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The child and his life: Over and above diagnosis and lists?

Before being classified as 'a child with special needs', because of a difficult family history, an insecure childhood, or a disability, a child is a human being and must always be seen as such, with his strengths and vulnerabilities, someone who is capable of having a happy life, if he or she is given the means to this end.

The child over and above diagnosis

During the past few years, lists and fast-track procedures have been applied to children 'with special needs' (see p. 5). The objective is to open up the access to adoption for children who, because of certain characteristics, such as their age, their health or the presence of brothers and sisters, may have more difficulties to find adoptive parents. Whilst some of these practices have shown positive results, they are still at the centre of debates. Indeed, even when well-meant in theory, some of them have generated situations in practice where children are classified as having 'special needs' as a result of subjective criteria, which vary from one professional to another and from one country to another (see pp. 11 and 14). This classification is not without risk, and may further stigmatise these children, who have already been abandoned and/or placed in care. On the one hand, these children are already incorrectly registered on a 'special' list, which will slow down or, on the contrary, speed up their adoption, sometimes without any real attempt at family reintegration, or promotion of domestic adoption, and with insufficient preparation and support. On the other hand, these children, who are more complex to place, are often, quite illogically, entrusted to applicants, whose applications are unlikely to succeed because of age or the fact that they are single. Another potentially negative effect of these lists is the incorrect registration of children as being in good health in order to avoid a long

waiting period. By circumventing official procedures, new irregularities are appearing.

Whatever procedure is chosen and with the permanent objective of protection, it is important to focus on what is essential: to carry out the most detailed assessment possible of the individual, of the unique needs of the child through the development of tools, and the use, as far as possible, of a common language. ISS has met this challenge through the publication of a new professional guide for all actors in adoption and the wider field of child protection (see p. 14). Furthermore, opening up the access to adoption also implies the development of programmes and an assessment methodology, and the preparation of, and support to, adoption applicants, all of which are adapted to the needs of the child. This is because each child is special and deserves special parents, and child protection systems must adapt to the child, and not the other way round.

The child and his life story

When faced with the potential pressures linked to the system of child protection (unwieldy bureaucracy, excessively long or short waiting periods, etc.), it is not always easy for professionals to create an environment for real dialogue and to grant sufficient time to constructing a relationship of trust with the child, which is the key to a quality support service. The life book is therefore a valuable tool, even if its impact is not always fully recognised for its true value. It offers the possibility for the child to

become the actor of his or her life, or to reintegrate his or her life, and to feel proud of his or her story, as reflected in the personal story of Katarina Tomic in the previous issue of the Monthly Review (No. 214 of August 2017). By assimilating and following the ideas of this book, the child and the professional can, together, map out the child's future, and make it easier for him or her to adapt to his or her family and social environment. The training of all professionals should include such works through specific learning programmes (see Monthly Review No. 208 of January 2017) and provision of resources such as the valuable guide on this subject recently published by CoramBAAF (see p. 9).

The child and his or her families

The unique needs of an adopted child or a child in foster care must also be seen in the light of the different families present in his or her life, and between whom he or she sometimes feels he or she has to choose. It is essential that professionals understand the conflicts of loyalty these children have to face, whatever the specific characteristics of the child (see p. 12). The complexity of the relationship issues underlying

the placement may put the child at risk. The issue of maintaining contact between the child and his or her biological parents following a placement in foster care, for example, may raise emotional and behavioural challenges for the child (see p. 7). The attitude of both, foster and adoptive parents, within their respective roles, is of prime importance and helps to avoid any feeling of competition. The child will adapt more easily to his or her environment and whole life, if he or she can understand that all these families play a complementary role in his or her life. There is room for everyone in the heart of a child.

These thoughts remind us that, over and above different cultures and borders, we are working with human beings in all their diversity and complexity. Let us get back to the importance of continuing to develop tools and methodologies, which enable us to assess ever more accurately the needs of each child, and to adapt our way of working in both domestic and international adoption and child protection to their realities.

The ISS/IRC team,
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