



An evaluation of post-adoption services

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Abstract

Social workers predict that the adoptability of children and the number of successful adoptions will rise with increases in the availability of post-adoption services. However, the development of such services has been stunted by the limited knowledge of the differential needs of adoptive families and by the limited published research on the effectiveness of post-adoption services. In this article, we present the findings of an evaluation of post-adoption services in B.C. Adoptive parents identified their concerns regarding adoption, indicated when they needed post-adoption services, and the sources of support on which they rely. Parents also rated the importance of educational and information services, clinical and support services, and material services. Finally, they reported how often they used these services, and what impact services had on their family. We recommend ways in which knowledge and use of services may be increased, and suggest potential directions for post-adoption service development. Targeting services to families who may need them most, at the time when they need them, and helping them deal with specific concerns, can amplify the positive impact that post-adoption services have on the lives of adoptive families. © 2006 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

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1. Introduction

While adoptive families typically have positive experiences with adoption, there are some families that do not (Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, & Carson, 1988; McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001). Families may face specific problems such as inadequate financial resources to meet the demands of adoption. In other cases, families may struggle with chronic problems such

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as poor adjustment to adoptees' needs, maladjusted adoptees, or conflict between adoptees and parents. When these problems cannot be resolved the end result may be the disruption of an adoption before it is finalized, or the legal dissolution of an existing adoption. Although adoption can be a source of anxiety, it is generally agreed that adoption offers the most permanent and secure home for a child (Barth & Berry, 1988; Rosenthal, 1993). Post-adoption services such as educational workshops and family counseling can help to promote understanding of adoption issues and strengthen family relations. Social workers predict that the adoptability of children and the number of successful adoptions will rise with increases in the availability of post-adoption services (Avery, 1999). Therefore, post-adoption services are vital in the consideration of adoption and in helping adoptive families cope with the difficulties that may arise.

It is important to determine both the types of support services needed by families after adoption and who may need such services. Researchers have examined the characteristics of adoptees and adoptive families that may contribute to post-adoption difficulties, thus highlighting which families should be targeted for support (for reviews, see Barth et al., 1988; Barth & Miller, 2001; Brodzinsky, 1993; McDonald et al., 2001; Rosenthal, 1993; Smith & Howard, 1991). For instance, adopted children may display behavioral problems such as conduct disorders and emotional/psychological problems such as attachment disorders that can threaten the success of their placements because parents may be unprepared or uneducated about such problems (e.g., Smith & Howard, 1991; Smith, Howard, & Monroe, 1998; Smith, Howard, & Monroe, 2000). Adopted children with a history of abuse and neglect may experience problems that may lead to disruption, presumably because these children are more likely to present emotional and behavioral problems and because parents feel uncomfortable with the child's sexuality (e.g., Smith & Howard, 1991; Smith et al., 1998). The disruption rate for adoptions of older children is higher than for younger children, possibly because older children may have suffered abuse or neglect, or may be more resistant to adapting to a new family environment (e.g., Barth & Berry, 1988; Barth et al., 1988; Berry & Barth, 1990; McDonald et al., 2001). Multiple placements have also been found to be associated with adoption disruption (e.g., Barth & Berry, 1988; Howard & Smith, 1999).

With regard to the characteristics of the family, it has been found that unrelated adoptions are more likely to raise difficulties than related adoptions which involve a step-parent or a non-parent relative, as parents may have little parental or adoption experience and because it creates a more dramatic change in the child's environment (e.g., Barth et al., 1988; Smith & Howard, 1991). There is some evidence of greater disruption rates when adoptive mothers have higher levels of education, perhaps because they have high expectations (e.g., Barth et al., 1988). Finally, in Canada, children are adopted from all over the world, and there is evidence that adoptive families may experience problems such as racial identity formation, language barriers, and difficulties in assimilating to a different culture (e.g., de Haymes & Simon, 2003; McRoy & Grape, 1999). In sum, these factors all tend to exacerbate post-adoption difficulties, and post-adoption agencies aim to provide these families with services that meet their needs.

Some researchers have identified the general needs of adoptive parents. For instance, Barth and Miller (2001) grouped post-adoption services into three basic types. Education and informational services may be offered via workshops and literature. These provide parents with information that can help them better understand their adopted child, plan for the financial costs involved in adoption, and help them seek out other available services. Clinical services are offered by trained professionals, and may include child, couple (i.e., parent), and family counseling. Finally, material services include the provision of subsidies, medical care, and respite care (i.e., a caregiver spends time with the adoptee thus giving parents a break).

Alternatively, [Watson \(1992\)](#) categorized post-adoption services into four types. After adoption, there may be a continuation of services provided by the agency that placed the child with the family in order to help families integrate the adoptee and to locate the sources of support they may need in the future. Intervention services may be provided upon request when families are experiencing difficulties. Agency-initiated, planned services may be offered that respond to the developmental needs of the child. Finally, services may be available to those involved in the adoption so they can seek information about each other, or make contact. Thus, it is important to recognize that there is a “continuum of need” ([Commonwealth of Kentucky, 1993](#); p. 54).

1.1. Past evaluations of post-adoption services

By contrast to the services that are widely available at the pre-adoption stage, there is a dearth of post-adoption services. Most post-adoption services are often offered to particular groups of families such as those with children who have special needs, and available to others on an ad hoc basis. In addition, most post-adoption services tend to provide short-term support to adoptive families.

The development of post-adoption services has been stunted by the lack of knowledge of the differential needs of adoptive families and by the limited research on the effectiveness of post-adoption services. As [Barth and Miller \(2001\)](#) noted, there have been relatively few published evaluations of post-adoption services. Indeed, the findings of many evaluations are only available upon request from the researchers or sponsoring agencies. Most evaluations aim to assess the needs of adoptive families, identify characteristics of the families that are served and the services that are delivered, and measure client satisfaction. Few studies measure outcomes. In this section, we review the findings of the small body of research that has evaluated post-adoption services.

1.1.1. Service needs and usage

[Phillips \(1990\)](#) found that adoptive parents in Scotland suggested 15 specific services they would like to receive, and many of these fell within the categories identified by [Barth and Miller \(2001\)](#). Furthermore, parents claimed that they would use the services if they were provided ([Phillips, 1990](#)). However, evidence suggests that adoptive families often turn to informal sources of support ([Berry, 1992](#); [Michigan Federation, 1999](#)). Thus, they may not always use the services provided by formal agencies that they need.

[Walsh \(1991\)](#) surveyed Illinois families receiving adoption assistance and found that the most needed resources were special education, medical services, financial assistance, and family counseling. However, less than half of the sample said they had used these services in the past year. Relatively fewer parents reported needing other services such as outpatient mental health services, respite care, and support groups, and only a small minority of families had used these services in the past year.

The [Commonwealth of Kentucky \(1993\)](#) reported that three-quarters of families received adoption subsidies, half used child counseling, and around a third used a contact person, and family counseling. Use of services such as advocacy, support groups, and respite care was less common, although families considered them to be important. Service needs that were not met included subsidies, mental health services, assistance in dealing with the school system, parenting skills education, support groups for children and parents, information resources, and help with disruption and dissolution.

In a study of the adoption of special needs children, [Kramer and Houston \(1998\)](#) found that pre-adoptive parents in an American mid-western state were particularly concerned about their

children's health and medical issues, child development and education, and child behavior problems at home. However, parents did not necessarily use the adoption agency as a source of support, and they rated informal, non-agency resources such as their spouse, extended family members, and friends to be most helpful. Parents identified several needs that were not being met including difficulty in accessing agency staff and services such as medical care, educational or developmental evaluations, counseling, support from other adoptive parents, respite care, and financial assistance.

More recently, McDonald et al. (2001) reported that adoptive parents in Kansas said they needed special education for their child, medical services, financial assistance, and legal advice. Ninety-percent of parents also indicated that they had received the needed services. However, fewer parents reported their need for parent support groups, respite care, advocacy services, sibling support groups, emergency assistance, and crisis intervention was being met. A minority of parents said they encountered problems when accessing the services. Finally, parents recommended that there should be more consistency and continuity with caseworkers involved in the adoption process.

Festinger (2001) documented the service needs of adoptive parents in New York. She found that the three most commonly provided services were medical services, special education programs, and information about after school activities. On average, parents said they needed eight services that were not provided. The three most unmet needs were for a telephone hotline, information about summer activities, and tutoring help. Parents also believed that subsidy payments would be insufficient when their children grew older. Festinger (2001) noted that parents only used on average three of the 26 services that were offered. Service needs were found to be associated with factors such as greater number of children's problems, greater number of adopted children, Black families, and higher parental education.

Finally, Brooks, Allen, and Barth (2002) compared the post-adoption service needs and usage of parents who had adopted children from public agencies (i.e., those initiated by a government agency) and private agencies (i.e., those initiated by a private organization) in California. The majority of parents in both groups stated they used educational resources on adoption issues. However, less than a quarter of parents in both groups reported using services such as support groups, family therapy, and counseling. Parents placed more importance on the provision of services such as educational resources, legal advice, financial advice, and workshops. By contrast, they placed less importance on respite care, intensive crisis counseling, couple or individual counseling, family therapy, and classes for extended adoptive family members. Nevertheless, less than 30% of adoptive families used most of the post-adoption services that were offered.

1.1.2. Service effectiveness

Some studies have documented the success of post-adoption agencies. Overall, adoptive parents tend to be satisfied with services (e.g., Avery, 1995; Harris, 2002). Brooks et al. (2002) revealed that both public and private agency adopters considered parent support groups, workshops on adoption issues, couple and individual counseling, and educational resources to be particularly helpful.

Berry (1992) observed that 88% of the families receiving intensive family preservation services from the In-Home Family Care Program in California avoided imminent child removal for a year after being served. Families that remained intact had received significantly more time of supplemental parenting, teaching of family care, and medical help. Furthermore, among those families that remained intact, agency contact was found to be associated with significant improvements in a family's general environment, physical environment, and child-care skills.

Specific services such as counseling were associated with moderate increases in family cleanliness and comfort, and child discipline, and health care. Others have reported similarly low rates of displacement or dissolution for families who received services (e.g., Prew, Suter, & Carrington, 1990; Smith & Howard, 1994). In addition, Berry and Barth (1990) noted that adoptive families who received greater subsidies tended to be more stable than families receiving fewer subsidies.

In a study of services delivered by the West Midlands Post Adoption Service, U.K., Harris (2002) found that services had affected families positively. These positive differences included improvements to their mental health, feelings about self, and information and knowledge about adoption. Researchers have also found that post-adoption services were associated with reductions in children's emotional and behavioral problems (Smith & Howard, 1994). Finally, post-adoption family support networks such as support from the spouse, other adoptive parents, physicians, and day care center, have been found to be associated with higher levels of family functioning (Leung & Erich, 2002).

1.1.3. Limitations

Although past research has documented the need for post-adoption services and attested to their effectiveness in helping families cope with difficulties, this research has some shortcomings. For instance, most studies suffer from low response rates, and so they may involve small, non-representative samples of adoptive families. Unfortunately, relatively few researchers contact non-respondents to discover how they may differ from respondents, and their reason for refusal to participate. Second, many studies have involved relatively short service periods or have omitted details of the length and intensity of the service period being studied. This makes it difficult to determine appropriate service lengths when developing programs. Similarly, to date, no-one has examined the durability of the positive benefits obtained after families receive services. It may be the case that the benefits of short-term, intensive services decline over the long-term. Finally, most studies have only examined the effectiveness of services via measures of client satisfaction. It is unclear how reports of satisfaction relate to other measures such as "helpfulness" of services and "impact" of services upon adoptive families. A multi-measure approach may provide more valid and reliable information on the effectiveness of post-adoption services.

2. The present study

In the present article, we report the findings of a recent evaluation of the post-adoption services offered by the Adoption Support Program (ASP) at the Queen Alexandra Centre for Children's Health B.C., Canada. The ASP is unique in its efforts to provide consistent, long-term post-adoption support to a general population of adoptive families. Over 300 families have used the program since it began in 1989. The ASP is committed to strengthening adoptive families, increasing awareness of adoption issues, and developing specialized services. It has a resource center that provides up-to-date information to parents and professionals on adoption issues such as building healthy families and fetal alcohol syndrome, and it provides education and training opportunities on adoption issues. In addition to providing counseling services, support groups, and respite care to adoptive families, the ASP facilitates reunions (i.e., the opening of closed adoptions), accesses psychological testing, and helps families to deal with schools, courts, and government agencies. The ASP typically provides such services in partnership with other adoption and mental health agencies. Importantly, the ASP aims to be flexible and adaptive to the needs of families who use the services such that a service will be provided upon request.

In 1996, Tanner conducted a qualitative evaluation of the ASP in an effort to determine its value to adoptive families and future directions for service provision. Several services were evaluated: resource library, counseling services (including individual and family), support networking groups (including those for children, teens, and parents), family support (including mentoring adoptees and respite care), and workshops. Overall, respondents reported being quite satisfied with the services. They said that services were “useful”, “invaluable,” and “effective,” and that services helped to “strengthen the family,” made adopted children “feel less isolated,” were “essential to adopted teen’s self-esteem and identity,” and allowed parents to give “mutual support.” Nevertheless, adoptive parents also highlighted several needs that were not being fully met. For example, they stated that respite care was too infrequent, and networking groups were offered at inconvenient times and locations. In addition, Tanner (1996) found that parents were often unaware of all of the services offered by the ASP. For example, they were unaware of the workshops that had been provided, and the availability of counseling and respite care. Finally, adoptive parents recommended several ways in which ASP services could be developed. For instance, it was suggested that new services could be introduced such as a newsletter, pre-school group, support group for non-adopted siblings, and online networking for parents.

The aims of the present study were to: (a) examine adoptive parents’ concerns, (b) identify when parents need support services, (c) identify the sources of support on which parents rely, (d) identify parents’ knowledge of the availability of ASP services, (e) compare the relative importance parents place on different services, (f) measure adoptive families usage of services, and (g) determine the effectiveness of post-adoption services in terms of satisfaction, helpfulness, and impact.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Surveys were mailed to 211 families living in the ASP catchment area and who were on ASP mailing list. The survey specifically asked adoptive parents about their post-adoption service usage in the past 2 years. Follow-up telephone calls with families indicated that 27 were ineligible to participate because they had not used any of the services in the past 2 years, and the contact details of 10 families were no longer valid. Forty-three adoptive parents of 68 adopted children completed and returned the survey. This represents a 25% response rate. Eighty-four families could not be contacted during the follow-up period. Forty-seven families were contacted, and their reason for non-response was because they were not interested in the study. Of these families, 25 agreed to provide some details about the characteristics of the family and adoptee. (To increase the chances of parents responding, we did not ask about the adoptees’ history of moves and abuse and neglect.) We found that there were no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents in terms of the gender, age, and origin of the adoptees, and the proportion who were adopted as infants. There were also no differences in terms of the proportion of two-parent families, public adoptions, and open adoptions. Below are the demographic characteristics of the adoptive families and adoptees in our sample.

3.1.1. Adoptive families ($N=43$)

The majority (79%) of adoptive families were two-parent families. Around half (52%) of adoptive mothers had finished college/university. There were on average two children (including biological, adopted, and foster) in a family. Sixty-two percent of families had adopted one child,

and the remainder had adopted from two to four children. Sixty-two percent of adoptions were public and the rest were private adoptions. Seventeen percent were open adoptions. Finally, 29% of adoptions were transracial or international.

3.1.2. Adoptees ($n = 68$)

Sixty percent of the adoptees were female. Half were aged 12 years or under, and the remaining were aged from 13 to 29 years. One-third (33%) of adoptees were born outside of Canada in countries such as Haiti, China, Germany, Guatemala, Romania, South Africa, and Korea. Only 29% of adoptees joined the adoptive family as infants. The remaining adoptees were originally living with their biological parents or a relative, in a foster home, orphanage, hospital, or in a group home. According to adoptive parents' reports, 21% of adoptees had experienced multiple moves prior to being adopted, and 35% had a history of abuse (i.e., physical, sexual, or emotional) or neglect prior to adoption.

3.2. Survey

Data was collected via a self-completion survey entitled "Evaluation of Client Services 2003." The survey comprised four parts. Part 1 was called "Family Information" and asked questions about the adoptive family (e.g., one or two parent family) and the demographic details of adoptees (e.g., age). These questions were taken from [Tanner \(1996\)](#), thus enabling a comparison of the demographic make-up of ASP clients over time.

Part 2 was entitled "Adoption Support Program Information." Respondents were asked to indicate how they found out about the ASP. The 13 services offered by the ASP were listed: resources library, individual counseling, family counseling, couple counseling, counseling follow-up, adopted child groups, adopted teen groups, parent groups, respite care, facilitating reunions, education workshops, accessing psychological tests, and help at school/court/ministry. Respondents were asked to rate their use of these services in the past 2 years on a 4-point scale with each point labeled (i.e., "never", "rarely", "sometimes", and "often"). Then, respondents were asked to indicate when their family needed post-adoption services (e.g., when the adopted child started school). Following this, respondents were asked to rate how satisfied they were with each service, how helpful they found each service, and how important they considered each service, respectively. These ratings were made on 5-point rating scales anchored at the end points and middle point (i.e., "very dissatisfied/very unhelpful/not at all important", "somewhat satisfied/somewhat helpful/somewhat important", and "very satisfied/very helpful/extremely important"). If respondents had earlier indicated that they had not used the services in the past 2 years, they were asked to skip the corresponding helpfulness questions. Finally, respondents were asked to rate how use of the ASP services had changed their family situations or problems using a 7-point scale from -3 to 3 , anchored at the end points and middle point (i.e., "much worse", "no change", and "much better").

Part 3 of the survey was called "Helping Resources" and included questions about respondents' knowledge of the availability of ASP services and who they turn to for post-adoption support. A list of sources of assistance was derived from [Kramer and Houston \(1998\)](#). At the end of Part 3, respondents were invited to write any other comments, questions, or concerns about post-adoption services. However, few parents did so.

Finally, Part 4 was entitled "Information on Each Adopted Child in Your Family," and first asked respondents questions about their adopted children (e.g., where the child lived prior to joining the family, and whether the child had a history of abuse). These questions required a "yes"

Table 1
Means and standard deviations of parental concerns by characteristics of adoptees

Concerns	Characteristics of adoptees												
	Gender		Age		Canadian born		Adopted as infant		Multiple moves		Abused/Neglected		
	Male	Female	≤12	13+	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Child's behavior	<i>M</i>	3.33	3.32	3.21	3.45	3.29	3.41	3.04	3.42	3.81	3.21	4.18	2.88
	<i>S.D.</i>	1.41	1.52	1.40	1.54	1.46	1.51	1.47	1.46	1.47	1.44	1.14	1.41
Child's emotional well-being	<i>M</i>	3.14	3.20	3.03	3.31	3.07	3.38	2.80	3.33	3.90	3.03	4.06	2.75
	<i>S.D.</i>	1.40	1.42	1.45	1.36	1.42	1.37	1.47	1.34	.90	1.44	.87	1.40
Child's relations with siblings/peers	<i>M</i>	2.48	2.90	2.93	2.53	2.63	2.90	2.38	2.85	3.40	2.59	3.53	2.34
	<i>S.D.</i>	1.17	1.31	1.17	1.33	1.30	1.21	1.28	1.23	1.13	1.23	1.02	1.16
Child's problems with school	<i>M</i>	4.54	2.78	3.81	3.18	3.74	3.05	3.11	3.59	5.42	3.03	4.93	2.75
	<i>S.D.</i>	6.50	1.49	5.95	1.54	5.28	1.48	1.58	5.00	9.44	1.49	7.02	1.51
Own parenting abilities	<i>M</i>	3.21	2.64	2.89	2.87	2.68	3.25	2.38	3.07	3.00	2.86	3.41	2.60
	<i>S.D.</i>	1.25	1.16	1.88	1.27	1.22	1.16	1.10	1.21	1.27	1.89	1.12	1.15
Lack of post-adoption support	<i>M</i>	2.13	2.58	2.54	2.25	2.19	2.76	1.75	2.62	3.12	2.20	3.41	1.82
	<i>S.D.</i>	1.35	1.33	1.31	1.39	1.32	1.35	1.06	1.38	1.27	1.33	1.32	1.01
Openness agreements/relationships	<i>M</i>	1.38	1.91	1.46	1.97	2.01	1.13	1.95	1.61	2.44	1.51	1.83	1.66
	<i>S.D.</i>	.79	1.26	.85	1.32	1.26	.41	1.47	.97	1.28	1.01	1.15	1.15

or “no” response. The next question listed issues that may cause concern for adoptive parents: child's behavior, child's emotional well-being, child's problems at school, child's relations with siblings/peers, parent's own parenting abilities, lack of post-adoption support, openness adoption agreements/relationships (i.e., any agreement between biological and adoptive parents concerning the exchange of information or the possibility of a face-to-face meeting following placement). This list of possible concerns was derived from the research reviewed above. Respondents were asked to rate their concern with each item on a 5-point scale anchored at the end points (i.e., “not a concern” and “a major concern”).

3.3. Procedure

Surveys were mailed to families on the ASP register in January, 2003. Each family received a package that contained a cover letter, the survey, a consent form, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope for returning the completed survey. The cover letter described the purpose of the survey, who was involved in designing the survey, and a contact number if participants had any questions. Participants were instructed to return the surveys within 2 weeks. The consent form assured participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was voluntary. In March, 2003, families on the ASP register were contacted via telephone to determine reasons for non-response and how they differed from respondents.

4. Findings

4.1. Adoptive parents' concerns

A series of independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine whether there were any significant differences in parental concerns according to the characteristics of the adopted child. As Table 1 shows, there were no statistically significant differences in the concerns of parents of

male and female adoptees, and parents of younger and older adoptees ($p > .05$). However, parents of adoptees born in Canada were significantly more concerned about openness agreements and openness relationships than parents whose adopted children were from outside Canada ($t[50] = 4.87, p = .001$). Parents of children who were not adopted as infants were significantly more concerned about their own parenting abilities than parents of adoptees who joined the family as infants, ($t[61] = 2.04, p = .046$). In addition, the former group of parents were significantly more concerned about the lack of post-adoption support than were parents of children adopted as infants ($t[61] = 2.41, p = .019$).

Parents with adoptees who had experienced multiple moves prior to adoption were significantly more concerned about a number of issues than were parents of adoptees who had not experienced multiple moves (see Table 1). Specifically, the former group of parents were more concerned about their child's emotional wellbeing ($t[30] = 2.73, p = .010$), and their child's relations with siblings and peers ($t[60] = 2.15, p = .036$). In addition, parents of adoptees with a history of multiple moves were more concerned about a lack of post-adoption support ($t[59] = 2.23, p = .030$), and openness agreements and openness relationships than were parents whose adopted children had no history of multiple moves ($t[54] = 2.73, p = .009$).

Parents of adoptees with a history of abuse or neglect reported greater concern about a number of issues than did parents of adoptees with no such history (see Table 1). The former group of parents were significantly more concerned about their child's behavior, emotional well-being, and relations with siblings and peers ($t[51] = 3.98, p = .001, t[60] = 4.55, p = .001, t[60] = 4.05, p = .006$, respectively). In addition, parents of adoptees with a history of abuse or neglect were significantly more concerned about their own parenting skills ($t[59] = 2.65, p = .010$), and the lack of post-adoption support ($t[59] = 5.27, p = .001$) than were parents whose adopted children had no history of abuse or neglect.

4.2. Parental need for post-adoption support

A majority (57%) of adoptive parents indicated that they needed post-adoption services after a stressful or traumatic event. Nearly half (45%) reported that services were needed soon after the adoption. Parents also said they needed services when their adopted child started school (26%), when their adopted child became a teenager (38%), and when he/she turned 19 years of age (17%). Finally, some parents reported needing services at other times such as for preparation of adoption and when they were fatigued.

4.3. Source of post-adoption support

Ten percent of adoptive parents reported turning to professionals such as an adoption agency, doctor or counselor as a sole source of support for their post-adoption needs. By comparison, 43% of parents said they sought help from both professional and personal sources such as friends and other adoptive parents, and 33% said they sought support from all three sources: professional, personal, and the internet.

4.3.1. Knowledge of services

Around one-third of adoptive parents said they learned of the ASP from a social worker (32%), or from the government agency that deals with adoptions (29%). Some parents were made aware of the ASP by a doctor or another adoptive parent. However, 17% of parents said that they did not know how to gain access to the services offered by the ASP, and around half (49%) claimed that

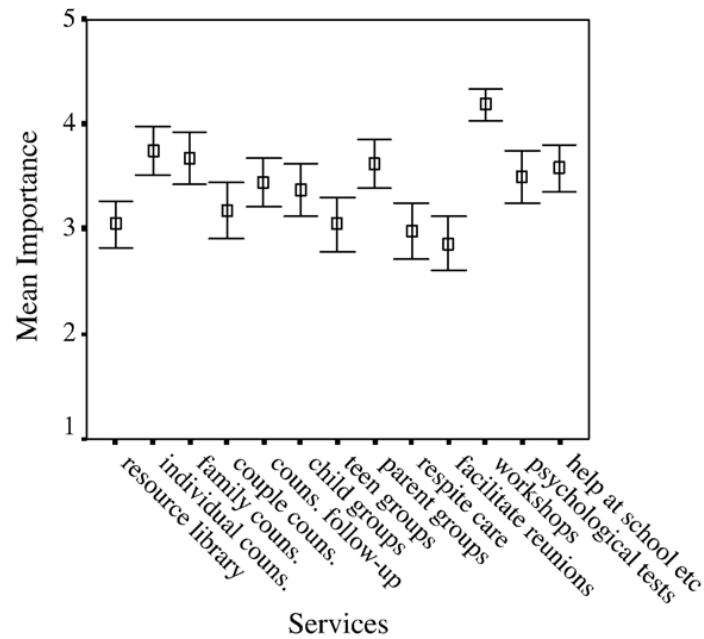


Fig. 1. Mean importance of post-adoption services and the standard error of the means.

they were unaware of the services they were eligible to have. Over a quarter (27%) of parents said it was difficult for them to gain access to the services offered by the ASP. When asked about the convenience of these services, 21% of parents stated that services were offered at inconvenient times and 28% said that services were offered at inconvenient locations. In fact, nearly half (46%) of the sample reported being unaware that they had input into the types of services offered by the ASP. Finally, nearly one-third (30%) of parents said that the services offered by the ASP did not reflect their needs.

4.4. Importance and use of post-adoption services

4.4.1. Importance

Fig. 1 illustrates adoptive parents' mean ratings of the importance of the 13 services offered by the ASP. On average, all services were rated as being at least "somewhat important." The 13 services were combined into three categories for further analysis. The first category was educational and information services and was comprised of the resource library and workshops. The category of clinical and support services was comprised of individual, family, and couple counseling, counseling follow-up, and child, teen, and parent groups. Finally, the material services category was comprised of respite care, facilitating reunions, accessing psychological testing, and helping families to deal with schools, courts, and government agencies.

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there were significant differences in the mean importance of the three service categories ($F[2, 76]=23.16, p<.001$). Within-subjects t -tests indicated that educational and information services ($M=3.63, S.D.=1.02$) were rated as being significantly more important than material services ($M=2.55, S.D.=.97$) ($t[38]=6.61, p<.001$). Similarly, clinical and support services ($M=3.44, S.D.=1.23$) were rated as being significantly more important than material services ($t[38]=5.64, p<.001$). There was no significant difference in the mean importance of educational and information services and clinical and support services ($t[39]=1.01, p=.318$).

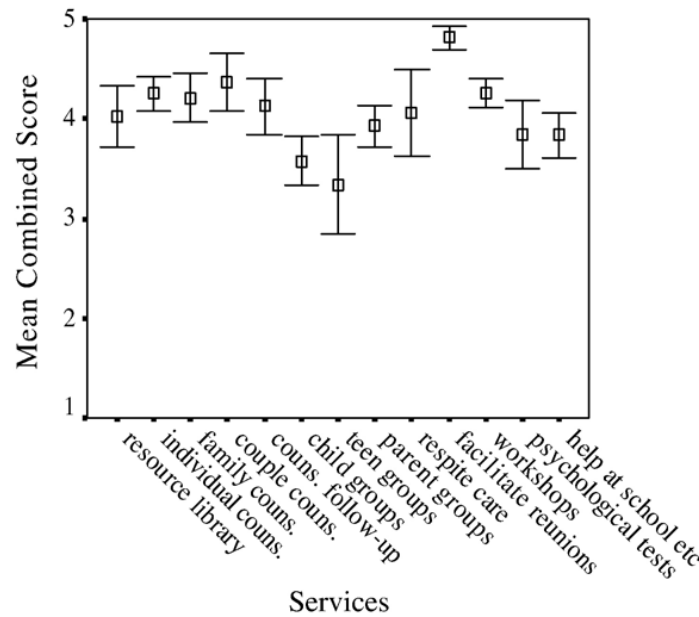


Fig. 2. Mean combined satisfaction with, and helpfulness of, post-adoption services and the standard error of the means.

4.4.2. Use

Adoptive parents were asked how often they had used each of the 13 services offered by the ASP in the past 2 years. There were no significant differences in the mean usage of the three service categories ($F[2, 72]=1.94, p<.152$). On average, educational and information services ($M=1.74, S.D.=.77$), clinical and support services ($M=1.71, S.D.=.79$), and material services ($M=1.54, S.D.=.74$) were only “rarely” used.

Bivariate correlations between ratings of the importance of each service and the use of the service were computed. There were moderate-sized positive correlations between importance and use of services such as individual counseling ($r=.58$), family counseling ($r=.58$), couple counseling ($r=.41$), counseling follow-up ($r=.48$), teen group ($r=.42$), parent groups ($r=.44$), respite care ($r=.44$), facilitating reunions ($r=.38$), education workshops ($r=.44$), and help in dealing with schools, courts, and government agencies ($r=.47$), (all $ps<.05$). There was, however, no statistically significant correlation between the importance and use of services such as the resource library, child groups, and accessing psychological tests (all $ps>.05$).

4.5. Effectiveness of post-adoption services

Effectiveness of the services offered by the ASP were measured via adoptive parents’ ratings of the satisfaction and helpfulness of each of the 13 services, and via ratings of the impact that the services together had upon specific situations or problems faced by the family.

4.5.1. Satisfaction and helpfulness

The inter-correlations among ratings of satisfaction and helpfulness for individual services were high ($Mr=.69, S.D.=.24$). Therefore, the satisfaction and helpfulness ratings were averaged to yield a combined score and the mean scores are presented in Fig. 2. On average, adoptive parents were quite satisfied with all of the ASP services, and found them all to be quite helpful. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences in the mean combined ratings of satisfaction and helpfulness among the three service categories ($F[2, 44]=.621, p=.542$).

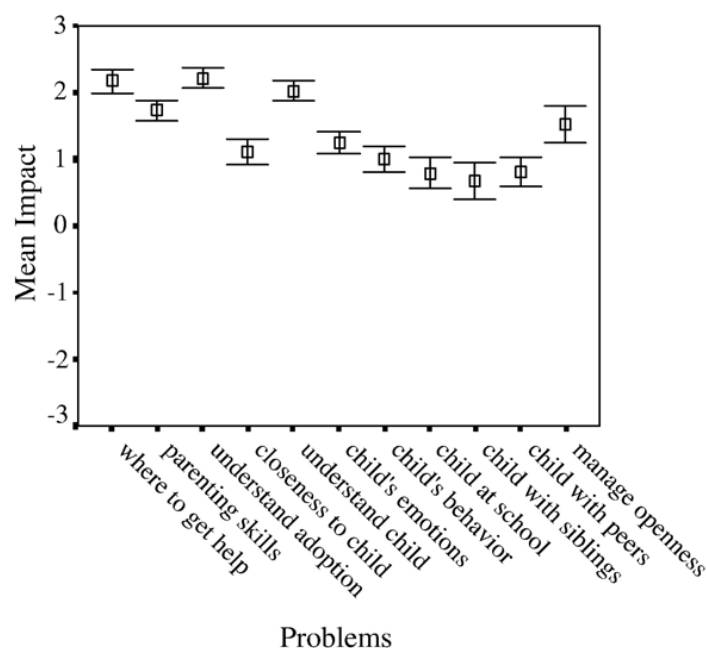


Fig. 3. Mean impact of post-adoption services and the standard error of the means.

4.5.2. Impact

Participants were asked to indicate what impact ASP services had on specific problems or situations, using a scale from -3 (much worse) through 0 (no change) to 3 (much better). One-sample t -tests revealed that the average impact ratings were significantly different from zero, indicating that use of the ASP services had a significant positive impact on the problems and situations of adoptive families (all $ps < .05$). As Fig. 3 shows, according to adoptive parents, use of services had a greater positive impact on parents' knowledge of where to get help, understanding of adoption, and of their adopted child, than on the child's problems at school, and the child's relations with siblings and peers.

5. Discussion

In the remainder of this article, we discuss the findings of our evaluation of post-adoption services and recommend ways in which knowledge and use of services may be increased. We also suggest potential directions for post-adoption service development and emphasize the importance of targeting such services to specific groups of adoptive families who may need them most. This may amplify the positive impact that post-adoption services can have in supporting and nurturing adoptive families.

5.1. Increasing awareness and use of services

Adoptive parents claim they would use post-adoption services if they were offered (Phillips, 1990). However, as we found, although parents regarded most of the 13 services offered by the ASP as important, parents rarely used these services. This low level of service usage is compatible with that reported in past research (e.g., Brooks et al., 2002; Commonwealth of Kentucky, 1993; Festinger, 2001; Fine, 2000; Michigan Federation, 1999; Walsh, 1991). The lack of service usage does not necessarily indicate that parents do not need such post-adoption support. Rather, low service usage may be explained by a number of factors.

First, adoptive parents often lack knowledge of the availability of services. Parents may be unaware of their own eligibility to use services, and how to gain access to them. The fact that education workshops were widely advertised by the ASP may partly explain why they were frequently used. It is imperative that post-adoption agencies increase their visibility in the community and effectively advertise their services. For instance, the [Commonwealth of Kentucky \(1993\)](#) found that caseworkers reported offering services more frequently than the parents noted them being offered. This finding highlights the fact that parents may not necessarily hear the offers, and they may also have forgotten that some services were offered. Clearly, verbal communication on its own is an inadequate means of informing parents of the services that are available to them. Post-adoption services may be more effectively and widely advertised via the internet, public libraries, family practitioners, and public and private adoption agencies. Creating a culture of information sharing via friends and family is also likely to improve knowledge of services and usage since this is a common channel for information exchange.

A second explanation for the low use of post-adoption services is that they may be offered at inconvenient times and locations. This is a serious problem because inconvenience may prevent families who know about services to actually use them when they are needed. Of course, the flexibility of a program will be hampered by constraints on financial and staff resources, and it is unlikely that services can be convenient for every family. Thus, as [Kramer and Houston \(1998\)](#) recommend, agency staff could encourage parents to seek out personal sources of support. Agencies should also encourage prospective service users who are prohibited by timing or other constraints to inform them of these reasons so that agencies can adapt to the changing needs of clients.

Third, parents may not use post-adoption services as they often seek help from alternative sources. As we found, many parents relied on several sources of support including personal sources such as friends and other adoptive parents, the internet, and professionals such as social workers and counselors. Informal, non-agency sources of support are convenient, and families may feel more comfortable turning to people they know rather than agency staff. In addition, [Harris \(2002\)](#) suggests that adoptive parents may avoid services because they are unwilling to acknowledge that a problem exists with the adoption or that the problem is serious enough to require assistance. By using services, some parents may be reminded that their child is adopted, and they would rather forget that part of their past and move on. Adoptive parents may also feel fearful of contacting social services for help. As [Phillips \(1990\)](#) concludes, “To be acceptable such a service needs to be provided along informal lines, with the initiative coming from the adoption agency” (p. 26).

Finally, another explanation for why adoptive parents rarely use some post-adoption services is that post-adoption agencies such as the ASP tend to employ a reactive rather than proactive approach to service delivery. Services are predominately offered to families upon request. Whereas this approach is efficient, it will likely be inadequate if families do not know about the existence of post-adoption services.

5.2. *Development and targeting of services*

[Watson \(1992\)](#) points out that agencies have six responsibilities “leadership and vision, planning and coordination, standard setting and licensing, training, funding, and the provision of some direct service” (p. 10). One of the mandates of the ASP is to be responsive to the needs of adoptive families in the development of services. However, we found that nearly half of the parents were unaware that they had input into the development of services. This may explain why

some parents felt that the services offered did not reflect their needs. Thus, it may be useful to make active efforts to gain the input of adoptive families, although this may be difficult when parents are overburdened and families are facing difficulties. Furthermore, services should be directed at the concerns of adoptive families, aim to replicate “what works”, be grounded in theories relevant to understanding and dealing with adoption issues, and informed by trends in adoption practice and policy.

5.2.1. *Concerns*

We found that parents of adoptees born in Canada were concerned about openness agreements and relationships. Parents of children who were not adopted as infants were concerned about their own parenting abilities, and the lack of post-adoption support. Parents of adoptees who had experienced multiple moves prior to the adoption reported being concerned about their child’s emotional well-being, relations with siblings and peers, a lack of post-adoption support, and openness agreements and relationships. Similarly, parents of adoptees with a history of abuse and neglect were concerned about their child’s behavior, emotional well-being, relations with siblings and peers, their own parenting abilities, and a lack of post-adoption support. The pattern of adoptive parents’ lack of confidence in their parenting skills, their need for knowledge about their child’s development, and their need for more emotional and practical support is similar to that reported by biological parents (see [Invest in Kids Foundation, 2002](#)). However, adoptive parents also have unique concerns and needs that should be met (see [Howard & Smith, 1999](#)).

Parents tend to need post-adoption services at specific time points. As our findings suggest, support is often required after a stressful or traumatic event. Further research is required to identify the nature of these events. More generally, services are needed soon after the adoption, and then again at significant developmental points in the child’s life such as when the child starts school, and becomes a teenager and adult.

To be efficient and effective, services should be targeted at the families who need them most, at the time when they most require them, and they should aim to deal with specific concerns. In order to facilitate targeted service delivery, post-adoption agencies will need to develop and maintain comprehensive client records. During our follow-up of non-respondents, we found that families had moved address or changed telephone numbers. Furthermore, the current ASP records had only limited data on the characteristics of adoptive families. In order to help families soon after adoption, post-adoption agencies will need to work in closer collaboration with the public and private agencies that initiate adoptions.

5.2.2. *Effectiveness*

The importance of providing post-adoption services has been highlighted by the literature that documents the effect such support has on the reduction of adoption disruptions and dissolutions (e.g., [Berry, 1992](#); [Prew et al., 1990](#); [Smith & Howard, 1994](#)). The ability of services to have positive benefits for the psychological and behavioral functioning of families has also been observed (e.g., [Harris, 2002](#); [Smith & Howard, 1994](#)). Nevertheless, such outcome evaluations are rare, presumably because of the difficulties inherent in demonstrating reliable effects. Outcomes may be measured in various ways including changing incidence of adoption disruption, clinical assessments, and subjective assessments by parents.

Although we did not examine the effect of ASP services on dissolution or disruption, we did measure parents’ assessments of the impact that services had on an array of specific problems. According to the parents, use of ASP services improved their own understanding of adoption and their adopted child, but had less impact on improvements in the child’s behavior, problems at school,

and relations with siblings and peers. In addition, the high ratings of satisfaction and helpfulness of post-adoption services given by parents in our sample are similar to those reported in other studies (e.g., Avery, 1995; Harris, 2002). However, we also found that parents were least satisfied with child and teen groups. Future research could examine why parents find specific services satisfactory or helpful. Research could also explore the durability of the effectiveness of services.

While many post-adoption services may be helpful, those that are less successful should also be examined in detail. For instance, although Berry (1992) found significant positive correlations among the delivery of specific services and improvements in the family environment and condition, and child's level of living, the magnitude of these correlations were low. In fact, she found that respite care was actually negatively correlated with improvements in child care. Furthermore, it was revealed that the program was not very successful with neglectful families. Clearly, more research is needed to determine which families tend to be helped and by which of the available services.

5.2.3. *Theory*

As Barth and Miller (2001) point out, post-adoption services should be based on theoretically sound principles regarding adoption (see also Barth, 2002). For instance, services should be based on theories concerning adoption adjustment such as the stress and coping model of children's adoption adjustment (Brodzinsky, 1990), biological perspectives on adoptee adjustment (Cadoret, 1990), attachment theory (see Johnson & Fein, 1991), and family systems theory (Reitz & Watson, 1992). Similarly, Smith et al. (2000) suggest that educational and counseling services should be able to deal with issues underlying child emotional and behavior problems such as separation/attachment issues and grief, identity issues, search issues, depression, and post traumatic stress syndrome.

5.2.4. *Trends*

The characteristics of adoptive families and adoptees being served by the ASP have changed very little since Tanner's (1996) evaluation. Nevertheless, the development of post-adoption services should be informed by the potential needs of adoptive families as adoption trends change over time (for trends in the U.S. see Stolley, 1993). In an examination of adoption trends across Canada, Daly and Sobol (1993; see also 1994; Sobol & Daly, 1994; 1995) found that from 1981 to 1990 total public adoptions decreased from 4441 to 1731, whereas total private adoptions increased from 935 to 1105. Furthermore, the proportion of public adoptions of children under 1 year decreased dramatically whereas the proportion of private adoptions of infants increased. Similarly, the proportion of public adoptions of children over 1 year increased whereas the proportion of private adoptions of older children decreased. There has also been a rise in the number of international (and often consequently, transracial) adoptions, although statistical information on this issue is limited. Finally, openness has been one of the most important recent legislated policy changes in adoption practice in Canada. In around one-third of such cases the biological and adoptive parents may regularly exchange information through a facilitator.

There are several implications of these trends in adoption for the development of post-adoption services. For instance, families who adopt privately may be less prepared because unlike public adoptions, the private adoption waiting period is considerably shorter and parents typically have no parenting experience. Brooks et al. (2002) observed that significantly more private agency adopters received educational services and parental support groups. On the other hand, older children are likely to be placed with families who adopt publicly, and these children may have emotional and behavioral problems that require greater understanding and support (see Berry & Barth, 1990). Indeed, Brooks et al. (2002) found that significantly more public agency adopters

received child counseling and family therapy. The rise in international and transracial adoptions may highlight the need to help these families cope with the unique problems they may face (see de Haymes & Simon, 2003; McRoy & Grape, 1999). Finally, as we observed, open adoptions may raise anxieties among adoptive parents, and service providers should examine how they can effectively help adoptive families relate to biological families through information, counseling, and mediation (see Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994).

5.3. Limitations

Although the findings of the present study were based on a relatively small sample of adoptive parents, this reflects the fact that the ASP serves a relatively small population. While the response rate was lower than some past evaluation (e.g., 52% in McDonald et al., 2001; 40% in Walsh, 1991), it was similar to many (e.g., 24% in Commonwealth of Kentucky, 1993; 20% in Tanner, 1996), and higher than some others (e.g., 8% in Avery, 1995). These response rates are respectable for mail-out surveys, and surveys of samples who may be overwhelmed and too busy to participate. Follow-up contact with non-respondents revealed no significant differences between them and respondents on various demographic variables. Nevertheless, future research could make efforts to increase response rates, employ alternative methods for data collection, and over-sample families with different demographic characteristics.

The present study and most past evaluations have involved adoptive parents. There is dearth of research on the post-adoption needs of adopted youth as expressed by the youth themselves. It is likely that the needs of adopters and adoptees may be different. Furthermore, both groups may have different experiences of the same service. For instance, in our study, while parents perceived child and teen groups to be less helpful, the adoptees may have had a different perception. Although it is not always easy to research children and youth, developmental psychologists have developed techniques that can provide valid and reliable data.

6. Conclusions

Adoption is a promising response to children in need of permanent homes and it can also be a positive experience. In North America there has been a great push toward promoting adoption. Society, however, also has an obligation to support adoptive families beyond the stage when adoption is legally finalized. The Adoption Support Program in B.C. has developed through close collaboration with adoptive families. Their shared experiences and challenges have helped to shape the services that are provided. In order to be responsive to the differential patterns of experiences of adoptive parents and their adopted children, and to changes in their concerns over time, post-adoption agencies must continue to identify the needs of adoptive families, and researchers must continue to explore “what works.” Post-adoption agencies should not only aim to meet needs and replicate effective practices, they should also be grounded in relevant theory, observe adoption trends, and update services in light of the information gleaned from such observations. Services should be better advertised, and agency records must be comprehensive. The adequate provision of a wide range of services requires the development of a network of community resources, and service providers must continue to engage other agencies and educate them about the unique needs of this client group. As we found, use of post-adoption services can have a positive impact on the lives of adoptive families.

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