

Parenting education for transnational, domestic, and foster care adoptions

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions, perspectives, and experiences of children, 5- to 14-years old, adopted before age 18 months, from the U.S. (n=4), Korea (n=3), and foster care (n=2) to determine the impact of their adoption type (transnational, domestic, foster care) on adoptive identity formation and family communication processes.

INTRODUCTION

Parenting education researchers, practitioners and scholars agree on the importance of parenting education for the long-term well-being of families and children. According to Carter and Kahn (1996), all parents need support in rearing children regardless of their cultural or socioeconomic position or their biological relationship to a child. Many researchers agree that families who experience adoption are no different in this regard; they need support, guidance, and education relative to normative parenting, development, identity, and communication issues (Brodzinsky, 2008; Hart & Luckock, 2004; Rosenberg, 1992). However, many adoptive parents, as well as non-adoptive parents, do not receive ongoing, long-term, pre- or post-parenting education. Communication and positive identity formation are extremely important concepts for parenting educators, due to their impact on the well-being of families and children. However, it is unclear how family adoption communication processes affect children's adoptive identity formations and how children's adoptive identities evolve over time. It is also unclear how children's adoption type, gender, and age relate to adoptive identity formation and adoption-related curiosities. Results from this study may inform those who work with, counsel, or educate adoptive families by revealing protective factors that foster family well-being.

PARTICIPANTS

Children	Age	Adoption Type	Gender	Unanswered	Proposed Adoptive Identity
				Questions	Type
Child 1	5	Foster Care	M	No	N/A
Child 2	7	Domestic	M	No	Pre-integrated
Child 3	8	Domestic	F	No	Pre-integrated
Child 4	9	Foster Care	F	Yes	Limited
Child 5	9	Transnational	M	Yes	Unsettled
Child 6	11	Domestic	F	Yes	Integrated
Child 7	11	Transnational	M	No	Limited
Child 8	13	Transnational	F	Yes	Integrated
Child 9	14	Domestic	M	No	Limited

RESULTS

Prior research concerning adoptive identity has been explored only with adolescents (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004) since identity formation is a developmental task primarily associated with adolescence (Erikson, 1968). However, findings in the current study indicate that children as young as 7 and 8 years of age are developing a sense of identity which includes their adoption status. Narratives from all but one child in this study were extremely congruent with narratives used to classify the four adoptive identity patterns (Dunbar et al., 2004). Because children younger than 11 years of age have not been included in the typology formation, Table 1 depicts a potentially new typology, "pre-integrated," to reflect children's adoptive identity formation at a younger age. Interestingly, these children's adoptive identity narratives were extremely similar between the three different adoption types, but gender and age elicited differences (see table above). Second, the three older females (C4, C6, C8) were more interested in their biological ties and adoption-related stories, when compared to all males. These three older females also had unanswered questions they had never asked their parents. Only one younger boy (C5) indicated he had questions; the other males self-reported not having any unanswered questions. Thus, differences between children's unanswered questions (communication processes) were unrelated to the children's adoption type, but were related to their age and gender, with older females declaring more unanswered questions.

DISCUSSION

Clearly, adoptive identity formation and family communication are dynamic, interrelated processes that may be mediated by those with whom children come in contact. However, much is still unknown about these relationships. With U.S. families becoming increasingly diverse, these findings may demonstrate the need for a much broader field of study. For instance, this research revealed interesting similarities between children adopted from Korea, private, U.S. agencies, and foster care. Hence, adoptive identity formation and family communication might be salient themes for all children reared by individuals other than a biologically-related birth parent. These results offer new insights for parenting, teacher, and counselor education for families joined through foster care, domestic, transracial and transnational adoptions, stepparent and blended relationships, grandparents rearing grandchildren, and families whose children were born as a result of assisted reproductive technologies. Also, this study demonstrates that adoptive identity should be broadened to include the study of children in early and middle childhood and researched over children's life-span. In summary, children's identity formation and family communication are interrelated processes that require significantly more understanding for the well-being of all families and children. A better understanding of these processes should foster additional opportunities for parenting educators, researchers, and scholars to promote protective factors that may enhance the overall well-being of many diverse family types. Thus, more empirical research must be conducted to adequately address adoptees' identity development, family adoption communication processes, and the interrelatedness between these processes with children's age, gender, and adoption type.

IMPLICATIONS

Findings from the current study offer insights that may inform parenting education initiatives and foster family well-being for children reared by someone other than a birth parent. First, because vast similarities were apparent between these children's experiences, communication, and identity formation, regardless of adoption type, research concerning adoptive identity should be: a) broadened to include younger children's perspectives, b) researched over children's life-span to identify determinants of identity formation and changes over time, and c) explored to determine the impact of gender and age on its formation. Second, implications from these findings should be useful for those who work with, or experience, other parent-child relationships since vast similarities existed between these children's experiences, communication, and identity formation, regardless of adoption type. For instance, ongoing, comprehensive child-parent communication guidelines are still lacking due to the multisystemic complexities associated with adoption and family communication, both of which are applicable to all family types. Third, this study might also prove useful in beginning to understand how identities develop over children's lifespan and help elicit basic guidelines for those who work with families, since adoptive identity formation appears to be an individualized process which has yet to be adequately researched, explored, or understood. Finally, ongoing pre- and post-parenting education initiatives should be provided for all family types to aid in family communication and identity formation.

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