Characteristics and Challenges of Families Who Adopt Children with Special Needs: An Exploratory Study

Introduction
Adoptions of special needs children (children who are older, from racial or ethnic minorities, members of siblings groups and/or who have special emotional, behavioral, developmental and/or medical problems) are increasing in the United States and Nevada, due to many factors, including the scarcity of white infants and federal and state legislation aimed at freeing children from foster care for adoption. The School of Social Work at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) collaborated on an important study of the special needs adoption families in Nevada. The research was intended to provide important baseline data on families adopting special needs children and to help facilitate understanding of the unique issues and challenges faced by special needs adoptive families. It was also intended to help identify the kinds of pre- and post-placement services that are most helpful to special needs children and their families.

Methods
In January 2000, a survey instrument was mailed to all families receiving adoption subsidies and/or who had an adoption subsidy in place (n = 609). The sample also included families whose adoption subsidy terminated in the last year because their child turned 18. Adoption subsidy agreements are in place with families who have adopted special needs children and can include the provision of financial, medical and/or service assistance. Two hundred forty-nine families responded (or 41%), representing 373 children.

Characteristics of Children and Families
In regards to basic demographics of the study sample, several characteristics are worthy of note. Ethnic backgrounds of parents and children were not consistent, suggesting numerous cross-cultural adoptions: 84% of the adoptive families were Caucasian, 11% were African-American, 2% Latino and the remaining 3% identified themselves from other or mixed ethnic groups compared to 55% of the children being Caucasian, 20% African-American, 20% of mixed heritage and 5% Latino. While overall, 55% of the families were previous foster parents to the adoptive child; 38% new parents and 7% relatives of the adoptive child, there were notable differences between the northern part of the state and the southern part: over 70% of the adoptions in the south were foster parents; whereas, only 48 of the northern adoptions were foster parents (new parents were used in the north as frequently as foster parents). Forty-five percent (45%) of the families were from southern Nevada (Clark County), 29% from out-of-state, 20% from northern Nevada (Washoe, Carson and Douglas counties) and 6% from rural Nevada.
The average age of the adopted child was 3 years at entry into the home and 9.5 at the time of the survey. A large number of the children were reported to have been exposed to drugs or alcohol (74%); 45% were part of a sibling group. The median number of behavior problems reported per child was 3 with 32% of the children having problems described as profound or severe. The most frequently reported behavior problems were anger (45%), impulsiveness (42%), defiance (38%), tantrums (36%) and hyperactivity (34%). The average child was reported to have 2.14 disabilities with 27% of the children having problems described as profound or severe. Behavioral problems (51%), emotional problems (42%), learning disabilities (42%) and developmental delays (40%) were the most frequently cited problems.

**Most Families Report Good Outcomes**

Despite the challenges associated with adopting children with special needs, adoptive parents reported being satisfied with their decisions to adopt, reported good adoption outcomes and reported having good relationships with their adoptive children. Eighty-seven percent of the adoptive parents expressed attitudes consistent with good parenting (less wealthy families had significantly higher parenting satisfaction than wealthier families); 62% of the responses reflected parenting attitudes of the general population (16% endorsed high-risk practices); and 77% responded that the quality of their relationship with their child was good to excellent. Additionally, 66% of families said that the overall impact of the adoption on their families was mostly positive and 49% reported that the overall impact on their marriage has been mostly positive (10% reported mostly negative). The majority of families were also positive about the social work services they received from DCFS (81% reported them as helpful) and 72% reported receiving about the right number of visits from DCFS before finalization. Interestingly, no differences were observed between former foster parents to the child and new parents. New parents were just as likely to report appropriate expectations of the child, be as satisfied with the adoption and report a quality relationship with their adoptive child as were former foster parents to the adoptive child.

**Information on the Adoption**

A large portion of families (58%) reported not receiving enough information on the child; and, 37% of the adoptive parents reported that the child’s problems were more serious than originally reported by DCFS. Fifty-one percent of the families reported that the information they received on the child was mostly accurate. Significant differences were observed in regards to information. Parents who adopted white children had significantly more information about the child’s background prior to the adoption than parents who adopted minority children; parents of younger children reported having received less information than families adopting older children and less information was available for children that have been in homes more than nine years or longer than children in homes for lesser periods of time (suggesting perhaps that DCFS is getting better at providing information). Surprisingly, while relatives reported having significantly more information about the child prior to adoption than former foster parents or new parents, no differences emerged in regards to foster parents and new parents. Foster parents did not report receiving any more information or any more accurate information than new parents. Finally, there were differences reported in regards to geographic residence: there was a definite trend for people in northern Nevada to report having more information and more accurate information than parents in southern and rural Nevada.

**Patterns of Needs and Service Gaps**

The most needed services reported by adoptive families include: other financial benefits (health benefits) (78%), financial subsidies (73%), dental care (65%), routine medical care (63%) and individual counseling (52%). There were significant reports of unmet needs. After parents were asked if they needed a service, they were asked if they ever received it. Only 28% indicated they received respite care services, 33% received...
in-home day care (baby-sitting), 34% obtained a support group for adoptive parents and 38% were able to obtain day care out of home. Parents assigned low ratings to the following services: emergency care (only 44% of the respondents reported that it was helpful), out-of-home placement (50%), drug/alcohol service (54%), counseling to prevent outside placement (62%) and counseling on the child’s future (63%). The most frequently cited reason for not being able to get a needed service was not knowing where to go. The most serious problem reported by parents was the perception that the people who were supposed to help did not understand their problems. Parents were more likely to obtain assistance from formal agencies as their first or primary source of information. Other foster parents/adoptive parents, master adoptive parents, child’s birth parents and child’s foster parents appeared to be a relatively untapped resource.

### Conclusion

The majority of families adopting special needs children from Nevada were positive about the adoptions despite problems obtaining needed services and the pronounced behavior problems and disabilities of the children they adopted. There was a significant positive relationship between number of years in the home and number of behavior problems experienced. As time in the home increases so do the number of behavior problems. The availability of a wide range of post-adoptive services is critical for families adopting special needs children. There were significant barriers reported in obtaining post-adoptive services and a large portion of families felt they lacked important information on their child. In addition, differences in adoption practices in regards to the amount and accuracy of information provided on the adopted child were reported between the north and the south. Finally, informal types of support such as adoptive support groups, master adoptive and foster parents and the adoptive child’s birth families appear to be an untapped resources in Nevada and could be an important resource to adoptive families.

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### ISSUE BRIEF UPDATE

This is the first in a series of Nevada KIDS COUNT Issue Briefs. Each of these publications will feature a specific topic related to child well-being. We sincerely appreciate the efforts of Nevada KIDS COUNT Advisory Council member, Dr. Thom Reilly, for providing us with this research overview.
HOW CAN YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The KIDS COUNT data can be used by:

- **Private citizens** to find out about the needs of children, help identify areas which need volunteers, and to contact elected officials regarding children.

- **Business people** to determine what issues in the community affect employees, future employees, and their families.

- **Teachers** to become more aware of possible needs of children in their classroom and to engage in relevant discussion regarding civic responsibility, problem solving, and community service.

- **Parents** to learn about issues that affect their child and to present concerns at parent-teacher conferences.

- **Educators and social service providers** to design programs to address community issues and concerns.

BECOME A VOICE FOR NEVADA’S CHILDREN!

NEVADA KIDS COUNT PARTNERS

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Nevada KIDS COUNT Advisory Council

If you need more specific information about the children and youth in your local area, contact Nevada KIDS COUNT, Marlys Morton, Coordinator

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