

***Characteristics of Successful Adoptive Parents***

"What are the requirements to adopt?" is one of the most commonly asked questions by those considering adoption. Most agencies can easily spell out a few parameters − age requirements, length of marriage and the like. But adoption social workers look beyond the surface information in order to assess a family´s readiness. They also look for certain personal qualities which bode well for the success of a special needs adoptive placement. Just what does it take to parent a child who has been in the state´s system, a child who will bring with him or her certain behavioral, emotional, or developmental challenges? What qualities should adoptive parents strive to develop in order to equip themselves for this enormous task?

***Readiness for Parenting***

To begin, adoptive applicants should evaluate their level of readiness for parenthood in general. The basic requirements include emotional maturity, stability, adequate health and energy, good communication skills and problem solving skills, and the ability to adjust ones expectations. Another key ingredient is sound motivation. Becoming a parent in order to feel fulfilled, to win approval, or to improve a faltering marriage, are never good reasons for bringing any child into the home, either through birth or through adoption.

***Readiness for Parenting through Adoption***

Next, the prospective adoptive parent needs to look at his or her ability to parent a child through adoption, as adoptive parenting has some important differences, along with its many similarities, to parenting by birth. Is the parent able to accept, to cherish, and to make a permanent commitment to a child not born to him or her? Can the parent accept the child's past? All adoptive children have a set of parents, and a genetic and family history, that is separate from the adoptive family's.

In addition, older children often bring with them memories of their time spent with their birth family. Can the adoptive parent accept these aspects of the child, while honoring a child's loyalty to his or her birth family or perhaps to a previous foster family? Finally, if infertility or loss of a child has been a part of the adoptive parent's history, has it been adequately dealt with and put to rest? Few experiences can be more detrimental to a child than to be placed adoptively with a parent who is still grieving the loss of either an actual or a fantasized birth child.

***Special Qualities for Adoptive Parents***

The parent of an adopted child should be aware of several additional assets commonly found in successful adoptive parents. Few families will possess all these qualities, but motivated parents can work towards developing them. These qualities are:

* **A Sense of Humor.** The ability to laugh at oneself, at the world, and at a child's antics is a great boast in facing the enormous challenges our children bring. This does not mean that all adoptive parents are great humorists, but parents who take every little thing very seriously often get into trouble parenting children with challenging behaviors. Laughter is often the best medicine, and a sense of humor is a survival tool.
* **A Sense of Perspective.** Successful adoptive parents are able to take one day at a time; to say, "Today was hell; tomorrow is bound to be better." They understand the long term nature of change (If the child spent seven years in unstable situations, another seven years is not an unrealistic time frame for the child to overcome some insecurities.). These parents' perspective includes a positive outlook on life. They see the world as a potentially good place and the future as promising.
* **Risk Takers.** Successful adoptive parents are risk takers. They are not careless or wanton, but they seek and welcome new challenges and new relationships, and their life histories reflect this. They do not need guarantees about the future to stir them to action, and they do not view challenges as insurmountable or overwhelming.
* **Tolerant of Changes and Unknowns.** Parents who can embrace this fare best. They understand and accept that enormous changes, some predictable but many not, are part of becoming a new family through adoption. They know that a child cannot move in and adjust totally to the family as it exists, but rather the family must do some adjusting and changing as well. They are willing to make changes, and are comfortable with unknowns.
* **Able to Accept and Express Emotions.** This is especially critical for adoptive parents. They are appropriate in their own expression of feelings, and are ready to become good role models in this arena. They know they cannot shield the child from pain, but must allow the child to experience and express pain and grief. The ability to accept feelings will enable parents to understand their own ambiguous feelings, and to accept without guilt those times when they may not like the child.
* **Good Team Players.** Adoptive parents acknowledge the need for outside resources, and they have a reliable support network. Families may be involved with therapists, special education teachers, counselors, social workers, speech pathologists, physical therapists, and the like. Secure parents see these services as a complement, not a threat, to their parenting. They advocate for the services their child needs, and work cooperatively with professionals.
* **A Holistic View of the Family and Child.** Successful adoptive parents see the family as a system-a team that works together. When problems arise, they concentrate on the family as a unit, rather than on one specific member. They view the child in his total environment, knowing the child is influenced by many factors, including school, neighborhood, friends, and past experience. They do not compartmentalize their thinking, which can lead to blaming and scapegoating.
* **Able to Make and Maintain Commitments.** Adoptive parents will stick with a child no matter how difficult the journey simply because this is what they have chosen to do. They may be disappointed over a child's perceived lack of attachment, but this does not deter their decision to be that child's parents. They believe in commitment, and are able to persevere in the face of adversity.
* **Secure Within Themselves.** Successful adoptive parents are able to de-personalize behavior, and to tolerate testing and lack of reciprocity. They keep right on being (believing that they are entitled to be) the child's parents, and refuse to be hindered by the child's rejection. They are able to delay gratification; to give without getting back. They do not need rewards from the child.
* **Flexibility.** This is an important quality. Adoptive parents must be able to make mistakes, adjustments, and allowances, as they will be called upon time and again to re-evaluate their expectations. They need to acknowledge when something isn't working and to try a different approach, or to modify an expectation.
* **Good Communicators and Problem Solvers.**. Successful adoptive parents express themselves clearly, and listen actively to others. They avoid linear thinking, but instead examine a problem from many angles, and employ logical and creative solutions. Communication and problem solving are skills parents will be called upon to use daily.

As you reflect upon these qualities, remember that few of us who are parenting children posses all of the desired qualities. They may best be seen as goals to strive toward. Often in two parent homes, one partner may excel in the areas where the other is weaker, thus providing balance. Researching this article was a humbling experience for this writer, who sees many shortcomings in her own measuring up. As I strive for self-improvement, I can only hope my critics will at some future time recognize my efforts. But isn't that what we hope for from all our children?

Article taken from Family Matters, February, 1993 by Claudia Hutchinson

Sources: Barth, Richard and Berry, Marianne, Adoption and Disruption
The National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption,
Characteristics of Successful Adoptive Families (video)

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