child to the agency or ceases to assume responsibility for the child	24.2% overall 10% Latino 14% Black 23% White 100% Asian
Block & Libowitz (1983)	Case record review; telephone interviews	32	All children under 18 who were discharged from Jewish Child Care Association to adoptive homes during 1978–79	2 years	Children no longer living in the home of the adoptive family	0%
Coakley (2005)	Survey	1131	Children currently under the age of 18 who were adopted from foster care through the California Department of Social Services	0–16 years	Children not living in the home of their adoptive parents following legal finalization of the adoption	7.1%
Davis & Bouck (1955)	Case record review	396	Adoptions through the Public Welfare Department in Colorado	1–3 years	Children removed from the physical custody of adoptive parents	6.3%
Fein <i>et al.</i> (1979)	Survey and/or interview	13	Emotionally disturbed latency aged children who were adopted subsequent to their participation in the Time Limited Foster Care Program through Child and Family Services in Hartford, Connecticut	5 years	The removal of the child from the home of the adoptive family	31%
Festinger (2002)	Record review and telephone interviews	497	Random sample of children adopted from out-of-home care in New York City in 1996.	4 years	Children not living in the home of their adoptive parents following legal finalization of the adoption.	3.3%
Festinger (1986)	Case record tracking	897	Adoptive placements of children over 6 years old in New York	1 year	The removal of the child from the home of the adoptive family.	8.2%

Table 1 Continued

	Method	Sample size	Sample	Length of exposure to disruption (follow-up period)	Adoption disruption definition	Disruption rate
Groze (1986)	Case record review	91	Children in a large, south-western city, adopted through a private, non-profit agency specializing in special needs adoption	6 months	A placement that fails (child removed from the home) before adoption finalization.	14.3%
Groze (1996)	Survey	71	Adoptive families receiving subsidies through the Iowa Department of Human Services in 1990	4 years	Child living in out-of-home placement at the time of the questionnaire. (With no dissolution of adoption.)	7%
Harper & Loadman (1992)*	Case record review	219	Foster children placed for adoption in Ohio between 1990 and 1992	2-4 years	Families that terminate the adoption process before or after finalization.	11.9%
Kadushin & Seidl (1971)	Review of case records and survey	2945	Any adoption made by the Wisconsin State Department of Health and Social Services between 1960 and 1967	8 years	The return of the child to the agency at any time, for any reason, following placement and before legal finalization	2.8%
Lahti (1982)	Case record review; structured interviews	64	Children in foster care in the custody of the Oregon Children's Services Division in 1973	5 years	Children no longer living in the home of the adoptive family	5.6%
McDonald <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Survey	159	Children placed for adoption in Kansas in 1985	18-24 months	Children living in temporary or permanent out-of-home placements at the time of survey	3%

*As cited in Harper-Dorton (2003).

Table 2 Characteristics associated with disrupted placements

	Method	Sample size	Sample	Disruption Characteristics (adoptive parents)	Disruption Characteristics (adoptive child)
Barth <i>et al.</i> (1988)	Review of case records	1155 children	Adoption of children over 3 years old from Northern California between 1980 and 1984	Stranger (not foster parent) adoption; $P < 0.01$ College-educated mother; $P < 0.01$	Older children; $P < 0.001$ Male children; $P < 0.05$ Greater number of child problems; $P < 0.001$
Bass (1975)	Case review	53 children	Children adopted and then returned to the agency in California Bay Area Counties between 1972 and 1974	Internal marital or family problems	42/58 (79%) over the age of 2 at time of placement Behavioural problems Inability of child to meet family's expectations Disruption of family functioning
Berry & Barth (1990)	Review of case records	99 children	Adoption of children age 12 years and over from Northern California between 1980 and 1984	Younger adoptive parents; $P < 0.05$ College-educated mother; $P < 0.08$ Stranger (not foster parent) adoption; $P < 0.09$ No other foster children in the home; $P < 0.05$ Biological children in the home; $P < 0.05$ Lower Adoption Assistance Program amount; $P < 0.05$	Child with special needs; $P < 0.07$ Less time in foster care; $P < 0.05$
Coakley (2005)	Survey	1131 children	Children under the age of 18 adopted from foster care through the California Department of Social Services	Not related to adopted child; Odds Ratio: 2.8	Older child; Odds Ratio: 1.4 (per year increase in age) Behavioural problems; Odds Ratio: 29.2
Festinger (1986)	Case record tracking; social worker interview	897	Adoptive placements of children over 6 years old in New York in 1983–84.	Adoptive parents' inability to cope with child's emotional/behavioural problem(s) Stranger (not foster parent) adoption	Emotional/behavioural problems Higher number of previous placements Single child placements (compared with sibling groups)
Groze (1986)	Case record review	91 children	Children adopted through a private, non-profit agency (in a south-western city) specializing in special needs adoption	No other children in home; $P = 0.03$ More than one previous placement; $P = 0.002$ Younger mother; $P = 0.002$ Higher family income; $P = 0.006$ Mixed race placement; $P = 0.04$	Age of child was best predictor of disruption ($P < 0.001$). (For every additional month of age, the log odds for adoption disruption increase 0.0228.)
Groze (1996)	Survey	71 families	Adoptive families receiving subsidies through the Iowa Department of Human Services		5/5 disrupted placements between the ages of 12–17 4/5 reported major emotional or behavioural problems 1/5 reported having a developmental delay

Table 2 Continued

	Method	Sample size	Sample	Disruption Characteristics (adoptive parents)	Disruption characteristics (adoptive child)
Kadushin & Seidl (1971)	Review of case records and survey	2945 children	Any adoption made by the Wisconsin State Department of Health and Social Services between 1960 and 1967	Disruption occurred more frequently when the families had children of their own and/or other adopted children Parents over 35 years old (70% of fathers and 66% of mothers in disrupted homes)	Older children (over 2); $P < 0.01$ Highest disruption rate between 2 and 6 years old Multiple placements (simultaneous placement of more than one child); $P < 0.01$
Rosenthal <i>et al.</i> (1988)	Matched pair design; survey and record review	54 children 27 disrupted 27 successful	Successful and failed adoptions through the Colorado Department of Social Services	Younger parents (36.5 years old for disrupted; 42.3 years old for successful) Higher income associated with disruption; ($r = -0.20$) Higher education associated with disruption; ($r = -0.36$ for adoptive mother, $r = -0.24$ for adoptive father) Fewer birth children Fewer children in the home Stranger (not foster parent) adoption; 78% of the disrupted placements, 59% of the intact placements) Participation in therapy correlated with disruption; $r = -0.26$	Male children (63% in disrupted group; 39% in successful group) Older children (8.8 years old at time of placement for disrupted; 4.4 years for successful)
Sack & Dale (1982)	Review of records; interviews with parents and children	12 children	Cases of failing/failed adoption in Oregon; 3-year study period	Average socio-economic level: lower-middle income 6/12 families had rigid style of limit setting 12/12 families had successfully raised adopted/natural children In 2/12 a recent pregnancy heralded the wish to terminate the adoption	Male children: 10/12 Average age: 7.66 years Average length in care: 21 months 5/12 used urine or faeces to express hostility 12/12 had behavioural problems In 7/12 behaviour appeared manipulative and calculated 4/12 fought with peers
Smith & Howard (1991)	Matched control group comparison; record review	148 children 74 disrupted 74 successful	Children placed for adoption through the Department of Children and Family Services in Illinois between 1983 and 1985	Adoption by strangers (not foster parents); $P < 0.001$ Mothers who did not attend church frequently; $P < 0.01$ No previous adoptions; $P < 0.05$	Older at initial removal (mean = 4.6 years) Sexual acting out; $P < 0.001$ Lying; $P < 0.001$ Vandalism; $P < 0.001$ Strongly attached to birth mothers; $P < 0.05$
Westhues & Cohen (1990)	Longitudinal study design; case review and survey completion by families	58 families who had adopted 79 children	Families from five Children's Aid Societies in Southern Ontario who had special needs children placed with them in 1984–85	Length of marriage shorter; $P < 0.05$ Husband self-employed, professional or in high-level management; $P < 0.05$ Motivated by infertility; $P < 0.05$	

disruption. Although the studies vary in important respects, most research in this area includes a sample of adoption disruptions within the context of an overall group of stable adoptions. Researchers have investigated many factors contributing to disruption, including gender, age, special needs, attachment, sibling groups and length of time in care.

The studies considering the impact of gender on the rate of adoption disruption offer mixed results (see Kadushin & Seidl 1971; Rosenthal *et al.* 1988; Berry & Barth 1990; Smith & Howard 1991; Coakley 2005), although it appears that the trend in the research, though certainly not conclusive, leans towards male children being over-represented among adoption disruption cases.

Findings relating to age are more clear. Many researchers have explored the impact of the age of a child on the adoption disruption rate, and it appears that there is a correlation between younger children and lower chances of adoption disruption (Kadushin & Seidl 1971; Barth *et al.* 1988; Coakley 2005). In their study, Kadushin & Seidl (1971) found that age at placement is related to adoption placement failure. The youngest children (ages 0–2 years) were less likely to disrupt compared with children ages 2–6 years or older. A study of adoption disruption in California similarly identified age as a risk factor for disruption, reporting an odds ratio of 1.4 for every year increase in age (Coakley 2005). In a different study, Barth *et al.* (1988) calculated the mean age of children in disrupted placements at 9.29 years, compared with a mean age of 6.93 years for children in stable placements. A similar comparative study by Rosenthal *et al.* (1988) found that the mean age at the time of placement for the group of children experiencing disruption was 8.8 years, while the mean age of the children successfully placed was 4.4 years. From a slightly different perspective, Smith & Howard (1991) studied 74 cases of adoption disruption and compared them with 74 cases of successful adoptions and found that children in the disrupted group were older at the time of removal from their biological families than the children in the successful group. The mean age at the time of removal for children who experienced adoption disruption was 4.6 years compared with 3.6 years for those experiencing successful adoptions. Although Berry and Barth's (1990) study of adolescents (age 12 years and older at placement) indicates that the age of the child does not influence the adoption disruption rate, the age range available for study may have limited their ability to detect a difference. Most studies suggest that

age may be associated with placement failures; however, because of the differences in the studies (sample population, sample size, disruption definition), it is difficult to make conclusive statements in this regard.

Adoption of children with special needs has been explored to evaluate the impact that this particular challenge might have on the rate of adoption disruptions. The term special needs includes children with emotional, cognitive and behavioural issues. Special needs research also includes children with abuse histories and children who have been prenatally exposed to substance abuse. In several studies, children classified as having special needs were found to be significantly over-represented in incidences of adoption disruption (Barth *et al.* 1988; Rosenthal *et al.* 1988; Berry & Barth 1990; Smith & Howard 1991). Specifically, Smith & Howard (1991) found that children with sexual abuse histories and sexual acting-out behaviours were more likely found in the disrupted group than in the non-disrupted group. In addition, Rosenthal *et al.* (1988) found a significant association between a child's challenging emotional/behavioural characteristics and adoption disruption, but only a modest association between a child's delayed or problematic skills or abilities and adoption disruption.

Studies have addressed the association between adoption disruption and a child's continued emotional attachment to biological parents, or lack of attachment to adoptive parents. Smith & Howard (1991) determined that children assessed as having a strong attachment to their birth mothers were more likely to experience a disrupted adoptive placement than children who did not have such an attachment. It is important to note that in the group of disrupted children, the mean age of removal from their birth parents was 4.6 years. This indicates that they were likely to have had memories of, and relationships with, their birth parents, possibly explaining the higher levels of attachment and resistance to the formation of a new, permanent family. Supporting this finding is a qualitative study conducted by Schmidt *et al.* (1988) in which 12 couples and three single adoptive parents who had experienced an adoptive placement disruption were interviewed. One of the major themes brought to light by this research was that, despite repeated rejection and disappointment, the adopted children clung to the fantasy of ideal birth parents.

The research into adoption disruption rates among siblings is contradictory. Kadushin & Seidl (1971) reported a general adoption disruption rate of 2.8%, but when categorized into single adoptions and

multiple (sibling) adoptions, the disruption rates were 1.2% and 28%, respectively. This early finding strongly suggests that siblings adopted together have a higher risk of experiencing adoption disruption than children adopted alone. However, in more recent research, this finding has been contradicted and little difference has been found in the adoption disruption rates of sibling groups vs. single children (Rosenthal *et al.* 1988; Berry & Barth 1990; Smith & Howard 1991; Hegar 2005).

Researchers have also explored the variable of time spent in care and its impact on the rate of adoption disruption. Several studies have found that the amount of time spent in out-of-home care is not associated with increased adoption disruption rates (Barth *et al.* 1988; Smith & Howard 1991). In fact, Berry & Barth (1990) found that adolescents who experienced adoption disruption had spent *less* time (average of 6.4 years) in foster care when compared with adolescents in stable adoptive placements (8.8 years).

The role of the child's race or ethnicity in relation to adoption disruption is difficult to interpret. Some studies find that ethnic minority children are less likely to disrupt than white children (Barth *et al.* 1988; Berry & Barth 1990); others find the opposite effect. These findings, however, may be complicated by the role of kin adoptive parents (Festinger 2002), who contribute to more stable placements.

Given a number of analytic and methodological limitations posed by many of these studies, it is difficult to interpret conclusively the findings on the role of child characteristics in disruption. For example, there may be interaction effects between age of the child, length of time in care and age at placement. Similarly, we know little about the effects of placement duration and its possible interaction with placement instability; in most studies, placement stability was not measured.

Family characteristics

Much of the research conducted on characteristics associated with adoption disruption has focused on the adoptive families in an attempt to decipher the role family characteristics play in the incidence of adoption disruption. Research findings regarding adoptive families are focused primarily on the variables of marital status/composition, educational level of mothers, previous relationship with the child and parenting experience.

Researchers have explored the effect of length of marriage and family composition on the rate of adop-

tion disruption. One study found that there was a positive correlation between length of marriage and stable adoptions (Westhues & Cohen 1990). Additional studies have found that single parents are not over-represented in the population of families experiencing adoption disruption (Festinger 1986; Berry & Barth 1990). However, in their study investigating adoption disruptions in Canada, Westhues & Cohen (1990) found that a family adopting a special needs child may benefit from the active participation of both parents in order to achieve success. Additional children in the home has been weakly associated with a decreased number of adoption disruptions (Rosenthal *et al.* 1988) and in a more detailed investigation has been found to have different impacts depending upon whether the children in the home were foster, adoptive or biological (Berry & Barth 1990).

Several studies have investigated the educational level of the adoptive parent, specifically the adoptive mother, in the context of adoption disruption. In most studies, the data suggest that mothers with more education are more likely to see their adoptions disrupt (Festinger 1986; Rosenthal *et al.* 1988; Berry & Barth 1990). In response to this finding, Berry & Barth (1990) suggest an association between college education and less parenting experience, as first-time mothers are more prevalent among the college educated. It is also possible that there is an association between a higher level of maternal education and the probability of a mother working outside of the home. Situations in which both parents are working outside of the home could lead to additional challenges to the child's adjustment to a new family system. Furthermore, the expectations, specifically intellectual expectations, of college-educated parents could be more rigorous than the expectations of a parent with less formal education.

Many of the studies have included an exploration of the influence of parenting experience of adoptive parents on the rate of adoption disruption. A study by Smith & Howard (1991) found that there was a moderate association between adoption success and previous parenting experience of the adoptive mother. However, this study did not find that the parenting experience of the father had any impact on the stability of the placement. Although Rosenthal *et al.* (1988) did not specifically explore the variable of parenting experience, they conclude that the presence of other children in the home was associated with intact outcomes. The presence of other children in the home may suggest that the families have some experience with parenting.

The most consistent findings pertain to the nature of the previous relationship between the adoptive parents and the child to be adopted. These findings appear to bolster the notion that foster parent and relative adoptions are very stable forms of adoption (Barth *et al.* 1988; Rosenthal *et al.* 1988; Berry & Barth 1990; Smith & Howard 1991; Coakley 2005). Berry & Barth (1990) report that in their study, 19% of foster parent adoptions disrupted compared to a rate of 39% of stranger adoptions. Rosenthal *et al.* (1988) found that 41% of the intact adoptive placements in their study began as foster placements as compared to 22% of the disrupted placements. Studies of children adopted in New York (Festinger 1986) and California (Coakley 2005) determined relative placements to be more stable than stranger adoptive placements.

Agency characteristics

Research has been initiated into the practices of adoption agencies in an effort to document the services or policies that have been successful in ensuring the stability of adoptive placements. The agency characteristics most commonly investigated include the difference between public and private agencies, the adoption preparation training available to the adoptive parents and the supportive services offered to the adoptive families both before and after adoption finalization.

In a survey of 1059 families who adopted children, Berry *et al.* (1996) found that of the families who chose to adopt through private agencies, 70% did so based upon the agency's knowledge of the adoption process, 35% based upon the availability of post-placement services and 33% based upon positive recommendations. In the same study, 43% of adoptive families who chose public adoption agencies based their decisions on the fact that the child desired was a foster child and 36% because the process was affordable (Berry *et al.* 1996). These differences in motivation for selecting an agency suggest that adoptive parents who chose a private agency did so more out of concern about the quality of services and reputation, compared with those who chose a public agency. However, researchers have found no significant difference in outcomes between public and private agency adoptions (Smith & Howard 1991) but have documented a lower disruption rate when there was only one agency involved in the placement (Rosenthal *et al.* 1988).

Preparation for adoption has been characterized as one of the most valuable resources to the adoptive

family (McCarty *et al.* 1999). Researchers have found that the majority of families adopting through public and private agencies have been offered some form of training or preparation (Berry *et al.* 1996). In private agency adoptions this preparation generally included talking with birth relatives, reading materials on adoption and participating in pre-adoptive counselling. Those parents adopting through public agencies were more likely to have discussed the child's past, visited with the child or read the child's life book in preparation for the adoption (Berry *et al.* 1996).

In addition to adoption preparation, supportive services to the families before and after the adoption finalization have been determined to be an important factor in maintaining permanency (Barth & Berry 1987). Qualitative research investigating the perspectives of adoptive families who had experienced an adoption disruption reports that adoptive parents valued the support of the adoption social workers throughout all phases of the placement process but felt that they were not given the entire history of the child before placement (Schmidt *et al.* 1988). While one study found that 96% of the adoptive families knew the reason that the child had been placed for adoption, significantly fewer had received information regarding the birth mothers' age or ethnicity, use of prenatal services or substance use issues (Berry *et al.* 1996). Clearly, the greater the extent to which agency practice can allow for significant disclosive transparency for adoptive parents, the more likely these parents will feel better prepared for the challenges likely to arise during their adoptive experience.

In sum, available adoption disruption literature is wide ranging in its findings, but some patterns are beginning to emerge. These findings, however, are tentative and should be viewed with caution given the methodological and analytical limitations of extant research. Nonetheless, it is possible that adoption of older children, adoptions carried out by strangers, into homes where no children or fewer children are present, to younger, better educated mothers may be more uncertain adoptive placement settings. These adoptions may need better preparation before placement, and more support after placement in order to help assure their success.

CONCLUSION, PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

If the policy changes seen in the last 20 years continue, it appears likely that 21st-century legislation

will further stress the importance of permanent adoptive families for the majority of the children in out-of-home care who cannot return to their birth homes. As the number of children being adopted grows, so will the number of adoption disruptions, an unintended outcome of a policy created to help children. However, the *rate* of adoption disruptions may not appreciably change, as the increase in special needs adoptions may be offset by the increase in kinship and foster parent adoptions – both of which hold promise for lasting permanency. It is unrealistic to expect that any policy or practice could eliminate the chance of adoption disruption; however, it is not unrealistic to attempt to reduce the frequency of adoption disruptions through enlightened policy and practice.

Based upon our review of the research, it is possible to make recommendations for changes in agency policy that could reduce the probabilities of adoption disruption. The value of the existing studies is that they clearly point researchers in a direction for future exploration. The following are recommendations for practice and research.

- In the area of practice, additional resources may be needed in order to ensure that caseworkers have adequate time and training to complete child and family assessments. These assessments should take into consideration the research regarding child and family characteristics correlated with disruption. Characteristics such as the age and gender of a child, the age of the adoptive parents and the educational level of the adoptive mother should factor in to decisions when matching children and families. Close consideration of these factors might also result in the pursuit of alternative permanency decisions for some children.
- In light of research findings correlating foster parent adoptions with lasting adoptions, recruitment efforts should be made to increase the pool of concurrent-planning caregivers – caregivers identified as interested in adopting their foster children should reunification efforts fail (Lutz 2002). Community education and publicity about concurrent planning might attract families who would otherwise choose stranger adoption.
- Adoption social workers should be educated about the current state of adoption research. Child welfare managers should try to facilitate learning organizations (Senge 1990) where social workers can incorporate adoption-related research into their everyday practice.
- In the area of research, further study is needed on the characteristics of families who successfully

adopt looked-after children. Such research would allow adoption professionals to recognize what skills or parenting techniques appear to increase the chance of stable placements and incorporate them into pre-adoptive screening, training and matching for families. Moreover, additional adoption research is needed. Although some studies include client satisfaction measures (McDonald *et al.* 2001; Coakley 2005), or assessments of children's well-being (Lahti 1982), long-term, prospective, comparative studies could inform the practice and policy community about the role of adoption in ameliorating a range of children's socio-emotional challenges.

Adoption disruption research could become far more useful to practitioners and policy-makers if researchers would agree upon a definition for measuring adoption disruption. The use of a common definition for disruption would allow scholars and practitioners to interpret research more easily and to develop trend lines that are meaningful. We recommend (1) that the term *pre-finalized adoption disruption* be used to define placement breakdowns that occur before the legal adoption finalization; (2) that the term *adoption disruption* be limited to disrupted placements that occur subsequent to the legal finalization of the adoption; and (3) that cases in which the legal relationship between the adoptive family and the adoptee is modified, terminated or set aside be termed *adoption dissolution*. More specificity could allow researchers to study these phenomena separately or combined and could add substantially to the knowledge base from whence policy and practice might derive. From the child's perspective, however, any or all of these disrupted relationships could prove hazardous to his/her short- and long-term well-being. Stronger efforts by the research community to examine the long-range outcomes of children's connections to, and dis-connections from, alternative families could be instructive.

A permanency revolution is taking hold in child welfare agencies in many states and countries. In some US states, adoption rates have doubled and even tripled in the past 5 years (Wulczyn & Hislop 2002). While we maintain optimism that the large majority of these new relationships will be lasting, evidence from the studies reviewed here suggests that some families may be at greater risk of experiencing disruption than others. Using research to inform thoughtful agency practice may be especially beneficial in order to appropriately direct social worker supports to families where necessary, and to customize training based

on the unique circumstances of children and parents. Using research to inform policy would suggest the development of dedicated child welfare funding streams to enhance pre- and post-adoption services. Support for the families in the vanguard of the revolution would align public policy philosophy with a better chance at positive outcomes for families.

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NOTE

1 For more information concerning disruption in the UK context, the reader is directed to: Parker, R. (1999) *Adoption Now: Messages from Research*. Department of Health. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester; Sellick, C., Thoburn, J. & Philpot, T. (2004) *What*

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