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EDITORIAL

The first encounter of the adoptive family and the probationary period of life together: Are there any remaining gaps in these crucial stages?

As one of the key moments in the development of the adoptive family, the ISS/IRC has decided to dedicate a special issue to the first encounter and the probationary period of life together of the child and his prospective adoptive adoptive parents, having observed that regulations as well as practices vary considerably from one country to another, and sometimes reflect some gaps.

Once the matching has been undertaken, the meeting and the first moments of life together, which take place, in general, in the country of origin, should be the opportunity for the PAPs to get to know the child with the support of the local professionals, who know him. These moments are decisive for the future of the adoptive family, as they build the initial groundwork, and assume an intense emotional burden, which is magnified by the current intercountry adoption context. Indeed, intercountry adoption nowadays often affects older children with a complex pre-adoptive experience (trauma, multiple placements, etc) and prospective adoptive parents, who have often faced long waiting periods and doubts. Despite a general consensus on the importance of these stages, in practice, prospective adoptive parents are sometimes left to their own devices once they have arrived in the country of origin, and the meeting with the child may be undertaken abruptly and without any support. Even though some flexibility must be granted to the existing methods, in particular in terms of probationary periods, which the ISS/IRC has decided to focus on, the necessary existence of a framework and support in this regard is unequivocal.

Is there systematic and satisfactory support?

It is during the first encounters that the child and his prospective adoptive parents are faced with reality: what happens when the prospective adoptive parents do not meet the expectations of the child or when the latter suddenly becomes aware that his separation from his environment is imminent and permanent? On the other hand, how should one manage the disappointment of the prospective adoptive parents when the child reacts in an unexpected manner, or when difficulties relating to the culture shock or potential communication problems arise? A lack of preparation and support for the prospective adoptive parents and the child may prove to be disastrous and may jeopardise the birth of this new family. In order to remedy, as far as possible, such risks, and in order to respond, as closely as possible, to the very specific needs of each child and each parent (see p. 12), a meticulous task must be undertaken progressively, in an individualised and empathic manner, thanks to the development of innovative tools (see p. 10). This task includes two different aspects, which are both essential: preparation prior to the meeting (see pp. 6 and 8) and support throughout this first period of life together (see the subsequent parts of the articles on pp. 6 and 8 in forthcoming issues

32 Quai du Seujet ■ 1201 Geneva ■ Switzerland
irc-cir@iss-ssi.org ■ www.iss-ssi.org

of the Monthly Review). Periodic supervision and monitoring of the process are key elements in the assessment of the child's adjustment to his family, and will have an impact on his prospective adjustment at other levels, such as socially and at school, amongst other aspects (see p. 13).

Do the legal and practical terms and conditions focus on the best interests of the child?

The legal implications of the probationary period, such as the child's nationality, the legal nature of the temporary placement or the consequences of situations of failure, must be clarified. The omission of such provisions may indeed create a legal gap and uncertainty as to the child's future and that of the entire adoptive family. In this regard, the ISS/IRC acknowledges those countries, which have developed an adequate framework for this stage, by defining, amongst others, the child's legal status and the roles and responsibilities of each involved authority and professional (see p. 4). In addition to the legal terms and conditions, the pratical arrangements of this period, such as its place of undertaking and its duration, must also be questioned having due regard to the child's best interests. The ISS/IRC therefore reflects on the – sometimes excessive – duration of some probationary periods, which make it difficult to follow up on the latter appropriately, and represent an obstacle for some prospective adoptive parents, who are unable to assume them, for example financially. A reasonable duration should therefore be set (approximately one to three months). Furthermore, whilst the benefits of this period are unquestionable and must be respected, it is worth ensuring its purpose and true objective: it must not be considered as a test that enables adoptive parents, at the end, to renounce to the child, but as a true opportunity to confirm the matching and to promote the progressive development of affective bonds.

Does the cooperation measure up to the needs?

The spirit of cooperation promoted by the HC-1993 is, once again, given its full meaning in the existence itself of this period and its conditions of implementation, as the Explanatory Report highlighted '*the importance of the probationary period [and considered that its] absence [would be] considered against the objectives of the Convention, i.e. to "establish a system of co-operation amongst Contracting States" and a "matching" of the conditions prescribed by each of the interested States*'. In particular, this cooperation should occur at two levels: first, States should ensure the respect and compliance of their respective legislation (see p. 4) and, secondly, this cooperation should operate in practice thanks to increased communication amongst Central Authorities, accredited adoption bodies and other involved professionals, such as the personnel of the child's institution. In this regard, accredited adoption bodies play an important role in order to ensure that prospective adoptive parents benefit from quality support during their stay with the child in the country of origin (see p. 8).

As an essential component of the adoption process, the probationary period of life together should be systematic and ensure the protection of the child and of his parents, legally and psychosocially. With quality professional support, this probationary period is a key element in the prevention of failures in adoption. Instead of providing donations/contributions to the institutions – which are in fact controversial aspects of cooperation, should receiving countries not rather direct their support towards the development of services in this field?

The ISS/IRC team
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32 Quai du Seujet ■ 1201 Geneva ■ Switzerland
irc-cir@iss-ssi.org ■ www.iss-ssi.org