



Adoptive Mothers and the Meaning of Motherhood

Meaning of Motherhood Nov 2008

Presentation will explore:-

Theory/Models



- Introduce “adoptive mothers” of Russian children)
- Transitions from deciding to adopt” to “becoming and being an adoptive mother”
- Learning from the parenting relationship of adoptive mothers about rebuilding an attachment, and resilience of mothers and children?

Masters thesis (2006-7)

What factors influence the attachment and parenting relationship of adoptive parents of Russian children?

- **Nurse, Educator, Playcentre supervisor, counsellor working with an attachment philosophy**
- **Russian nephew- Alexi – curious**
- **What sort of parenting makes a difference for traumatized children?**
- **What makes a difference for adoptive children and parents? And others?**

Adoptive Mothers

15 participants: 10 female

30-35 years:- 2

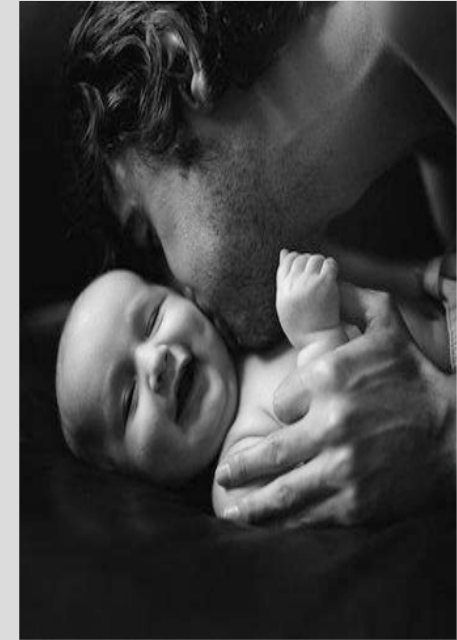
40-45 years: 9

50-55 years :4

All European

One single mother, others married, none had other children. One now does.

Otago and Southland, city and rural



Process for Intercountry adoption

Approval:- assessment from CYF

Includes:- 3 day adoption preparation course, police and medical check, references, social work interviews

----- Approved home study report

Register with ICANZ- (1 Day) seminar

- share information, books and travel etc**
- Local group support**

Process

- **Began in 1992- Intercountry Adoption NZ (Rumania)**
- **Phone call- trip to meet with authorities and meet potential children in the orphanage. Decision made**
- **Trip back to NZ to prepare and for Russian legal processes**
- **Second trip back to Russia- court appearance- approval**
- **Time in Russia waiting for legal processes (week)**
- **Time in limbo in another country waiting for NZ legal processes (3 weeks)**

Any adoption Involves complex Issues ...

- **Loss for all parties, grief**
- **Identity and Rejection**
- **Shame**
- **Intimacy**
- **Mastery/control (Silverstein and Roszia, 1999)**
- **Attachment, bonding, loyalty and entitlement (Taddonio and Lieberthal, 2003)**
- **Lifelong**

Intercountry Adoption

Brings further complexities and risks:- developmental, behavioural and attachment

Research primarily focuses on DEVASATES

Yet Gunnar and Ketes (2005:58) reminds us that the good developmental outcomes for these children show the brain capacity for healing and factors in the adoptive family.

**So, what is the uniqueness of adoptive mothers and families?
What transitions for mothers are required?**

What transitions are required by adoptive mothers?

- **Conscious preparation-** The decision to adopt a child/ran
- **Becoming an adoptive parent and parenting at each stage**
- **Integrating the child/ran into the family**
- **Forming attachments and supporting the grief process**
- **Managing challenging behaviours**
- **Maintaining realistic expectations**
- **Managing stress and utilizing support**
- *(Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes in Bornstein, 2002)*



Conscious Preparation:- to decide to adopt

- **Grief and loss**
- **Decision to adopt**
- **Intercountry adoption**
- **Learning about parenting strategies**
- **Commitment**



Grief and Loss

Open sharing of the loss felt about not having their own biological children

“...that loss and grief thing... we found out we couldn't have biological children...so I went thru an angry stage”

“...ongoing thing. I love my children dearly, I wouldn't swap them for the world...but you know there's sometimes... the old what ifs creep up”

“My one disappointment is that I haven't had my boys...from 9 months before birth...it starts with... expectations in the mind”

Biological viewed as number one option, adoption number two

Decision to adopt

“...by the time we found out we couldn't grow our own children, it was a matter of we both knew we wanted our own family, we've got to get on with it...”

“Spent a year in the local adoption pool and we decided to give it a year...because by then I was getting 40”

Another decision then to consider intercountry adoption

“...once we had made up our mind with what we wanted to do we went and visited a couple who had adopted from Russia”

“...if you go to Russia you're guaranteed to get children, event though it's a long haul”

Learning parenting strategies

- **Attending CYF training days**
- **ICANZ (Intercountry adoption NZ) training day**
- **Books**
- **Internet**
- **Group**
- **Other Parents- of adoptive children**

Conscious process

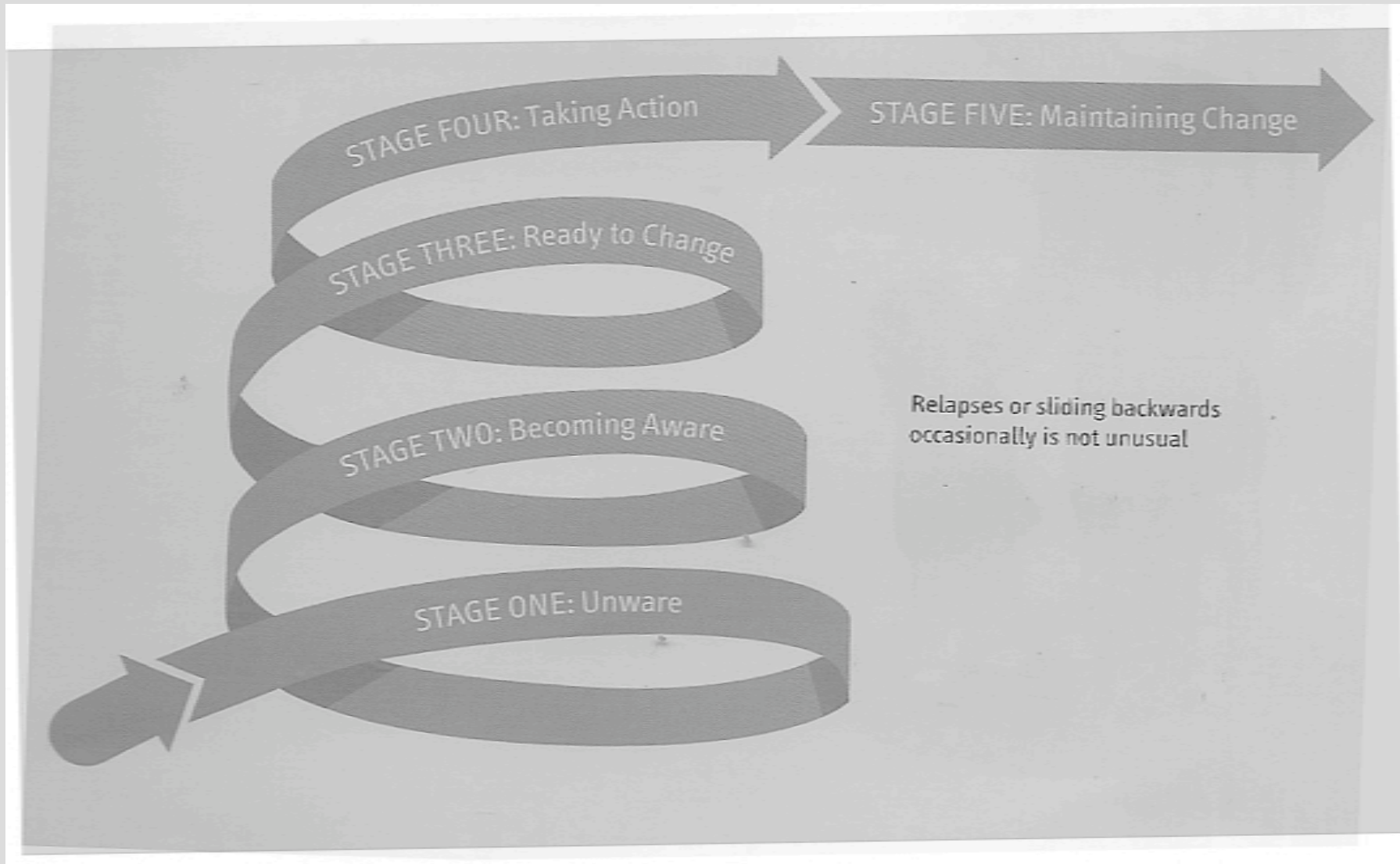
- **Preparation- Home study- evaluation, reports outlining why you want a child and how you will parent and why. Practical details of what school and when**
- **very stressful process to be assessed as parents**
- **Reflection of own life and issues of loss, grief, infertility and family of origin**
- **Plan for child's future- goals, priorities and how this might happen.**

“... it's a heck of a job going thru the home study...find out about yourself doing that...what you're going to do, what your plans are...You've got into the whole thing probably a bit deeper right from the start”

“(attachment) did start there with all the preparation, because that's what we were working towards. We initially made the decision and started planning”

SKIP Model of Change

(Family and Community Services, 2006)



Becoming an adoptive Mother

- **Approval- evaluation**
- **Uncertainty- when and who?**
- **Stigma**
- **Challenges of ready made family...different ages and trauma**
- **Resilience**

Approved (CYF) now what...

Wait for a phone call, and a trip to Russia

Time in Russia and orphanages

- **Attachment built with anticipation of meeting children**

“...once I’d got on the plane that was my beginning and I was constantly thinking of whoever this child was, imagining what he or she would look like, what he would be doing...”

- **Meeting their children involved an incredible joy yet a fear of the journey ahead**

“...it was like I’d had this birthing experience...I assumed to be a nine-month-old baby...sixteen months old...I just burst into tears of course and that was my first beginnings of being a mum”

“Room full...plonked in this strangers arms. I was so overwhelmed...we just sat for quite a few minutes looking at one another and just taking each other in...just spoke to him in gibberish and giggled him on my knee”

Time overseas- Limbo time

Time in Russia, then another country for legal work to be processed. Valuable bonding time

“T (Russian host) made a huge difference to W getting to know me and spending time...translating for us. Wrote down a whole lot of things W could remember about her family”

“..the three weeks were virtually all tied together with a piece of string...living together, travelling ...and it helped with the bonding”

“we had the time in a safe environment relaxed and informal... needed to trust us to hold them in the pool, walking along the beach...we’ve just seen it steadily grow”

Separation...

- **Mother leaves child/ran in Russia. Back to NZ to wait Russian legal processes and to prepare**
- **Use of photos, gifts, transitional objects to aid memory and attachment**
- **Flight back to Russia to pick up children**
- ***Reuniting and real journey of mothering begins...***

Stigma re adoption

Mann (Adoption and Healing, 1997) argues:- lot anti adoption feeling- leads to shame and pain

Little Voice- adoptive mothers

Little voice of adoptive parents in debate, literature, and policy. Research as part of adoptive cycle but not their own uniqueness, within a society which prizes biological parenthood.

Scrutiny felt by Mothers

“Like you’re in a goldfish bowl”

“...you felt they were watching, even your own siblings. I felt they were watching to see how we were going to manage..., I just felt the community were watching and that family were watching”

“... People will give you advice because you don’t really know the kids.... Other people know better because they’re their birth children and they sort of feel that they can”

Curiosity

This included an ongoing curiosity and inappropriate questions by them.

“... Quite personal questions... “Where are her family?” “I’m her family”. “Do you know what happened to them?” “Yes I do.” “Tell me?” “That’s her story.”

Felt a need to be the “best” parents



Yet...resilience

Most fare better then non adoptive in early stages

(Levy-Shiff and colleagues, 1990, 1991)

- **Older, more settled in career, financially secure, married longer**
- **Hence good communication, stress management**
- **Powerful sense of fulfilment**

Mothering and attaching to the adopted child

- **Conscious preparation**
- **Attachment framework and knowledge**
- **Attachment strategies-** child centred approach- “child cues”
- **Structured environment**
- **Consistent and repetitive**
- **Group support**
- **Ask for help**
- **Celebrate small gains**
- **Solution focus**

Attachment framework and knowledge

- **Thru ICANZ seminars, and groups all adoptive parents had a good working knowledge of attachment**
- **Understanding of child's insecurities and trauma, and hence desire to work with that from child's perspective**
- **Contrast to mainstream advice e.g. sleep, creating dependence instead of independence (all independent, pain and hurt, time in not out**
- **Staying close and being responsive in a repeated and consistent way (Inspirational- Commitment)**

“I think everything we did was to promote attachment...they'd be nothing that we were doing that wasn't for that aim”

“Probably playing together...a lot of things that they didn't know how to use, what to do.”



“...time and patience”

“ hugs, kisses and holding hands...lots and lots of times but you cant do it too many times with these kids...they're craving it... but to not be afraid to get close to them because that's actually what they need, so to get close to them quickly because it reassures them...”

“talking to them all the time you know when we were in the car... everything we saw we talked about...”

“all just playing and increasing the vocabulary...”



“people say leave them in the cot and let them cry but we sort of though he’s from an orphanage he’s never had cuddles before. Were not going to let him cry...its what happened to him for 18 months... we’d pick him up and just cuddle him and talk to him”



“any scrape or bruise we’d make a big fuss of them.... If you get hurt someone will care about that and kiss it better. It mattered.”



Bowlby (1940's) Psychiatrist, psychoanalyst

He explored issues of loss, despair and detachment for children separated from their parents and asked why delinquent children were the way they were.

key factor relationship with mothers/ and primary caregivers

“Attachment behavior is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave”.

**Developmental framework-
that is intergenerational**





Attachment is the term “given to the mutual affectionate growing relationship that develops between a mother/caregiver and an infant...

(Watson, in Nash et al, 2005, p 212).



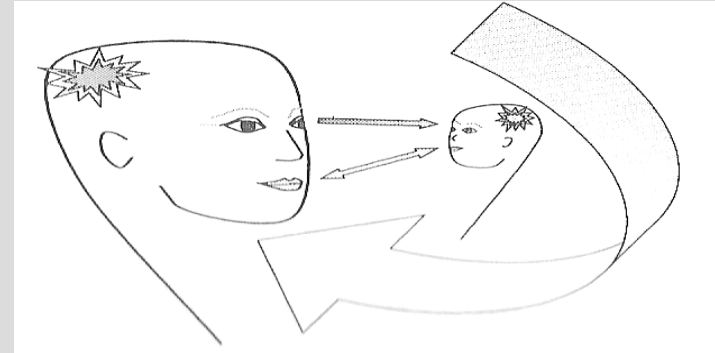
Internal working model

Which forms the framework of expectations about relationships through life, a road map, or template (Perry, 2006) as the repetitive bonding experiences provide the solid foundation, the healthy attachment process for future relationships



Ainsworth

found infants most securely attached were most likely to explore and learn, and vice versa.



- KEY to healthy attachment was-
- **Maternal sensitivity- mothers ability and willingness to try to understand behaviors and emotions from her baby's point of view.**
- What does attachment achieve for a child?
- Fahlberg (1991).
- Full intellectual potential, to think logically, develop social emotions.
- Develop a conscience, trust others, become self-reliant, cope better with stress, reduce jealousy, and fears, worries and increase self worth.

Recent Neurobiological -Dr Perry, Dr Stroufe

Neurons are the connection between genetic (Physical)
and environment (Emotional)

- Genes programmed into the first year. Connections are active.
- Neurons are living and moving around to make contact.
- Those used in the first years reinforced.
- Those not used closed down.
-
- **USE IT OR LOSE IT.**
- Can **REBUILD** at least partially- takes repeated, repetitive new patterns- lots of time and commitment after trauma
- Positive relationships – positive potential of genes.
- Right hemisphere- dominant brain for social and emotional function.
- Support for controlling aggression is empathy.

Institutions/abuse/neglect – Impact on Child?

SYMPTOM-Challenging Behaviours- sleep, food, learning, relationships

- superficial behaviour with strangers, restlessness, extravagant claims made, lack of affection and touch, bossiness, high levels of anger, aggressive, cruel to animals, break toys little sense of humour, coercive and demanding, lying and manipulating to win, stealing, abnormal eating habits, few friends, lack of conscience, poor impulse control, preoccupied with violence, little eye contact, self neglect.



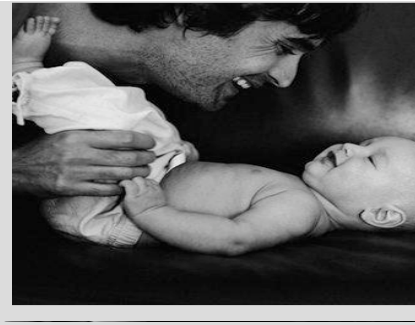
These are cues to ask what is happening for the CHILD- what are they thinking and why*****

AIM is to encourage parents, caregivers to become CHILDCENTRED- NOT to focus on the behaviour but underlying emotional needs of child

Attachment strategies



Time
Touch
Talk and
Play



Parenting and Attachment Behaviours used to rebuild

- **Time** spent with children
- **Emotional age** of child
- **Touch**- massage, cuddles, swimming, bathing, games at child's pace
- **Play**- interaction together- messy and sensory
- **Language**- feelings words
- **Explanation / expectation** what will happen and what can the child do
- **Understanding** behavior FIRST
- **Connecting** to others - groups normalize
- **Attachment** and importance to child's total well being
- **Simple**-One day at a time, long term goals

Groups

Important place to normalise parenting issues, to work to solutions and to empower a hopeful cycle- see others perspective

For adoptive families-

Groups were vital to the success of their attachment and parenting with their adoptive children- only place they felt safe and understood, place to gain information and solutions for the challenges they faced every day....

...all been through the infertility the grief, the loss...can ask questions of each other...

Resilience

Humour- *“laugh with them. Its too easy to get stressed”*

Solutions *“tried to focus on things he’s good at...”*

“ even in the worst moments...I've never said why did I do it? It's always been well, how to sort this one out.”

“trust yourselves.. Parents can do Miracles...”

“ surprised ourselves at how we can think on our feet of something different if something’s not working”

Hindering Factors

- **Touch-Some of the older children rejected the closeness. Remained safe and independent. Difficult for adoptive parents to touch them. (One of their regrets)**
- **Survival behaviour- older children- Challenging 24/7**
- **Most parents limited the environment on arrival home and ongoing TV etc. Those that didn't find this an issue- "lost lamb" and said they would change this**
- **Problem approach-not solution (CYF)**
- **Scrutiny**

“F...he’s a survivor to still be alive at 7. In Russia you’ve got to be tough and so F will always put F first... he wants to be the key person....for 7 years he had no attention... so the biggest thing still is giving him time and doing things with him, from a distance is preferred”

“ very controlling, very manipulative ...”

“long term, hard to live with”

“ R was quite stiff and didn’t want to be cuddled and that was to do with past experiences...independent within the orphanage structure... wasn’t used to being touched or held...we weren't used to holding a 7 year old either...”

“often they display the opposite of what they want”

“its so easy to think that’s naughty, you can go and sit on your bed...it’s because she needed something, and the fact that she held on so tight made me realise, that’s what she needed right now

To new adoptive parents...

- **Go for it- “worthwhile journey” “wouldn't change them for the world**
- **All satisfied with their family life**
- **Join a group- vital for success, safe place, source of information**
- **Ask for help**

Go for it

All adoptive parent's despite all the challenges were satisfied with their decision to adopt, and recommended this process to others.

"I wouldn't change my family for the world"

"..its still the best thing since slices bread. Its meant to be and there's so many positives that you know any negatives are minor...It was tiring but every day was exciting"

"...heck of an experience...more of an emotional experience adopting them than getting married was... a decision two of us made as adults whereas we were making a decision for these two little boys as well, but oh well worthwhile"

Summary

Adoptive parents demonstrated a profound commitment to their children. They revealed an attachment understanding in theory and practice, which family professionals and parents could all learn from.

As Federici (2003:10) reminds us all, “ it is the deep commitment that parents make to their child, whether biological or adopted, that promotes the most optimal outcome” as the family is the most important resource a child has.

**What can we
learn from adoptive mothers?**

Strength Based Parenting

Promote, Support, Encourage, Accept

- Conscious parenting- work to do on our past
- Time for children
- Play for children
- Loving consistent boundaries- HOW to
- MAP – HOPE, Choice
- Parents and children being valued in society
- Groups, connections- RELATIONSHIPS
- Asking for help- All need it, parenting together
- Small gains especially if trauma- Build on small successes

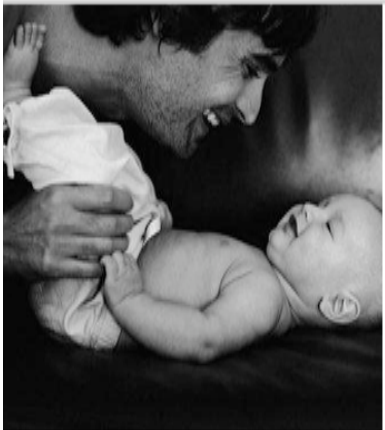


Family Worker- What can we do?

- Goals – SKIP- p12
 - * what sort of person do you want your child to grow into?
 - * What kind of relationship do you want with your children?
 - * What type of vision (picture) do you have for your family's
» future?
 - * What picture would you like your child to have of their upbringing?



- What do they want from us? **CONSCIOUS**
- Attachment information **Parenting**
- Promote play, time, touch- Reasons WHY
- Child Centered- child's advocate- what will they learn? what will they think?
- Normalize parenting challenges
- Give HOPE- way forward. (MAP)
- Ask for help- normalize



The Progress of the Nations

HOW WILL NEW ZEALAND BE JUDGED?

The day will come when nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength...

By the provision that is made for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged;

And by the protection that is afforded to the growing minds and bodies of their children. The Progress of Nations 1998

Each be a child and family advocate - HOW?

Vision -Together, the best for every child



100 years strong

working together to achieve the best start for children

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

Change

Not everything that is faced

Can be changed

But nothing can be changed

Until it is faced