NOW THAT YOU'RE A FAMILY:

A Guide to Adoption Issues and Services

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New Jersey Adoption Resource Clearing House:
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www.njarch.org

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The addition of the New Jersey Adoption Resource Clearing House (NJ• ARCH) to the existing adoption-related services in New Jersey offers additional support and guidance to all persons touched by adoption. You can access NJ• ARCH the following ways:

Warm Line: 1.877.4ARCHNJ (1.877.427.2465)

Internet: www.njarch.org

Office: 76 South Orange Avenue, Suite 209
South Orange, New Jersey 07079

Additional information about NJ• ARCH services is included in Section IX, Services and Resources.

Readers are encouraged to conduct their own investigation of the matters addressed in this handbook, make any conclusions and take any action pertaining to the subject matter of this handbook based upon their research. The information provided is accurate to the best of our knowledge as of the date of publication.

I. Introduction

The joys of adoption and becoming a family are accompanied by key adoption issues and, at times, significant challenges for the adoptive family unit. This booklet offers information about the core issues of adoption, the importance of open communication among all members of the family, and the potential need for support services for the adopted child and the adoptive family. Keep in mind, as you read about the core issues, that each child is different and that how your child experiences adoption may vary significantly from another child's experience. For some children, the impact of adoption across their life span does not present significant challenges; for other children the challenges may be substantial at various stages of their development.

This booklet also describes the types of services available to families and includes information about finding the right services for your family.

It is not possible to cover any of the topics introduced in this booklet in great depth. Our goal is to summarize some of the most significant adoption issues and to identify support services and resources.

II. Life-Long Issues of Adoption

It is often hard to understand that your child's experience of adoption may, in many ways, be different from your experience. For example, you may be celebrating the child's addition to your family and your child may be grieving the loss of his/her birth family. You may be expecting your child to feel good about having "been chosen" and your child may be reacting to having been "given up." Or, your child may seem to be secure and well-adjusted and then, for no apparent reason, become unhappy and feel that he/she doesn't fit in with your family.

Although most potential adoptive parents receive information about the key issues of adoption during the application process, it is not always possible to fully understand the impact of these issues until after the adoption occurs. Understanding the issues and creating a family environment that deals openly with these issues helps strengthen the family and contributes to the family members being able to meet the challenges they encounter.

Some of the issues adopted children and adoptive families typically encounter include: [1]

Grief and Loss: An adopted child may experience a profound sense of loss as he/she comes to understand the loss of birth family, extended biological family, and heritage. In fact, the child may experience this sense of loss repeatedly, as he/she matures and better understands the extent of the losses. As with other losses, it is important to be able to grieve; however, there is little recognition of the adopted child's need to grieve and there are no rituals to honor these losses. Adoptive parents who do not understand the importance of the grieving process may impede this process, because their child's expressions of grief may be interpreted by the adoptive parents as a rejection of them. The child may not trust that the adoptive family relationships are permanent. The profound nature of the losses and the inability to grieve the losses may affect the child's relationships and how he or she deals with subsequent losses. The failure to grieve can lead to depression or acting out.

Rejection: Often, adoptees believe that they were relinquished by their birth parents because they themselves did something wrong, or are in some way, flawed. This may be reinforced by an idealized version of the child's birth family. In this case, the thought process is something like this: "If my birth mother is so good, there must be something really bad about me, or she would have kept me." The feeling of rejection can lead to low self-esteem and to the expectation that the adoptee will be similarly rejected by other people, once the others realize that there is something wrong with the child.

Guilt and shame: When a child believes that the separation from his/her birth parents happened because the child is worthless or defective, he or she may feel guilt about the perceived defect and

shame about people knowing about it. The child may also feel that he/she deserves misfortune or maltreatment.

Identity: A child's identity develops, in part, from knowing where he/she came from. Adoptees lose their birth family identity and may feel that their adoptive family's identity does not truly belong to them or doesn't fit. Issues related to identity are more complex when the adoptive family is a different race from the child or the child is from a different country. The lack of a sense of self may lead to a negative self-image. Adoptees who do not feel that they "belong" in their adoptive families may either demonstrate extreme and negative behaviors in an attempt to establish a separate identity or may behave in ways that they believe will please other people.

Intimacy: Children who are confused about their identity may have difficulty developing close relationships with others. Children who have experienced profound losses may fear intimacy because of the risk of experiencing more losses.

Control: All parties involved in adoption have lost control over at least one significant aspect of their lives. For the adopted child, the total lack of control over the decision to place him/her for adoption and the seemingly random nature of how he/she became part of the adoptive family may result in the child engaging in control battles with his/her adoptive parents or in the child having difficulty understanding cause and effect and taking responsibility for his/her actions.

Divided loyalties: Adopted children often feel that they are being disloyal to their birth parents if they love their adoptive parents and feel part of the adoptive family, or that they are disloyal to their adoptive parents if they have positive feelings about their birth family and want more information about them. The child may feel both these emotions at the same time and may feel that he/she has to make a choice between birth and adoptive parents.

Adopted children's experiences of each of these issues vary significantly. Most children confront these issues with relatively little difficulty; however, some children struggle with these issues well into adulthood. Children's reactions may also vary over time, as they enter different developmental stages and experience normal life transitions.

No matter how positive the adjustment though, the adoption issues do not go away. They are life-long issues that most adoptees and their adoptive families (and birth families) experience in different ways across their life spans. Understanding the issues and that they are life-long can help both adoptive parents and adopted children view them as normative experiences, as opposed to problems or crises.

[1] Adapted from "NACAC speakers describe seven core issues of adoption." Adopted Child. October, 1989 and Kuchlak, Dianne Campbell. Following Adoption: Strengthening Adoptive Families Through Groups for Parents, Teens and Children. PA Statewide Adoption Network. 2000.

III. DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS

Infancy

What your child may be experiencing:

The primary tasks of infants are to attach to their primary caregivers and to develop trust that their caregivers will take care of them. The tasks of the adoptive parents are to provide consistent care and nurturing and to integrate the child into the family.

Children placed as infants may have experienced trauma due to inadequate care or as a result of separating from their birth mothers or foster parents and may therefore have some difficulty attaching to their adoptive parents and in developing trust. Infants may even experience the effects of trauma in utero, especially if their birthmother was under a great deal of stress.

What you can do:

- Provide consistent care, nurturing, and structure.
- Integrate the child into your family.
- Find role models for parenting an adopted child in order to develop realistic expectations about adoption and to receive support from someone who has experience as an adoptive parent.
- Begin exploring your own thoughts and feelings about the child's birth family so that you will be prepared for the tasks ahead of you.

Toddler and Preschool Years

What your child may be experiencing:

Toddlers begin experimenting with independence, exploration, initiating projects, and questioning. They need the support and encouragement of their parents to master new tasks, which will contribute to them developing positive self-esteem. The tasks related to independence and exploration may be more difficult for a child who is not securely attached to his/her parents.

Both toddlers and preschoolers may have fears of being abandoned and getting lost. A child placed in his/her adoptive home as a toddler or pre-schooler will, in all likelihood, have difficulty feeling safe in the new environment and may have exaggerated fears of abandonment.

Children also begin to express some anger and aggressive behavior at this stage.

They begin to develop racial awareness and will be aware of their "differentness" if of a different race from their adoptive family.

Toddlers and preschoolers learn their adoption stories but are not yet able to understand the meaning of adoption. Parents may assume that the child's ability to repeat the adoption story means that the child understands and is comfortable with having been adopted.

What you can do:

- Begin the telling process.
- Create a family atmosphere that is conducive to open communication.
- Set reasonable limits.
- Assure the child that the family is permanent.
- Recognize and celebrate personal and cultural differences.

Elementary School Years

What your child may be experiencing:

At this age, children begin to develop meaningful relationships with people outside the family and begin to pull away somewhat from the control of parents. They are concerned about peer acceptance and sensitive to peer criticism. They are also developing the capacity for logical thought and problem-solving. For many adopted children, learning disabilities are identified at this stage of development and the children have to cope with another factor that makes them different from their peers.

At this stage, children tend to expect a lot of themselves and become frustrated when they believe they are not meeting these expectations. They may have difficulty expressing their feelings and may act out. Learning, behavioral, and emotional problems are not uncommon among adopted children of this age.

Children begin to understand the meaning and implications of adoption and begin to explore their thoughts and feelings about their birth parents and being relinquished. They may believe that they were relinquished because there is something wrong with them. They begin to experience a strong sense of loss of their birth family, whether or not they knew them. They may begin to seek information about their birth parents and may begin a relationship with a fantasy birth family or imagine a reunion with the birth family they did know.

They may also begin to experience the stigma associated with adoption and become increasingly aware of physical differences between themselves and their families. They may begin to feel very

different from their friends because of the adoption. These feelings may be more intense for children adopted internationally or transracially. Children may begin to struggle with divided loyalties between their adoptive families and their birth families.

What you can do:

- Encourage your child to master new skills.
- Reassure your child about his/her strengths and skills.
- Provide guidance about his/her mistakes.
- Help your child understand the meaning of adoption.
- Acknowledge your child's grief.
- Help your child cope with adoption losses by validating his/her feelings.
- Validate your child's connection to both adoptive and biological families.
- Foster a positive (but realistic) view of the birth family.
- Maintain open communication about adoption.
- Assure the child that your family is permanent.
- Advocate for services for your child, as necessary.
- Prepare your child ahead of time, whenever possible, for transitions and new losses.
- Be sensitive to signs of stress during times of transition or loss.
- Expose your child to role models from the same racial and cultural background as the Child.

Pre-Teens

What your child may be experiencing:

Pre-teens are increasingly able to think in abstract terms and understand more complex concepts. They demonstrate more self-control than at earlier ages but are typically egocentric. Peers and the acceptance of friends are of increasing importance. At this stage, children begin to understand that people are not all good or bad. For adopted children, this may cause even more ambivalent feelings about their parents than for children who are not adopted.

The physical changes that occur during puberty often cause pre-teens to feel unsure of themselves and awkward. They may experience periods of emotional irritability and moodiness. Sensitivity to differentness may lead adopted children to feeling less connected to their adoptive families.

Feelings of loss and the grieving process may intensify during the pre-teen years, as the child understands the depth of his or her losses. The child may not understand his/her grief and may not express his/her feelings. The grief, instead, may be expressed through acting out, anger, and withdrawal.

What you can do:

- Help your child recognize and express his/her feelings in constructive ways.
- Help your child develop skills that will make the child feel good about him/herself.
- Foster a positive view of birth family.
- Avoid control battles.
- Assure your child that it is OK to care about both the birth and adoptive families.
- Maintain open communication about adoption.
- Enlist the help of your extended family in helping your child feel that he/she belongs in the adoptive family.
- Recognize and celebrate personal and cultural differences.
- Expose your child to role models from the same racial and cultural background as the child.

Teenage Years

<u>What your child may be experiencing:</u>

The primary tasks for adolescents are to establish individual identities and to become independent from their families. This means that adolescents must develop a strong and positive identity and must develop a variety of skills related to living independently and maintaining relationships with other people.

The development of identity is extremely complicated for adopted teens who must eventually be able to integrate the history of two families into their self-concept and who may feel that they caused their birth families to relinquish them. Often, adopted adolescents feel as if there is a piece of themselves missing. They may seek more information about their birth families, but may experience strong feelings of disloyalty to their adoptive families. Some teens may reject or be oppositional toward their adoptive families out of loyalty to their birth families. Sometimes, teens will act in ways that they believe their birth families did, in an attempt to recreate themselves.

Identity issues are even more complex if the adolescent is from a different race or culture from the adoptive parents, especially if the adolescent has not had role models from his/her racial or cultural background or if the adoptive family has not actively valued diversity. Adolescence is also frequently marked by limit testing and risk taking as the adolescent experiments with independence. In addition, adopted teenagers often have intense feelings of anger related to feelings of not having been in control of their lives. The anger may be directed at the adoptive parents. The limit testing, risk taking, and expressions of anger, not surprisingly, may cause extreme conflict in the family—for all members.

Adopted teens may experience greater difficulty in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships because of trust issues. They may fear rejection and therefore act in ways that they reject others first. Again, the adoptive parents may feel the brunt of these behaviors.

What you can do:

- Reassure your child that you are comfortable talking about his/her birth family.
- Continue to value and celebrate diversity.
- Help your child achieve a clear sense of his/her racial and cultural identity.
- Expose your child to role models from the same racial and cultural background as his/hers.
- Ensure that your teenager is involved in positive group activities with peers, under adult guidance (sports, school clubs, church activities, volunteering, etc.).
- Remain calm and supportive, even when your child is expressing anger toward you.
- Encourage your teen to master skills and tasks related to becoming independent.
- Give your teen appropriate opportunities to make decisions and solve problems.
- Allow age-appropriate freedoms, but continue to set limits.
- Continue to encourage your child to express his/her feelings.
- Support your child's interest in searching for his/her birth family.
- Maintain open communication about adoption.
- Avoid control battles.
- Create a balance between loving and letting go in your relationship with your teen.

IV. YOUR BIRTH CHILDREN

If you have birth children, they will have to make major adjustments as their family expands through adoption. You will have to help them learn more about adoption and how adoption affects the entire family, just as you will have to help your adopted child. All children have to adjust when siblings join the family either through birth or adoption; however, the adjustment may be more difficult when the sibling is adopted. Your birth child may resent the changes in the family and may find it difficult to share their parents' attention. This can be especially true if the adopted child is older, is from a different race or culture, or has special needs. It may also be difficult for your child to answer questions that his/her friends have about the family. Your child may feel less secure about his/her place in the family or may seek your attention by having tantrums, acting out, or withdrawing. There may also be conflict between the adopted child and the birth child.

You can help minimize the difficulties your birth child experiences by maintaining the same kind of open, on-going communication about adoption issues with your birth child as you do with your adopted child. Your birth child will need to feel that he/she can freely express his/her feelings about the changes in the family and his/her own reactions to the changes. He/she will also need to be reassured about his/her place in the family and helped to feel empathy for his/her adopted sibling. Most importantly, he/she will need assurance that all families experience some conflict and that you will help him/her get through any difficult times.

V. THE ON-GOING DIALOGUE

David Brodzinsky, [2] a recognized expert in the field of adoption, finds that adoptive families who acknowledge that families formed by adoption are different from families formed by birth contribute to the positive adjustment of their adopted child. These families openly communicate with their child about adoption, and neither deny that there are differences nor focus an inordinate amount of attention on these differences. Brodzinsky also found that a warm, accepting attitude toward the child on the part of the adoptive parents, realistic parenting expectations, and satisfaction with adoptive parenthood are associated with more positive adoption adjustment for the child.

This means that adoptive parents can effectively influence their child's adoption adjustment by maintaining open communication with their child about the many issues associated with adoption.

Anne Bernstein[3] identifies three critical steps to creating an open and supportive communication style. They are:

· *Knowing how you feel about your child's background and history, his/her birthparents, and the genetic and other differences between you and your child*:

Often, adoptive parents have conflicting feelings about their children's histories. It is important to understand these feelings because children can understand the feelings associated with conversations long before they can understand the content. Your primary goal is to create a family environment that supports communication and the expression of feelings. Your second goal is to communicate facts. You will have repeated opportunities to provide more detailed information as your child matures, if the pattern of open communication is well established.

· *Understanding what your child understands and how he/she has interpreted this:*

Parents often make the mistake of assuming that their children understand adoption (or other issues) because the children can repeat the words they have heard. Children, because of developmental factors and individual differences, may interpret information very differently than their parents. Since you cannot always accurately predict how your child is interpreting information you share, you have to actively encourage him/her to tell you how they understand the information.

· *Understanding your child's developmental capability so that you can give the right amount of information in a way your child can understand:*

> Preschoolers use words without always understanding what the words mean. They do pick up on feelings and will retain the feelings from conversations about adoption. As young children begin to have some understanding of adoption, they do not distinguish clearly between birth and adoption. Early elementary age children are very curious and want to understand details, but continue to think in concrete terms. They also engage in magical thinking. At about the age of seven or eight, children may begin to see that their understanding of adoption includes conflicting information. Between the age of 7 and 12, children are more concerned with the accuracy of information. Typically, children do not come up with a reasonable explanation of the information they have about adoption until they are 12 or older. A comprehensive understanding of adoption does not develop, for many adoptees, until well into adulthood.

Since the issues of adoption are life-long and children's understanding and reactions will vary over time, it can be helpful to think of your communication with your child about adoption as one that will continue throughout your lifetime and beyond. As an adult, your child's experience with adoption will continue in his/her relationships with his/her own children and others. Establishing a relationship that supports the healthy expression of feelings and individual identity will serve you and your entire family well.

If you lay the groundwork for open communication about adoption, you do not have to struggle with making sure that you "get it right" every time you have a conversation about adoption. You will have many chances to add and refine information and feelings. A good example is the telling of your child's adoption story. You will initially tell your child about his/her adoption in a simple, but truthful way. As your child is capable of understanding more information and more complex issues, you will add small pieces of information. If you remember to check out what the child understands and how he/she is interpreting the information you share, you can more easily continue your dialogue, clarifying information as you go along. If your child leaves each conversation with the feeling that you are comfortable talking about adoption and that you will help him/her cope with his/her feelings about adoption, the dialogue will continue.

If you experience feelings of sadness about your child's history, help your child understand exactly what is making you sad. In this way, your child will have a good model for the healthy expression of feelings and will not interpret your sadness as an unwillingness to talk about his/her history or adoption issues. If your child's history is particularly difficult, you may want to talk to an adoption professional about the best way to talk to your child about his/her history.

Finally, if your child, at any time, seems overly confused, sad, or conflicted about his/her adoption story, it may be wise to seek professional help. Sometimes it is easier for a child to talk to a non-family member who has expertise in adoption, especially when your child is experiencing conflicting feelings. This does not mean that you have failed your child. Rather, it means that anyone can use help at difficult times and that early intervention can prevent more serious problems from developing.

[2] Brodzinsky, D, Smith, D., and Brodzinsky, A. Children' s Adjustment to Adoption: Developmental and Clinical Issues. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998.

[3] Bernstein, Anne. " Talking to Children About Sex and Adoption" . Pact Press. Volume 4, No. !, Winter, 1995.

VI. SCHOOL

Adoption may affect your child's school experiences socially and academically. The social impact is played out in the reactions of teachers and peers to the fact that your child is adopted and, if your child is from a different racial or cultural background from yours, to the fact that your child is visibly different from his/her parents. The academic impact can be related to both regular classroom assignments, such as drawing a family tree or bringing in baby pictures, and to special educational and behavioral challenges that your child may have.

Some families will have a choice about sharing the fact that their child is adopted with school personnel. This is the case for families whose children are adopted as infants or toddlers and whose children are of the same racial background as the parents. For families adopting older children or children of a different race or for same sex parents, there is less choice. The decision to share information and how much information to share is of course personal; however, adoptive parents should keep in mind that if they don't share basic information about the adoption, it will be difficult to solicit the support of teachers when there are assignments that relate to family history, when there are special educational needs related to your child's background, or if other children tease or bully your child for being different.

For most families, there is no real choice about sharing information about the adoption. The first task is therefore deciding exactly what you will tell the teacher and, with your child, what he or she is comfortable sharing with his/her peers. Your child should know in advance what to say when his/her friends ask questions about adoption or your family.

When you tell your child's teacher that he/she is adopted, you should also spend some time talking to the teacher about any assignments that may be related to family and personal history and how the teacher can promote a positive image of families formed by adoption.

Many studies suggest that adopted children are more likely than non-adopted children to have learning disabilities, especially attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Several factors may contribute to the higher incidence of learning disabilities. These include:

- Genetic predispositions
- Inadequate prenatal care
- Birth mother's alcohol or substance abuse
- Abuse and neglect
- Adopted child's preoccupation with issues of adoption
- Multiple placements

If your child demonstrates learning or behavior problems in school, he or she may or may not have a learning disability. You will need to have your child evaluated through the school or you may wish to have preliminary evaluations conducted privately. Either way, it is important to have a comprehensive assessment completed in order to determine the nature and extent of your child's problem. If your child has a learning or emotional disability, your school is required by state and federal law to provide an appropriate education and related support services. You will then work with your school district to determine the best educational plan for your child.

More comprehensive information about adoption and the schools is provided in the North American Council on Adoptable Children's publication, "Adoption and the Schools" and the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse publication, "Adoption and the School Issues". Both publications are available through the NJ Adoption Resource Clearing House (NJ ARCH).

VII. Open Adoption

Open adoption has become increasingly popular as more adoptive and birth parents recognize the potential benefits of adopted children having some form of connection to their birth families. If you and your child's birth parents have agreed to maintain contact, it is important to keep in mind that the nature and extent of contact should always be based on what is in the best interest of the child, The child's best interest can change over time based on his/her developmental stage, the birth family's circumstances, or other unforeseen factors.

You, as the legal parents, have the ultimate responsibility for making decisions about contact; however, the stronger a relationship you have with the birth parent (or other members of the birth family), the better the chances that you can together agree on the type and frequency of contact. Contact can take many forms, including occasional letters, e-mails, contacts through social media, phone calls, and visits. For some families, the contacts are through a third party, typically an adoption agency or lawyer. In other instances, contact is direct and identifying information is shared.

In addition to being committed to basing contacts on the best interest of the child, you can support your child's connection to his birth family by being respectful and accepting of the birth family, setting clear boundaries for what contact and communication is acceptable, being reasonably flexible within those boundaries, and being open about needed changes in the contact. If your child has had prior contacts with his/her siblings, it is important to maintain those contacts, if at all possible.

While most families, who have agreed to some degree of openness in adoption, see the benefits to their child on knowing his/her heritage and feeling connected to both the birth and adoptive families, there are sometimes circumstances that interfere with on-going contact. In the event that the birth family does not meet the commitments made to your child, you will need to help your child understand the birth family's actions and help your child cope with disappointment and sadness.

"Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Parents" is a helpful resource and is available through the Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-openadopt/. This fact sheet also contains a list of resources for additional information.

VIII. GOOD TIMES AND BAD

Families formed by adoption, like all families, will have times of great joy as well as times of extreme challenge. It is important for families to recognize that many of the difficult times may have little or nothing to do with adoption issues and may, instead, be the result of the issues all families face at one time or another, such as financial or marital stress, major life transitions, moves, adolescence, or the death of a close friend or family member.

At the same time, adoptive families face the additional stressors already discussed in this booklet. When families understand the most common adoption issues and when they are likely to cause difficulties, families are better prepared to handle their reactions. In other words, just as there are predictable points of crisis in all families' lives, there are predictable points of crisis in the life cycle of adoptive families. Within this context, the crisis can be viewed as normative.

On the other hand, some children will experience severe difficulties with adoption issues. As with any child who shows extreme symptoms of distress, adoptive parents should seek professional help if their child demonstrates any of the following behaviors:

- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Unusual risk taking
- Repeated truancy
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Suicide threats or attempts
- Loss of interest in social and recreational activities or hobbies
- Eating disorders

Other symptoms of distress may be more subtle. Parents should be concerned if they see a persistent pattern or a number of the following behaviors:

- Clinging/insecurity
- Fear of separations from parent
- Over-reactions to all loss or transition
- Reluctance to attach to adoptive family
- Refusal to discuss adoption history or obsession with history
- Refusal to consider positive or negative information about birth family
- Outbursts or depression at holidays, anniversary dates
- Power struggles with authority figures
- Defiance
- Rigid adherence to routine

- Creating conflict or chaos in adoptive family
- Lying, stealing, hoarding
- Great anxiety over short separations
- Difficulty going away to college, emancipating from adoptive family
- Patterns of approach/avoidance
- Anxiety or over-reactions to "perceived abandonment"
- Self-destructive behavior
- Refusal to allow self to be successful
- Association with less than desirable friends
- Attempts to be the perfect child or as far from the perfect child as possible
- Fear of intimacy
- Involvement in dependent relationships
- Experimentation with different identities, often very different from those modeled by adoptive family
- Modeling after behavior, or imagined behavior, of birth family
- Preoccupation with appearance/ethnicity of birth family
- Sexual acting out

If your child demonstrates several of these behaviors or persistently demonstrates one of them, you should both talk to other adoptive parents about their experiences with these behaviors and seek professional help. The types of support services available to adoptive families are discussed in the next section.

Child Traumatic Stress:

If your child experienced trauma prior to adoption, your child may have difficulties related to the trauma. Prior trauma may include persistent neglect, physical or sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence or war, multiple losses of caregivers due to changes in placements, accidents, injuries, or serious illnesses, sudden loss of a loved one, homelessness, natural disasters, or acts of terrorism.

When children experience a traumatic event, they respond physically and psychologically. Normal reactions include increased heart rate, sweating, and emotional upset. However, some children have long-lasting reactions that interfere with their physical and emotional health and development. Possible symptoms of Child Traumatic Stress include intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, difficulties with attention, academics, sleep, or eating, nightmares, and aches and pains. Significant behavioral changes may also occur.

There are many ways to help your child. These include:

- Make sure your child feels safe in your home and community.
- Maintain regular routines.
- Encourage your child to express his/her feelings and fears.
- Respond to your child in calm and predictable ways.
- Prepare your child in advance for changes and transitions.
- Answer questions about your child's past honestly, as appropriate to his/her age and developmental stage.
- Engage in the activities described in the section on developmental factors, beginning on page 7.

If your child's difficulties persist or seem extreme, seek professional help. There are treatment interventions that have proven to be very effective in helping children and families recover from traumatic stress. An excellent resource is the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, which can be accessed at www.nctsn.org.

IX. Services and Resources

It is important to find services provided by individuals or groups who understand adoption issues. Many post adoption services are premised on the concept of "normative crisis" discussed earlier. This approach is critical because it recognizes that challenges related to adoption are to be expected and are not necessarily signs of family or individual dysfunction. Many services are designed to help the family recognize that some of their challenges are similar to other types of challenges families face that adoption-related difficulties may be resolved with open communication and support, and that even families in serious trouble because of adoption issues can find help. A central premise of post adoption services is that children who have experienced trauma prior to their adoption are most likely to heal from that trauma within their adoptive family.

There is a wide range of post adoption services available in New Jersey. Examples of these resources are summarized below. More information about these services can be obtained by contacting NJ ARCH by telephone: **877-4ARCHNJ (877-427-2465)** on the internet: www.njarch.org or emailing the NJ ARCH Warm Line: warmline@njarch.org.

NJ ARCH Services:

Resource Directory: A comprehensive directory of local, regional, and state resources, which is regularly up-dated and available on-line at the NJ ARCH website. The directory includes adoption agencies, support groups, mental health providers experienced in adoption, medical health providers, mobile response, camps, and more.

Warm Line: Provides opportunities to talk to an NJ ARCH staff member about adoption questions, obtain referrals for services, or just chat with a helpful and empathetic person. The warm line is staffed 40 hours a week. Should you call during an unstaffed time, leave a message and your call should be returned within one business day.

Newsletter: Contains information about NJ ARCH's activities, news and items of interest related to adoption, a featured child waiting to be adopted, an "ask our expert" section, and much more.

Free Lending Library: An extensive library of books, articles, and videos on adoption-related topics, which can be borrowed. A list of the collection is available on the NJ ARCH website.

E-Learning Opportunities: An up-to-date listing of on-line educational resources related to adoption, offered by organizations such as Adoption Learning Partners.

Conference Opportunities: An up-to date listing of conferences on adoption issues, as well as related topics, such as mental health, children with special needs, and child welfare. The "Let's Talk Adoption" conference is an example of a New Jersey based resource that has been providing support and education on adoption for 35 years. It is sponsored by Concerned Persons for Adoption (www.cpfanj.org), a volunteer educational and networking organization in conjunction with the Rutgers School of Social Work. Adoptive Parents Committee (APC) offers support groups and conferences around the tri-state area as well. They can be viewed at https://www.adoptiveparents.org/.

Other Resources:

Post Adoption Counseling Services: Counseling services are provided FREE of charge by private agencies granted contracts and referrals from the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P). The free Post Adoption services are available to all New Jersey families who have adopted children up to the age of 21.; whether from the Division of Child Protection and Permanency, a private agency or through an attorney. Available services may differ from county to county.

Parent Support Groups: Many adoptive parents seek out a support group as they are considering adoption, adjusting to their child's arrival or when adoption brings unexpected difficulties. Meeting with other parents who understand the unique rewards and challenges that adoption brings to a family helps to validate the family's experiences and provides support, encouragement, and guidance from parents who have had similar experiences. Parents can share experiences, resources, and advice and help reduce the family's feelings of being different from other families. Many support groups sponsor family activities where adopted children can interact with children who share similar experiences.

Some parent support groups are open to any adoptive parents; while membership in others may be limited to a specific group, such as transracial or transcultural families, single parent adoptive families, families with special needs children, or gay and lesbian families. Parent support groups may be parent-led or facilitated by an adoption professional.

Adoptee Support Groups: Some agencies or parent support groups offer support groups for children and adolescents or for adult adoptees. Support groups for children and adolescents provide opportunities for children to interact with other children who have had similar experiences, to better understand their own behaviors and reactions, and to feel less alone and different from their peers. Similarly, groups for adult adoptees offer adults opportunities to share experiences and gain insight into their behavior, reactions, and relationships.

Search and Reunion Services: If your adult child decides to search for his/her birth family, it is critical that he/she be prepared for all possible outcomes. Services are available through adoption agencies and adult adoptee support groups that will educate your child about the process and will support him or her through the potential reunion or a range of other outcomes.

Therapy: Many adoptive parents and adopted children participate in individual or family therapy. When looking for therapy services for your family, make sure that the service provider, in addition to understanding adoption issues, is supportive of the adoptive family's role and importance in the child's life and is willing to work with you and others involved with the child to develop strategies for behavioral interventions. Adoptive families are the source of healing and must therefore be involved in treatment strategies.

Parents should look for a therapist who has training and experience in adoption issues. If your child was exposed to trauma prior to joining your family, you should look for a therapist who has experience and training in treating child traumatic stress. NJ ARCH maintains a resource directory, which includes information about the credentials, special training, and experience of therapists. It can also be helpful to seek recommendations from other adoptive parents who have experience with therapeutic services. Once possible therapists have been identified, don't hesitate to ask the therapist questions to determine whether he/she is likely to be a good fit for your family. Questions you might ask include:

- Do you have experience working with adoptive parents and adoptees?
- Have you participated in any special training in adoption issues?
- Will you work with only my child or with the whole family?
- Do you use a particular method of treatment?
- Do you have experience with the special problems (i.e. sexual abuse, substance abuse, abuse and neglect, learning disabilities, child traumatic stress) my child has?

If you or your child do not feel comfortable with a therapist, trust your instincts and find another therapist who you feel is more suited to your family's needs.

Helpful websites:

NJ Adoption Resource Clearing House (NJ ARCH): www.njarch.org
Kinship Care Clearing House (KinKonnect): www.kinkonnect.org
Child Welfare Information Gateway: https://www.childwelfare.gov/
Concerned Persons for Adoption: www.cpfanj.org
Adoptive Parents Committee (APC- Tri-state) : https://www.adoptiveparents.org/.
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption: https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/
National Adoption Center: http://www.adopt.org/
National Child Traumatic Stress Network: https://www.nctsn.org/
Attachment and Trauma Network: https://www.attachmenttraumanetwork.org/

X. Conclusion

We hope that this handbook will be helpful to you and your family as you face the unique joys and challenges of being a family formed by adoption. Although the booklet has focused on the life-long issues of adoption, we want to conclude with the message that the overwhelming majority of families formed by adoption are strong and healthy families. Similarly, the vast majority of adoptees enter adulthood as strong and healthy individuals.

We believe that the most important things that adoptive parents can do to ensure the strength of their family are to recognize that they face some unique challenges, to not be overwhelmed by these challenges, to maintain an ongoing dialogue about adoption issues, and to enjoy and celebrate the individual characteristics of each family member.

We wish you luck and happiness on your adoption journey.

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