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Characteristics and Challenges of Families Who Adopt Children with Special Needs: An Empirical Study

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An increased number of children with special needs are being placed in adoptive homes. Successful placements of these children are of critical importance to adoption agencies. The first purpose of this paper was to examine demographic differences in special needs adoptions that might exist in child, parent, and agency characteristics. The second purpose of this paper was to examine these child, parent, and agency characteristics to determine if they have predictive value in relation to positive adoption outcomes. Two hundred and forty-nine (249) special needs adoptive families representing 373 children responded to a mail survey as part of a study on special needs adoption. The majority of adoptive parents in this study reported good adoption outcomes despite problems obtaining needed services. As found elsewhere in the child welfare research literature, certain characteristics of the adoptive child and adoptive families coupled with agency practices appear to have predictive value in their adoptive experience. Child characteristics and parental expectations had the greatest influence on adoption outcomes. No differences on adoption outcomes were found between former foster parents to the adoptive child and new parents. Implications for practice and policy are advanced.

Adoptions of special needs children (children who are older, from racial or ethnic minorities, members of siblings groups, and/or who have special emotional, behavioral, developmental and/or medical problems) are increasing throughout the United States due to many factors. Included among these conditions are the limited number of healthy white infants available for adoption

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and federal and state legislation geared towards freeing children from foster care for adoption. The permanency planning movement spurred by the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) has resulted in the increased numbers of children with special needs being placed in adoptive placements rather than growing up in the foster care system. The shift towards more special needs adoptions has been accompanied by an increased rate of children and families experiencing post-adoptive problems (i.e., financial, medical, behavioral, legal). It has also resulted in an increase in disrupted and dissolved adoptions (i.e., termination prior to and after legal finalization); and an intensified demand for more pre and post adoptive services from state and local entities (Groze, 1996; Kramer & Houston, 1998; Smith & Howard, 1994, 1999).

In addition, the recent passage of federal adoption and foster care reform legislation, The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) (ASFA) places new requirements on states to lessen the time a child remains in foster care and to expedite the number of adoptions of special needs children which further increases the availability of special needs children for adoption. States are faced with shorter time frames for making permanent placement plans for children who have been in supervised care and mandates to terminate parental rights for children who cannot be placed with their parents or other relatives after fifteen months in foster care.

While the majority of families who adopt children with special needs remain intact and report good outcomes (Groze & Rosenthal, 1991; Nelson, 1985; Rosenthal & Groze, 1994; Smith & Howard, 1999), little empirical evidence exists that describes these families. Most of the information on successful adoptive families must be inferred from studies that were conducted on disrupted or dissolved adoptions. Taken as a whole, the child welfare research literature has suggested that certain characteristics of the child and adoptive families coupled with agency practices have predictive value for adoptive outcomes.

Child Characteristics

Several studies have found that the older the child at placement, the greater the risk for poorer adoptive outcomes and disruption (Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield & Carson, 1988; Groze, 1986; Rosenthal, Schmidt & Conner, 1988). Severe, multiple, and persistent behavior and emotional problems of the child have also been found to be correlated with a decrease in parental satisfaction and stability of the placement (Barth & Berry, 1988; Groze, 1996;

Reid, Kagan, Kaminsky & Helmer, 1987; Rosenthal & Groze, 1992, 1994; Schmidt, 1985). Smith & Howard (1991, 1994) and Schmidt (1985) found past history of sexual abuse to be highly associated with disruption, and multiple foster care and adoptive placements have been linked to increased incidence of disruption and parental dissatisfaction (Kagan & Reid, 1986; Festinger, 1986). Finally, the research generally supports the notion that sibling group placements pose greater risk for disruption and poorer adoptive outcomes (Boneh, 1986; Benton, Kane & Tipton, 1985; Kadushin & Seidl, 1971). However, Rosenthal et al. (1988) found sibling group placement associated with reduced risk.

Parental Characteristics

Foster-parent adoptions and relative adoptions have been correlated to fewer disruptions, increased parental satisfaction and more appropriate parental expectations (Barth et al. 1988; Festinger, 1986, Groze, 1995; Rosenthal, Schmidt & Conner, 1988; Schmidt, 1985; Smith & Howard, 1991). Several outcome studies found better outcomes when adoptive families are of lower socioeconomic status (Barth & Berry, 1988; Groze, 1986, 1995; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988). Goetting (1986) found that parents with higher education tend to report lower levels of satisfaction with parenting, while numerous studies have found a positive association between disruption and the higher educational attainment of one or both parents (Barth, 1988; Barth & Berry, 1988; Festinger, 1986; Rosenthal & Groze, 1990; Rosenthal, Schmidt & Conner, 1988). However, others do not show this pattern (Bourguignon & Watson, 1989; Smith & Howard, 1991). Lower disruption rates in minority families have been observed in a few studies (Rosenthal et al., 1988; Rosenthal & Groze, 1990; Urban Systems Research and Engineering, 1985), while others show no such association (Barth & Berry, 1988; Festinger, 1986). Single-parent adoptions have proved to be as stable as couple adoptions (Barth et al., 1988). Finally, family rigidity, father's noninvolvements in parenting tasks and unrealistic expectations on behalf of families have all been associated with more negative adoptive outcomes (Barth & Berry, 1988; Cohen, 1984; Kagan & Reid, 1986; Glidden, 1991; Groze, 1995).

Agency Practices

Barriers to and shortage of post-placement services that support and assist the adoptive family have been linked to more negative adoption outcomes (Barth, Berry, Goodfield & Feinberg, 1986; Nelson, 1985; Groze, Young & Corcran-Rumppe, 1991). Insufficient pre-adoptive placement training (Barth, 1988; Barth & Berry, 1988; Katz, 1986; Nelson, 1985) and incomplete information on the child prior to adoption (Groze, 1994; Nelson, 1985) have been identified as major stressors for adoptive families and have been linked to more negative satisfaction on behalf of the adoptive family. Nelson (1985) found satisfaction with agency preparation was one of the most critical predictors of parents' satisfaction with the entire adoption.

In general, the same factors that predict intact versus disrupted adoptions also predict positive adoption outcomes versus negative outcomes. Positive adoption outcomes can constitute numerous variables such as parental satisfaction (Gerard, 1994), quality of relationship between parent and child (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992), and the overall impact of the adoptive child on the family and marriage (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992). The current research is an initial effort to examine factors related to positive adoption outcomes of special needs children in the state of Nevada. It was conducted to help facilitate understanding of the unique issues and challenges faced by special needs adoptive families. The study focuses on three major areas of special needs adoptions: child characteristics (children's behavior problems and children's disabilities), parental characteristics (expectations regarding adopted children), and agency practices (amount of prior information about adopted children and problems parents encountered while trying to obtain services for their adopted children). The first purpose of this paper was to examine demographic differences that might exist in child, parent, and agency characteristics. The second purpose of this paper was to examine these child, parent, and agency characteristics to determine if they have predictive value in relation to positive adoption outcomes (parental satisfaction, quality of parent-child relationships, perceived overall impact of the child's adoption on families and, perceived overall impact of the child's adoption on marriages where applicable).

Methods

Participants & Procedures

Eligible participants included all families in the state of Nevada receiving adoption subsidies and/or who had an adoption subsidy agreement in place as of January 2000 ($n = 609$). Adoption subsidy agreements are in place with families who have adopted special needs children and can include the provision of financial, medical and/or service assistance. Surveys were mailed to these families in January 2000. A pre-paid return envelope was included in each mailing. No identifying information was collected, allowing for completely anonymous responses. For the purpose of sending reminder postcards to encourage participation, a number was assigned to each envelope to track which families had completed the survey. Two follow-up mailings were sent to families not responding to the survey. Data collection ended in May 2000. Two hundred and forty-nine (249) families responded representing 373 children (41%).

The survey instrument was pre-tested with social workers from the state child welfare agency and foster and adoptive parents. It included items to assess the following elements thought to be predictive of positive adoption outcomes: demographics, child characteristics, parental characteristics and agency practices. Child characteristics were comprised of children's behavior problems and disabilities. Parental characteristics referred to parents' expectations regarding their adopted children. Agency practices included the amount of information parents received about their children prior to adoption, and problems parents encountered while trying to obtain services for their adopted children. Positive adoption outcomes encompassed parents' satisfaction with the adoption, parents' quality of relationships with their children, and the perceived overall impact of the adoptive experience on their families and marriages (where applicable).

Predictor Measures

Child Characteristics

Behavior Problem Index. Development of the behavior problem index was based on empirically defined characteristics of behavior and emotional problems known to effect special needs children (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992). It consisted of thirty-five (35) items. Twenty-three (23) items specifically

measured distinguishing features of delinquent or aggressive behavior and the remaining twelve (12) items described emotional issues. The Behavior Problem Index is an itemized inventory of behaviors that are rated as perceived problems by the child's caregiver. The scale has an excellent internal consistency reliability coefficient (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

Disability Index. The disability index consists of a seventeen (17) item checklist of physical handicaps, disabilities and/or emotional problems that are known to reflect those of special needs children (Rosenthal, Groze & Morgan, 1996; Rosenthal & Groze, 1992; Walsh, 1991). This measure's internal consistency coefficient falls at an acceptable level (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$).

Parental Characteristics

Parental Expectations. The inappropriate expectations subscale from the "Adult-Child Parenting Inventory - 2: Assessing High Risk Parenting Attitudes and Behaviors" (Bavolek & Keene, 1999) was adapted to measure parental expectations. Seven statements were rated by caregivers on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included the following statements: "Parents need to push their children to do better" and "Children learn respect through strict discipline". The sum of these ratings reflects caregivers' opinions and attitudes regarding their expectations of what is appropriate behavior for their children. Higher scores are associated with more nurturing non-abusive parenting attitudes. The measure's internal consistency reliability coefficient was very good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

Agency Practices

Prior Information Index. The prior information index was adapted from Rosenthal, Schmidt & Conner (1988) and measures the amount of information a parent had regarding a special needs child's background and characteristics prior to adopting that child. Issues included in this measure were awareness of the child's relationships and attachments with birth family members; birth parents' medical and social histories; the child's personal history of abuse, neglect and/or emotional problems, the child's handicaps and/or disabilities, medical conditions, and personality. Ten (10) items were rated on a four point scale from 1 (no information) to 4 (a great deal of information). This measure's internal consistency reliability coefficient is very good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

Adoption Problems Index. The adoption problem index was adapted from the results of an Illinois study (Walsh, 1991) to identify potential problems that caregivers might experience when trying to obtain services. There are ten (10) items and a qualitative option to write in specific problems not included on the list. The 10 quantitative items are rated by caregivers on a scale from 1 (small problem) to 5 (big problem) with regard to how the situation affects their family. The measure's internal consistency reliability coefficient was very good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

Outcome Measures

Based on previous research five measures were chosen to reflect positive adoption outcomes. These included: parental satisfaction, the quality of the relationship between parents and children, and the overall impact of the child's adoption on the family and/or marriage.

Parental Satisfaction

Satisfaction with parenting was adapted from a subscale of the "Parent-Child Relationship Inventory" (Gerard, 1994). Ten statements were rated by the caregiver on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Sample items included the following statements: "I get a great deal of satisfaction from having children" and "I would really rather do a lot of other things than spend time with my child". The sum of these ratings reflected opinions and attitudes regarding the parenting experience. The internal consistency coefficient falls at an acceptable level (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$).

Quality of Relationship with Child

The quality of primary caregivers' relationships with their children is a composite score of their responses to five (5) items addressing the following issues: trust, respect, communication, regular and mutually enjoyable time spent together, and their overall estimation of how well they get along. The five statements were adapted from Rosenthal & Groze (1992) and were rated on a scale from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent). The measure's internal consistency reliability coefficient was very good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Overall Impact of Child's Adoption

Two measures were obtained by asking caregivers to rate separately the impact of the child's adoption on their family and their marriage (if applicable). Responses options were as follows: mostly positive, positives and negatives about equal, or mostly negative.

Results

Characteristics of respondents were as follows: The majority of primary caregivers were female (88.1%), White not of Hispanic descent (86.1%), married or living with a partner (79.1%), and their ages ranged from 25-73 with an average of 44.9 years. Most had attended some college (40.7%), were employed full-time (38.5%), and had an annual household income of \$60,000 or more (28.6%). This majority resided in single family homes (85.9%), in Southern Nevada (44.8%). They were active in their religious or spiritual beliefs (40%), were prior foster parents to their adopted children (57.7%), and had primarily adopted these children after becoming acquainted with them through the foster care system (39.7%). The majority of special needs adopted children were male (51.5%), White not of Hispanic descent (57.5%), and were adopted individually - not as part of a sibling group (54.5%). Their ages at the time of entry into the home ranged from newborn to 14 years with an average of 3.14 years, and at the time of the survey from 7 ½ months to 29 years with an average of 9.67 years. The full diversity of caregiver respondents and adopted children is illustrated in Table 1. Ethnic backgrounds of parents and children suggest numerous cross-cultural adoptions.

Table 1.
Sample Demographics

Demographic characteristics	Primary Caregiver		Spouse or Partner		Adopted Child	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	44	11.9	254	84.9	183	51.5
Female	325	88.1	45	15.1	172	48.5
Race / ethnicity						
Asian / American	1	.3	2	.7	5	1.4
African / American	35	9.5	18	6.0	65	18.1
Hispanic / Latino	5	1.4	5	1.7	13	3.6
Mixed race / ethnicity	6	1.6			58	16.1
Native American	4	1.1	5	1.7	3	.8
White not of Hispanic descent	316	86.1	270	90.0	207	57.5
Other					9	2.5
Education						
Some high school	9	2.4	10	3.3		
High school diploma	44	11.9	40	13.3		
Attended some college	151	40.7	127	42.3		
College graduate	68	18.3	58	19.3		
Graduate school	61	16.4	28	9.3		
Technical, vocational, or trade	32	8.6	33	11.0		
Other	6	1.6	4	1.3		
Religious or spiritual practice						
Not active	97	26.2	104	34.3		
Active	148	40.0	112	37.0		
Very active	125	33.8	87	28.7		
Employment						
Part-time	35	9.4	9	3.0		
Full-time	143	38.5	195	64.8		
Self-employed	48	12.9	40	13.3		
Retired	20	5.4	21	7.0		
Student	6	1.6	3	1.0		
Not employed for pay	66	17.8	15	5.0		
Other	53	14.3	18	6.0		
Family Characteristics	N %					
Annual income from all sources						
Up to \$14,999	10	4.1				
\$15,000 to \$24,999	18	7.5				
\$25,000 to \$34,999	31	12.9				
\$35,000 to \$44,999	55	22.8				
\$45,000 to \$59,999	54	22.4				
\$60,000 and above	69	28.6				
Don't know	4	1.7				

Table 1 continued

Demographic characteristics	Primary Caregiver		Spouse or Partner		Adopted Child	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Money at the end of the month						
Not enough money	56	23.6				
Just enough money	148	62.4				
More than enough money	33	13.9				
Type of family residence						
Single family home	213	85.9				
Farm or ranch	13	5.2				
Apartment	8	3.2				
Duplex, condo, townhouse, etc.	11	4.4				
Other	3	1.2				
Location where family resides						
Northern Nevada	50	20.2				
Southern Nevada	111	44.8				
Rural Nevada	15	6.0				
Out of state	72	29.0				
Sibling group membership						
Adopted single children	201	54.5				
Adopted siblings	168	45.5				
Type of adoption						
Foster parents	210	57.7				
Relative	27	7.4				
New parents	127	34.9				
Age	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
At time of survey	44.93	8.08	45.94	8.18	9.67	4.23
Age of child at entry to home					3.14	3.03
People supported on annual income	4.79	2.33				
Number of children in the home	3.09	2.25				

A comparison can be made between families who participated and families who failed to respond to the survey. As evident in Table 2, those responding to the survey were representative of the sample as a whole.

Table 2.
Respondent and Nonrespondent Characteristics

	Survey Sample		Survey Nonrespondents	
	N	%	N	%
<u>Primary caregiver</u>				
Race / ethnicity				
White	205	83.7	273	76.0
Black	27	11.0	97	16.0
Latino	4	1.6	12	2.0
Other / mixed	9	3.6	37	6.0
Type of adoption				
Foster parent	210	57.7	347	62.0
Relative	27	7.4	45	8.0
New parents	127	34.9	168	30.0
<u>Child</u>				
Race / ethnicity				
White	207	57.5	335	60.0
Black	65	18.1	123	22.0
Latino	13	3.6	39	7.0
Other / mixed	75	20.8	61	11.0
Gender				
Male	183	51.5	268	48.0
Female	172	48.5	291	52.0
Sibling group membership				
Yes	168	45.0	240	43.0
Age at entry to home	3.1 yrs.		4.1 yrs.	
Age at Finalization	5.2 yrs.		5.8 yrs.	

Child Characteristics

Pearson correlations were used as a measure of association between the child demographics of age at the time of the survey, number of years in the home, and the child characteristics of number of behavior problems, and number of disabilities. To explore differences between demographic groups, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed on two dependent variables: the child's number of behavior problems and the child's number of disabilities. Independent variables were the child's gender, race / ethnicity, and sibling group membership. With the use of Wilks' criterion, the combined DVs were significantly affected by the child's sibling group membership ($F_{2, 318} =$

7.14, $p < .001$). Significant between-subjects effects are presented below and in Table 3.

Behavior Problem Index. The median number of behavior problems reported per child was 3 with 32 % of the children having problems described as profound or severe. The most frequently reported behavior problems were anger (45%); impulsiveness (42%); defiance (38%); tantrums (36%) and hyperactivity (34%).

- There was a significant positive relationship between number of years in the home and the number of behavior problems ($N = 352$, $r = .238$, $p < .001$). As the time in the home increased so did the number of behavior problems that occurred.
- There was a significant main effect of sibling group membership ($F_{1, 340} = 13.70$, $p < .001$). Those who were adopted as part of a sibling group displayed more behavior problems ($M = 7.41$) than those who were adopted as individuals ($M = 5.16$).

Disability Index. Children were reported to have an average of 2.14 disabilities with 27% of the children having problems described as profound or severe. Behavioral problems (51%); emotional problems (42%); learning disabilities (42%) and developmental delays (40%) were the most frequently cited problems.

- There was a significant positive relationship between number of years in the home and the number of disabilities ($N = 352$, $r = .164$, $p < .01$). Greater numbers of disabilities were associated with more time in the home.

Parental Characteristics

To explore differences between demographic groups a between-subjects analysis of variance was performed with the primary caregiver variables of gender, race / ethnicity, education, employment status, religious practice, income, type of adoption, and whether or not the child was adopted as part of a sibling group with regard to their expectations toward their child. Subsequent comparisons were computed using Dunnett's C tests to account for unequal variance between groups. Significant results are presented below and in Table III.

Parental Expectations . Sixty-two percent (62%) of the responses reflected parenting attitudes of the general population, while 16% endorsed high-risk practices.

- There was a significant difference for sibling group membership ($F_{1,358} = 4.97, p < .03$). Parents who adopted single children as opposed to sibling groups scored higher ($M = 21.44$) or expressed more nurturing, non-abusing parenting attitudes than those who had adopted children as part of sibling groups ($M = 20.19$).
- There was a significant difference for race / ethnicity ($F_{4,356} = 4.24, p < .01$). African-American parents endorsed more high risk parenting practices ($M = 17.63$) than White parents not of Hispanic descent ($M = 21.31$).
- There is a significant difference between activity in religious or spiritual practices ($F_{2,359} = 6.21, p < .01$). Those reporting to be very active endorsed more high risk parenting practices ($M = 19.84$) than those who were not active in their religious or spiritual beliefs ($M = 22.35$) ($p < .05$).

Agency Practices

To explore any differences among child and parent demographic groups with regard to agency practices, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed on two dependent variables: the amount of information parents had prior to adopting their children and the number of problems encountered while trying to obtain adoption services. Independent variables were the child's age at the time of the survey (grouped on quarter percentiles: infant to 6 years, 7 to 10 years, 11 to 13 years, 14 years and older); the child's minority status (minority vs. white not of Hispanic descent); length of time the child had been in the home (grouped on quarter percentiles: less than 4 years, 4 to 6 years, 6 to 9 years, more than 9 years); the child's sibling group membership (yes or no with regard to whether or not they had been adopted as part of a sibling group); and the child's type of adoption (previous foster parents to the adopted child but not related, relative of the child, new parents to the child but not prior foster parents or related). Subsequent comparisons were computed using Dunnett's C tests to account for unequal variance between groups. With the use of Wilks' criterion, the combined DVs were significantly affected by the child's age at the time of the survey ($F_{6,356} = 3.13, p < .01$), and the type of adoption, ($F_{4,356} = 3.26, p < .01$). Significant between-subjects effects are reported below and in Table 3.

Table 3.
Child, Parent, and Agency Variables

Variable	Demographic
<u>Child variable</u>	
Behavior problems	> Years in the home > Sibling groups .001
Physical disabilities	> Years in the home .01
<u>Parental variable</u>	
Appropriate parental expectations	< Sibling groups .01 < African American parents .01 < Religious practice .01
<u>Agency variable</u>	
Prior information	> Relative placement .05 < Younger children .05 < Years in the home .05
Adoption problems	> Older children .001

Prior Information Index. A large portion of families (58%) reported not receiving enough information on the child; and 37% of the adoptive parents reported that the child's problems were more serious than originally reported by the adoption agency.

- There was a significant difference regarding the age of the child at the time of the survey ($F_{3, 268} = 2.97, p < .04$). Parents of younger children reported having received less information than families adopting older children ($p < .05$).
- There was a significant difference between types of adoptions ($F_{2, 268} = 4.10, p < .02$). Relatives reported having significantly more information about the child prior to adoption ($M = 18.11$) than both former foster parents ($M = 12.58$) or new parents ($M = 11.53$). No significant differences emerged in regards to foster parents and new parents. Foster parents did not report receiving any more information or any more accurate information than new parents ($p < .05$).
- There was a significant difference regarding the amount of time a child has been in the home ($F_{3, 345} = 3.45, p < .02$). Less information was available for children that have been in homes 9 years or longer than children in homes for lesser periods of time ($p < .05$).

Adoption Problem Index. The most frequently cited reason for not being able to get a needed service was not knowing where to go. The most serious problem reported by parents was the perception that the people who were supposed to help did not understand their problems.

- There was a significant difference of child's age ($F_{3, 268} = 3.28, p < .03$). Parents of children 14 and older reported more problems obtaining adoption services than parents of younger children.

Outcome Measures

Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the adoptive families expressed attitudes consistent with good parenting. Seventy-seven percent (77%) responded that the quality of their relationship with their child was good to excellent. Sixty-six percent (66%) of families said that the overall impact of the adoption on their family was positive. Forty-nine percent (49%) reported that the overall impact on their marriage has been mostly positive, while 10% reported mostly negative.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the role of child, parent, and agency characteristics in positive adoption outcomes. The dependent variables for four separate analyses were the positive adoption outcomes: parental satisfaction, parents' quality of relationships with their children, and the perceived overall impact of the adoptive experience on their families and marriages (where applicable). Independent variables in each analysis were: children's behavior problems, children's disabilities, parents' expectations, parents' problems obtaining adoption services, and the amount of background information provided by the agency prior the child's adoption. Stepwise selection of variables was employed. Criteria for inclusion were $p \leq .05$ and designated values for removal were $p \geq .10$.

Preliminary analyses were performed to determine the distribution characteristics of the study measures. As shown in Table IV, measures of children's behavior problems, children's disabilities, and parents' problems obtaining adoption services demonstrated significant skew. Square root transformations were used on these variables. Transformed data for these variables were used in all of the regression analyses. Table V shows Pearson correlations for among all predictor variables used in regression analyses. Table VI presents the correlation of predictor variables with outcome variables.

Table 4
Means, Standard Deviations, and Distribution Statistics for Predictor Variables
Included in Regression Analyses

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Child – Behavior	6.12	6.91	1.267	.942
Child – Disability	2.14	2.17	1.547	2.680
Parent – Expectations	20.84	5.32	.109	.134
Agency – Prior Information	12.43	6.60	.519	.047
Agency – Problems	5.34	6.09	1.083	.350

Table 5
Intercorrelations of Predictor Variables Included in Regression Analyses

Variable	Child – Behavior	Child - Disability	Parent - Ex- pectations	Agency - Information	Agency - Problems
Child – Behavior	-----				
Child – Disability	.165**	-----			
Parent – Expectations	.020	.156**	-----		
Agency – Prior Information	.028	.087	-.147**	-----	
Agency – Problems	.380**	.195**	.070	-.161**	-----

** p < .01

Table 6
Correlations of Predictor Variables with Positive Adoption Outcome Variables

Variable	Child – Behavior	Child - Disability	Parent - Ex- pectations	Agency - Information	Agency - Problems
Parental Satisfaction	-.189**	.057	.100	.015	-.061
Parent-Child Relationship	-.049	.094	.079	-.017	-.015
Impact on Family	-.079	.017	.104*	-.034	.014
Impact on Marriage	-.028	.010	.086	.059	-.039

** p < .01

The role of child, and parent characteristics was significant in predicting the positive adoption outcomes of: parenting satisfaction ($R = .216$, $F_{2, 286} = 7.02$, $p < .001$); quality of parents' relationships with their children ($R = .140$, $F_{1, 286} = 5.76$, $p < .02$); impact of the child's adoption on the family ($R = .153$, $F_{1, 285} = 6.81$, $p < .01$); and impact of the child's adoption on the marriage ($R = .171$, $F_{1, 199} = 6.02$, $p < .02$).

Two of the IVs contributed significantly to prediction of satisfaction with parenting. The R-square value indicates that about 4.7% of the variability in parental satisfaction was predicted by knowing scores on the two IVs. Child's behavior problems ($\beta = -.172$) had the greatest influence on parental satisfaction followed by parents' expectations for their adopted children ($\beta = .137$). The fewer the behavior problems, the higher the satisfaction with parenting. The more realistic the parents' expectations for their children, the higher the satisfaction with parenting. Only one of the IVs contributed significantly to the prediction of each of the three remaining dependent variables. Parents' expectations for their children had the greatest influence on the quality of the relationship with the child ($\beta = .140$), the impact of the child's adoption on the family ($\beta = .153$), and the impact of the child's adoption on the marriage ($\beta = .171$). The direction of parental expectations influence in these three regressions was positive. The more appropriate a parent's expectations for their child, the more positive the impact on their relationships with their children, their families, and their marriages. Table 7 shows the results of these multiple regression analyses.

Table 7
Standardized Beta Weights for Stepwise Multiple Regressions

Variable	Parental Satisfaction (Model 2)	Parent-Child Relationship	Impact On Family	Impact On Marriage
Child – Behavior	-.172**	-.052	-.096	-.093
Child – Disability	.025	.012	-.003	-.020
Parent – Expectations	.137*	.140*	.153**	.171*
Agency – Prior Information	.027	.060	.033	.095
Agency – Problems	-.030	-.028	-.006	-.072
Total R ²	.047	.020	.023	.029

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Discussion

Despite the challenges associated with adopting children with special needs, the majority of adoptive parents in this study reported good adoption outcomes despite problems obtaining needed services and the pronounced behavior problems and disabilities of the children they adopted. As found elsewhere in the child welfare research literature, certain characteristics of the adoptive child and adoptive families coupled with agency practices appear to have predictive value in their adoptive experience.

A large portion of families' reported significant behavior problems and disabilities of the children they adopted. Close to a third of the families surveyed reported the behavior problems and/or disabilities experienced by their adoptive child as profound or severe. Greater numbers of disabilities and behavior problems were also associated with more time in the home. This study reinforces the notion that many problems of special needs children manifest themselves many years after placement (Smith, Howard & Monroe, 1998; Unger, Dwarshuis, & Johnson, 1977). Obtaining needed post-adoption support services for these families is critical throughout the child's life cycle.

While 62% of families adopting special needs children in this study expressed appropriate nurturing and non-abusing parental attitudes; 16% endorsed attitudes consistent with high-risk practices. Parents who adopted children as part of a sibling group as opposed to single child adoptions, African-American parents, and parents reporting to be very active in religious or spiritual practices endorsed more high-risk parenting. The use of corporal punishment for some African-American and religious families may account for the lower scores for these groups. This measure may also reflect some middle-class bias. The finding regarding sibling group adoptions, coupled with the earlier finding that these adoptions have more behavior problems, may be resulting in more stressful situations that are negatively impacting the adoptive families' expectations of what is appropriate behavior for these children.

A large portion of families (58%) reported not receiving enough information on the child; and 37% of the adoptive families reported that the child's problems were more serious than originally reported by the adoption agency. Significant differences were observed with regard to information. Parents of younger children reported receiving less information than families adopting older children and less information was available for children that have been in homes nine years or longer than children in homes for lesser periods of time. The finding regarding length of time in the home could suggest that the adoption agency is getting better about providing more information to fami-

lies. In the recent past, some adoption agencies withheld information on a child or records were inadequate or poorly kept (Nelson, 1985; Groze, 1994). Due to better adoption practices, adoption agencies are attempting to provide more up-to-date and accurate information on these children. The finding regarding younger children could be a combination of the adoption agency having less information on very young children and the lack of preparation adoptive families may have regarding the problems associated with many special needs young children (i.e., medically fragile conditions, substance –exposed, etc.). It is critical that adoption agencies provide special training on the developmental needs of medically fragile and substance –exposed children.

Surprisingly, while relatives reported having significantly more information about the child prior to adoption than former foster parents and new parents, no differences emerged in regards to foster parents and new parents. Foster parents did not report receiving any more information or any more accurate information than new parents to the child.

Adoptive families reported significant barriers in obtaining post-adoptive services. Not knowing where to go and a perception that people who were suppose to help did not understand their problems were the major reasons cited by families for not getting supportive services. Adoption agencies must not only develop a wide range of post adoption services but promote and advertise these services to the community. These services need to be available through a cadre of state/county run programs, non-profit groups and faith-based institutions. Furthermore, providers of these services must receive special training on the needs of special needs children and families (Smith, Howard & Monroe, 1998). It is well documented that the shortage and availability of post-adoptive services can result in more negative adoption outcomes (Barth et al., 1986; Groze, Yoaung & Corcran-Rumppe, 1991). The lack of formal and informal resources for families adopting special needs children can cause significant stress that can severely impact the success of these adoptions.

The predictive value of the multiple regression equation joining child, parent and agency characteristics in relation to positive adoption outcomes, while significant, provided limited utility. Parental expectations did emerge as a significant indicator and had the greatest influence on all four of the adoption outcomes (parental satisfaction, quality of relationship between parent and child, and impact on family and marriage). The more appropriate a parent's expectations for the child, the more positive the impact on the adoption. In addition, the child's behavior problems had the greatest influence on parental satisfaction - the fewer behavior problems, the higher satisfaction with

parenting. These findings reinforce other research. Children with more behavior problems and more special needs have been associated with poorer adjustment (McDonald, Propp & Murphy, 2001; Rosenthal & Groze, 1994; Smith, Howard & Monroe, 1998). Unrealistic parental expectations have been linked to poorer adoption outcomes in several studies (Barth & Berry, 1988; Kagen & Reid, 1986; Glidden, 1991; Groze, 1995). However, the multiple regression equation joining together these different variables only accounted for a small percent of the total variance. Additional constructs are needed to offer more confident conclusions regarding the predictive value of the characteristics related to positive adoption outcomes.

Longitudinal or panel studies which involve the collection of observations from various individuals or participants over two or more occasions may provide more conclusive evidence on constructing a model predicting positive adoption success (Groze, 1996). In addition, other measures of adoption success including the use of services by adoptive families (McDonald, Propp & Murphy, 2001) may offer more insight to positive adoption outcomes. Finally, instead of linking all special needs children together, it may be necessary to study the specific type of special need the child has in relation to various parental, family and agency characteristics. Clearly, more needs to be known about the predictors of special needs adoptions and the challenges families face.

It was surprising to find, that contrary to other research (Nelson, 1985; Smith & Howard, 1991), no differences were found between former foster parents and new parents to the adoptive child on any of the adoption outcomes. This finding may indicate that despite the challenges in adopting special needs children, new parents can be as effective as former foster parents. Adoption recruitment efforts may want to increase their efforts in targeting families in the larger community to adopt special needs children. Adoption agencies need to ensure the expectations of both former foster parents and new parent to the adoptive child are thoroughly assessed.

In light of this discussion, it is important to consider the limitations of this study. First, data collection methods in this study relied on self-reports of adoptive parents, which are susceptible to response bias. Second, the special needs adoptions were being handled by one large state-operated child welfare agency in the west. The extent to which families in other states have similar or different experiences around their adoption experience is not clear. Many states are now contracting out to private agencies to perform special needs adoption. Finally, the current sample of participants, while appearing to resemble the non-respondents in terms of income, educational level, ethnicity

and marital status, may not be fully representative of the non-respondents. It is possible that respondents were more verbal, more comfortable expressing their opinions or more open to the benefits of research than the non-respondents. These findings need replication with a larger sample, and more exploration is needed into the various factors that contribute to positive adoption outcomes. Despite its limitations, this research offers important insight for intervention efforts on behalf of special needs adoptive children and their families.

Conclusion

Most parents reported good outcomes of the adoption, good relationships with their children, and overall satisfaction with the adoption experience. This study underscores the need for both better preparation of families adopting special needs children and the provision of post-adoptive services that are accessible, affordable and available to the family throughout the child's lifecycle.

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