

## **Grief and loss for adoptive parents'**

**Excerpt of article, "Loss issues in Adoption" by Sarah Armstrong, PARC**

The death of a loved one, the loss of a limb, the loss of a job, are more tangible than the loss of something that never existed - my unborn children.' (from 'Teddy Bear in the Corner' by Ann James)

This quote from an adoptive mother of two adult children clearly brings us to the key loss issue for most adoptive parents, that of their infertility. There is, however, much less written about the loss experience of the adoptive parents than of the other sides of the 'triangle'. Like adoptees, they were seen to be the lucky ones, the receivers of the gift of a child. What they had lost along the way, what they would continue to lose, was rarely seen.

These adoptive parents suffer with the loss of the children they would have had - their 'fantasy child' (Lifton), the child that would have carried on their biological line, resembled them, formed the basis of future generations, reproduced themselves. Infertility was a taboo subject until more recent years, when reproductive technology developments allowed it to be discussed more freely. Infertility issues may not have been resolved, or even addressed, at the time of the adoption. Adoptive parents have reported that, when being assessed as prospective adoptive parents, they were questioned on their infertility and that this may have been a painful and humiliating experience, but that the degree to which they had resolved the issues was dealt with perfunctorily, if at all. They also, particularly the mother, where it was often assumed that the infertility lay were made to feel blamed, imperfect, lacking somehow, for 'failing' to produce a child. There may have been little or no opportunity for exploring the grief of the infertility even with their partner or wider family; with the miscarriages, stillbirths or the unexplained failure to conceive being mourned in private and alone. Adoptive parents suffered with the code of silence in much the same way as did birth parents, with the pressure not to talk about the infertility being very real.

Over the years of raising their children, the infertility issues may be brought to the surface repeatedly by the various reminders of their non-biological relationship to their children - questions about their children's medical history that cannot be answered, remarks about the lack of resemblance between them and their children, telling their children about the adoption, the birth of grandchildren and, perhaps most forcefully, their children's reunion with birth family members. The pain of these continuing reminders, however necessary, can reinforce the negative power of the couple's infertility. In the past, some adoptive parents have found these issues so difficult that it has led them to deny the reality of the adoption. It is in these families that dangerous myths have grown; it is here that adoptees have not been told of their adoption and have been brought up literally 'as if born to' their adoptive parents. In our experience, this is not uncommon, and is almost always discovered at some stage, causing untold damage and anguish to all sides.

Adoptive parents have also suffered from the fallacy that raising an adopted child is identical to raising their own biological child. If this is taken on as a belief, the adoptive parent is poorly equipped to deal

with the very real differences in the two sets of experiences. The 'fantasy child' which may have replaced their own dead or imagined children will almost certainly love them, but also comes to them with a pre-existing biological link to another mother, another father. He or she will, therefore, never fully be theirs and cannot fully replace those lost children. For some adoptive parents, there may be a fear of losing their child and therefore a threat to their secure role as a parent. The natural mother may somehow reclaim her child - in infancy or when reunion occurs.

What successfully promotes healing differs for each person, but some of the common things that have been found to be helpful are: meeting with people who have had similar experiences and hearing one's own experience given respect in the retelling; being heard and having one's experience validated, for example through forums such as the current Parliamentary Inquiry into Past Adoption Practices in NSW; seeking information on birth family, entering into a reunion if desired and having these new relationships supported by people close to you; public recognition of the complex nature of adoption; counselling and support groups.

### **What has been found to promote healing?**

Any single adoption has as many meanings and truths as there are different parties involved. The experience of loss can be seen to thread its way throughout the various narratives and the different tellings of the same story. Part of our work is to help those affected parties to find ways of living with what they have lost and to find their own way of making sense of their adoption experience.

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