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NEWSLETTER

Reverse flow programme by the French Adoption Agency

In this interview, Caroline Bouchet, Head of the Information and Support Department at the Agence française de l'adoption (the accredited public adoption body in France), presents the reverse flow programme that has been in place at the agency for over a decade, its challenges and its benefits.

1. Could you describe the reverse flow programme that AFA (Agence Française de l'Adoption, the French Adoption Agency) has been running since 2009? What needs has this programme met?

This programme is a response to the evolving landscape of adoption, both nationally and internationally. The profile of children has shifted towards older children, often siblings, with complex life histories and frequently diagnosed mental and physical health issues. It's crucial to highlight the efforts made by origin countries in compiling child reports. Given these developments, it's evident that families require better preparation and support to handle these challenges.

Consequently, AFA's partner countries increasingly propose children who meet France's definition of Children with Special Needs (aged 5 and above, siblings, with a significant life history or health problem). Since 2022, AFA has also supported French departments in finding families for children under state care when no family is identified.

The integration process into the Reverse Flow programme allows working with applicants on the

scope and opportunities of their project. It ensures that applicants' plans are supported and that a child's specific needs align with the resources provided by their new family.

2. What kind of children are adopted through this reverse flow programme?

The profiles vary as much as the families' plans. However, they mainly include older children (over 10 years old) whose pre-care and placement experiences often impact their development (emotional, behavioural, learning challenges, adapted schooling). AFA is also involved with young children whose development and diagnosis may be uncertain, requiring families to be prepared for long-term uncertainties.

3. Not all applicants will be accepted into this specific programme. What additional particularities are expected of them?

Today, most children put forward for adoption, both nationally and internationally, are so-called special needs children. However, children proposed through AFA's Reverse Flow programme exhibit more pronounced and identified needs, necessitating tailored responses.

Candidates therefore need to be particularly aware of these needs and their implications on a

day-to-day basis and over time. Preparation and long-term availability - beyond adoption leave - are very important. Applicants also need to be realistic about their plans, such as existing local resources (for adapted schooling or identified support people, for example) or the financial impact of certain types of care.

4. How do the candidates in this programme prepare?

Applicants interested in this programme must attend two compulsory group sessions: the first one on children with special needs and the second on the reverse flow programme. At the end of these two sessions, they are given a questionnaire. The questionnaire has been contextualised by professionals from AFA's health department (doctors and psychologists). Applicants must complete it, contacting any professionals they may need (social workers, psychologists, medical specialists, etc.). Applicants must also take the time to check that their project corresponds to the limits set out in the information sheet attached to their approval.

Upon receiving the questionnaire, AFA reviews its alignment with the profiles received through the Reverse Flow. If aligned, applicants are interviewed by a doctor and psychologist jointly. A committee then unanimously decides on their enrolment. There is no refusal; a decision to postpone is made in the event of non-enrolment, so that applicants can take the time to reflect on the points raised by the professionals.

These steps for joining the reverse flow are not exclusive. Applicants are invited to prepare for adoptive parenthood through other sessions offered by the *Agence Française de l'Adoption* (free of charge for users), and through training courses that may be offered by other adoption stakeholders in France, such as *Enfance et Famille d'Adoption* (a federation of associations present throughout the country), the *Fédération Française des OAA* (French federation of AABs) or the *Faire Famille* association (non-exhaustive list).

Once enrolled, candidates continue preparing through sessions offered by adoption stakeholders.

5. What benefits have you seen since the programme was set up? Are there any

particular challenges that need to be addressed as well?

This programme makes it possible to gain a better understanding of the limits of the candidates and therefore to propose the best possible match between the profile of the child(ren) and that of the proposed candidate(s). AFA also works in close collaboration with the adoption teams in Children's Social Services at the *département* level. In this way, families who have joined the programme are notified to the department and can be more easily planned for a child with special needs. Finally, well-prepared families are better equipped to manage a child's needs, though this doesn't guarantee success.

Challenges, or "ghosts" of adoption as psychologists might term them, include the uncertainties applicants face despite preparation. Applicants registered in the reverse flow know that their application has been put forward by the agency, but that as an intermediary for adoption, the AFA is not the decision-maker: in intercountry adoption, this will be the Central Authority of the country and in national adoption, the family council of the *département*. However, despite all the preparation, applicants can still make plans.

The psychologists and professional services teams provide them with support, but some applications are put forward many times before they are potentially successful. Repeated projections and potential disappointments can deter applicants from pursuing their plans and they sometimes give up on their project.

6. Which countries does this programme work with? Do you have any good practices to highlight with certain countries of origin in particular?

This programme has been set up in many of AFA's partner countries, each with its own procedures. In some cases, you must already have a file registered in the country of origin in order to apply (e.g. Peru), while in others there is a competition between all the operators (Togo) or a proposal of a child's profile to an operator for a limited period (Bulgaria). AFA has extensive experience of working with Colombia, but also with other countries where adoption is rarer (Albania). It is important to remember that the child's country of origin is looking for the best possible

family to meet the needs of the proposed child. As with any proposal, best practice includes the quality of the application, the information it contains and the opportunity for applicants to ask

additional questions (at least once). In addition, clear and streamlined procedures improve conditions for supporting families.



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