International Resource Centre for the Protection of Children in Adoption

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ISS/IRC News Bulletin n° 67
May 2004

Editorial: To promote the adoption of children with special needs

Children are waiting …

Millions of children and young people « with special needs » or "who present particularities" reportedly live in family or institutional placements around the world, both in developing countries or those in transition and in the industrialized countries. Too often, no permanency planning has been drawn up for them. Even if adoption is probably not the solution for the adequate permanent protection for each of them, a certain number are psycho-socially and legally adoptable. Many of them, however, do not find an adoptive family.

Who are these children? Older children, carriers of disease or a handicap, who have been in placement a long time, scarred by their past or living in a sibling group that cannot be broken up. The family integration of some of them presupposes, for sure, very specific capabilities for adaptation on the part of the children as well as the adoptive parents. But some families bear witness to the success of such adoptions.

Moreover, depending upon the definition of « special needs », that varies from country to country, other children differ much less from the profile of the child the prospective adopters dreamed of : children just three years old, either carrying a disease or a harmless curable handicap, who have lived through a trouble-free placement, or a sibling group of two healthy young children, … To classify these children in the category of « children with special needs » no doubt sometimes unduly diminishes their chances of being adopted, when they could be integrated in a family, probably by means of professional support.

To be realistic about the state of domestic and inter-country adoption, one should underline that, at the global level, unlike the healthy young children the prospective adoptive parents are waiting for – and will have to wait longer and longer, and more and more to no avail - these are the children with special needs who are waiting for families, in vain in most cases.

What is the desire for a child?

It is natural that prospective adopters, like all parents, want their child to avoid any major developmental problem. Some adopters, however, probably approaching the problem more from the perspective of giving a child a family rather than of « finding a child » for their family, are willing and able to face up to certain special needs of children. In any case, it is becoming more inevitable with every passing day to question the substance of the requests made by prospective adopters, to let them evolve, if they possibly can, in their portrayal of their dream child; to broaden their desire; and, on occasion, set off in search of very tangible children in need of domestic adoption or, failing that, inter-country adoption. Nonetheless, this step is certainly not within the reach of all prospective adopters. Children with special needs probably need parents actively recruited and chosen according to adjusted criteria, and certainly parents counselled and supported in specific ways.

The need for global awareness

This task of putting the requests of would-be adoptive parents in proper perspective necessarily presupposes a full awareness of the reality of children in need of adoption, in every country, on the part of the press, those in government, professionals and the public at large. In fact, how many people are still unduly convinced that « the Third World is swarming with healthy babies just waiting

for a family »? Specific information, training and education are indispensable in this context, as well as targeted scientific research.

Adapting professional practices

Together with this raising of awareness, professional practices, often still insufficiently adapted to the special needs of children, should evolve towards:

- Priority advancement , in *all* countries , of the *domestic* adoption of children with special needs, who must be incorporated in a global policy of child protection and benefit from permanency planning like other children (in this regard, it is not in the best interests of a children to declare them legally adoptable and then to leave them with this status, if no adoptive family can be found for them ; after a period of active search for such a family , it is advisable to draw up an alternative life plan for and with them);
- Opening up all receiving countries to the adoption of foreign children requiring medical or psychological care, which is not the case at present ;
- Information for prospective adoptive parents, before their suitability is judged, about the reality of children in need of domestic and inter-country adoption ;
- The active search, by professionals, for prospective adopters likely to respond to the special needs of children ;
- The evaluation of the suitability of prospective adopters in terms of the needs of children who are genuinely adoptable ;
- Matching based, case by case, on a precise assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the child and the potential adoptive families ;
- Specific counselling of prospective adopters and of the child before they first meet ;
- The professional follow-up to the meeting and the period before the legal decision in favour of adoption ;
- The offer of specific professional post-adoption services ;
- The possibility of granting benefits in certain circumstances for the adoption of children with special needs ;
- The possibility of simple or open adoption, that allows certain adoptable children to maintain their links with members of their family of origin.

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In every country, developing, in transition, or industrialized, the present challenge posed by adoption – both domestic and inter-country - and an important part of its future undoubtedly reside in the search for suitable families for children with special needs, as well as in suitably adapted professional practices. Different situations for children, different adoptive parents and reformed professional practices.

The ISS/IRC team

For further information on this topic, see Documentation Centre Bulletins 1, 3, 4, 6 and 11, and on the ISS/IRC website : Editorials in News Bulletins 64, 65 et 66 ; Editorial in the Documentation Centre Bulletin 12 ; N. Cantwell, « Inter-country Adoption – Commentary on the number of « adoptable » children and the number of people trying to adopt at the international level » ; I. Lammerant, « The ethical and legal bases of the adoption of abandoned children ».