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EDITORIAL

Adopting an older child: Are parents sufficiently capable and skilled? (Second part)

As a follow-up to the previous Monthly Review, which addressed the child's perspective and his specific needs, let us now focus on the parents' perspective, and assess the support that receiving countries and professionals can provide them with.

Whilst the adoption of older children is clearly part of the future of intercountry adoption (see Monthly Review N° 181 of May 2014), it is important to remember that it should never be considered as an adoption by default. In order for these adoptions to occur under the best auspices, they require different resources from the professionals in receiving countries, but, above all, from the parents, whose adoption project often still remains inconsistent with reality. Indeed, the expectations of prospective adoptive parents have not changed much in relation to the child they wish to adopt: as young and healthy as possible. The latter must therefore often reflect upon, or even redefine, their expectations and their criteria, and must be prepared in this sense. It is important for prospective adopters to be aware of the challenges raised by the adoption of an older child and, in particular, by his specific physical, cognitive and psychological needs. Faced with this reality, are receiving countries ready to provide these children and their prospective parents with adequate support?

Overcoming fears and myths relating to children in care

Fears and myths remain as to the adoption of children, who have been placed in care, sometimes for several years. Based on the survey

undertaken by the ISS/IRC in 2013, many parents are afraid of failing in their parental responsibilities, and fear that the fact of not having been able to witness the child's first experiences (first steps, first words, etc) may render the attachment more difficult, or even impossible. The child's story, his health conditions and specific needs, may also be an obstacle to considering his adoption. However, based on the study undertaken in 2008 by the ISS/IRC¹, the adoption of older children does, on average, not fail more often than the adoption of babies. Nonetheless, it is true that children, who have experienced several break-ups or situations of neglect, may develop attachment and behavioural disorders, which make their adjustment to a new family, cultural and social environment more complex. However, as demonstrated in Monthly Review N° 181 of May 2014, if the assessment of the child's adoptability and his preparation are adapted to his situation, this fear may be reduced. Furthermore, the abilities of the parents, as well as their preparation, will have a dominating impact on the positive development of this project.

Informing, preparing and supporting the parents

As stated by Anne-Marie Piché, in order to better address '(...) the very strong tension of



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interests between the private sphere (the wish to build a family and a bond with a young and healthy child) and the social sphere (expectations of the institutions as to the parents being more distanced “actors”, which act in a placement process’, it is important for the parents to be correctly informed, prepared and supported by professionals, in order to help them deconstruct preconceptions and value those bonds that are built in some other ways². Unlike a newborn, an older child already has a past, often his own language and culture, which the parents do not necessarily understand. The parents will need support prior to as well as after the adoption, on the medium and long term, adapted to the particular needs of each child and each family context. Several experiences have been developed, such as in Italy (see p. 6) or France (see p. 5), for example. Receiving countries also have a role to play in the care of the child and in the support provided post-adoption. The establishment of longer parental leaves for these parents, who must display greater availability, and/or financial aid may be considered in this framework.

Are specific abilities required?

Some skills, which are often important in adoption in general, turn out to be particularly relevant in the framework of an adoption of an older child (see p. 10). The great majority of professionals, irrespectively of the country that they work in, regularly mention a series of

necessary psychological dispositions amongst the parents: flexibility, empathy, openness, stability, intuition, tolerance, understanding, etc³. Furthermore, in the context of the adoption of older children, the psychological, cognitive and emotional abilities are not the only ones that are expected from the parents, but these also require linguistic competencies (it is strongly recommended that both parents speak or have some basic knowledge of the child’s mother tongue), physical abilities (good health), financial resources (the possibility of resorting to private educational support or to psychological support), or even family skills (such as having already brought up a child or having experience with older children, and benefiting from the support of relatives – family, friends, etc).

The assessment of the prospective adopters, of their resources and their motivation, is decisive in the success of a late adoption. For some parents, it will be more fulfilling to develop a relationship with an older child than with a newborn. In order to identify such vocations and to enable prospective adoptive parents to raise the correct questions, this Monthly Review intends to present and define the profile of the families and to provide better tools to the professionals.

The ISS/IRC team,
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