Intensive Support for Adoptive Families in Rural Areas

by

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Introduction
Many families who have adopted children from the foster care system live in rural areas with limited services available. The families are coping with the challenges of caring for children who came to them with extensive histories of trauma, prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, diminished ability to form relationships, and often anger at the world, and at themselves.

Kinship Center® in California has developed a unique post-adoption service to support these families, and reduce the need for out-of-home placement for these children.

Problem Statement
Families who adopt do not necessarily live in cities with relatively easy access to community supports and treatment options. Our experience over the last several years has been that many adoptive families find that rural settings offer more space, larger homes leading to a greater willingness to accept a child or sibling group by families in dwelling counterparts. Other families may adopt in the cities and later move to the country due to family or a lower cost and higher while such factors may supplement, many adoptive families find that the help they need to successfully raise their families is hard to find, or simply unavailable.

When difficulties arise in adoptive families that are related to adoption issues, the families often struggle on, gaining what help they can get from the internet and a plethora of “how to” books, until they become exhausted, overwhelmed, and, most importantly, isolated from friends and extended family. These parents believe that they made a solemn legal and moral commitment to parent their adopted children, but now they feel themselves to be failures, with life becoming a succession of seemingly endless stressful events. Families often reach this stage when the children are in their teens, with normal teenage separation issues exacerbated by limited attachment capability, and frequently characterized by opposition, defiance, attention deficit difficulties, poor school performance, repetitive lying, drug use, and even suicidal gestures or actual attempts. Other families reach this stage when the children are much younger, when the impact of trauma on their children’s development is more recent, and very frequently compounded by the damage caused by prenatal drug and/or alcohol exposure.

Previous Options – Residential Treatment
Faced with this seemingly unsolvable set of circumstances, some families come to believe that it would be better for the child, and therefore all concerned, to place the child in a residential treatment facility. Even though the financial costs associated with residential treatment are great, California’s Adoption
Assistance Program (AAP) can fund such placements for up to eighteen months for each episode, making out-of-home placement a viable option for struggling adoptive families. In addition, treatment facilities specializing in issues of attachment are often located in neighboring states, such as Utah and New Mexico. That degree of distance may sound appealing to families wrought with daily emotional pain.

The solution appears logical at that point. Indeed, it might be but for a couple of uncomfortable realities. First, most residential treatment programs do not yet have training in the unique issues related to adoption, and consequently are not able to fully address the attachment-based behavioral problems resulting from those underlying core issues. Without treating those core issues, little will have changed for the child after eighteen months, except that they have become more distant in their attachment to the family. Secondly, some of these children simply do not go home. Repeated eighteen month periods may be authorized if the parents remain convinced that the child has not made enough progress to return. In fact, many adopted children in residential treatment are able to comply for the most part with the expectations of the facility because they are not expected to demonstrate the emotional reciprocity that generally takes place in a family. While some of these children may be able to make the transition back to their families, many will not be able to do so successfully. Families for those children may choose not to reunify with their children because they are afraid to do so.

In recent years, California counties, who administer the AAP program, are much more reluctant than they used to be to fund repeated episodes of residential treatment when it is believed that the family has no intent to reunify. In some counties, adoptive families who balk at their child’s return from placement may be threatened with criminal abandonment charges by the very same agency that arranged the adoption in the first place. Children who are not reunified with their adoptive families following residential treatment simply re-enter the foster care system by court action or relinquishment of parental rights.

**Toughing It Out**

Most adoptive families in this predicament do not turn to residential placement but struggle on through the teenage years and beyond. They routinely find that therapists do not understand their issues (training for professionals in the unique needs of adoptive children and families is rare even in urban communities), and that school personnel tend to blame the parents for the child’s disruptive behavior. Over time, people who might be supportive become harder and harder to find. The parents cannot remember the last time they went out on a date together, and family vacations have become an impossible proposition. Statements such as, “we’ve become prison guards in our own house,” and “we have to watch him/her constantly, 24/7/365,” are not just occasional, they are common. The mental health of everybody in the family is impacted, and sometimes that results in unwise parenting decisions and violence that is reported as child abuse.

**Solution**

Kinship Center’s solution was developed in the year 2000, and expanded to focus on the rural population in 2008. Utilizing the legislative and administrative structure of California’s Wraparound initiative, the organization developed what came to be called Adoption-Informed Wraparound, which melds the principles and practices of Wraparound with a thorough knowledge of the Seven Core Issues of Adoption to assist families who have run out of options.

This paper is not a venue to describe Wraparound in detail, but a brief summary is helpful here. This is a process whereby the strengths of everybody in the family are identified and then utilized to solve problems
and move families toward their vision of what the future should preferably be. It is a process that is driven by the family, focused on goals and tasks to be carried out to reach those goals, and staffed by both professionals and mentors for a period of up to eighteen months. It is funded by the money that would have been used for residential treatment if that placement had occurred. Each family meets with its Wraparound team on a regular basis, including anyone they feel would be helpful. The team may consist of teachers, therapists, neighbors, relatives, probation officers, social workers, and boyfriends or girlfriends, to name a few. A Facilitator (usually a Master’s level social worker) is responsible for the integrity and structure of the process, and each family has a Parent Partner (an experienced adoptive parent) as a peer support person. Depending on the nature of the needs, Family Assistants are deployed to help with specific tasks such as mentoring, behavioral planning, getting to appointments, and anything else that the Family Team wants to get done. Additional financial support can be provided for those families who need it.

This intensive process has seen remarkable success. Over the past ten years, we have seen 82% of the families served by Adoption-Informed Wraparound remain intact with their children still living at home. We have found that even though families begin their Wraparound experience with serious doubts, they are able to fulfill their commitment to the child, and the Family Teams are able to help families reach a successful outcome in most cases. This says a great deal about the character of families who chose to adopt, their flexibility, their love and their willingness to try new things. Families typically graduate with improved relationships with their children, possessing new parenting tools specifically crafted for their unique situation and, most importantly, greater hope for their future and their children’s eventual success. For those families where the child does not remain at home, nearly all are able to successfully maintain their parental relationship while the child is living in a temporary foster home or group home. They then reunify, perhaps with the help of a second episode of Wraparound. Our primary goal is to maintain the parental commitment for every child.

**Implementation of Rural Adoption Wraparound**

Foster children in California are often placed in families who reside in a different county from the child’s, and sometimes at great distance from the child’s home town. The best match between family and child determines those decisions. Yet, as described above, many of these rural communities do not have relevant resources available. To implement a helpful Adoption Wraparound service in rural areas, we have needed to be very creative and use all the resources and technology that is available.

We presently serve families from Kinship Center’s offices in San Jose and Salinas, California, with families living as far away as Redding, Sacramento, Chico, Eureka, Crescent City, Lakeport, Susanville, and Santa Barbara. In the initial phases of implementation, our staff has been traveling extensively by car and by air, incorporating team meetings with as many families as possible on each trip. Parent Partner and Behavioral Specialists travel less frequently but maintain close contact by conference phones and email. Video calls have provided another way to bring staff to meetings, as well as others who are helpful to the family. Because some family locations have little or no cellular service, we sometimes rely on landlines. We help the family recruit Family Assistants from their own community, providing the advertising needed to identify candidates, and provide the funds to pay them.

We are now moving to the next phase as we begin to identify and hire staff in the communities where we see the highest number of referrals, and we are opening combination offices and residences in those locations. We are working with the community agencies that do exist, or are relatively close by, to develop skill sets that can support these families. We are assisting families in networking with other families, and have
established active support groups that rotate between the family homes. The next step is to offer a video conference room that can accommodate up to four families and a staff moderator.

**Summary**

I have attempted to describe a unique process of assistance for families who have adopted children who have experienced trauma, and who reside in areas with few community resources. Knowledgeable post-adoption support for families is a rarity in our urban areas and mostly absent in rural communities. By deploying teams of adoption-competent staff, focusing on the unique needs of each family and employing creative methods in local resource development, we have shown that family isolation, shame, and fear can be transformed into a new set of parenting strategies, and a recommitment to the adoption itself. Families emerge from their Wraparound experience revitalized, with a clearer view of their future, and on their way to realizing their vision.

**Sources**

Adoption Wraparound at Kinship Center  [www.adoption-wraparound.org](http://www.adoption-wraparound.org)

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**Endnotes**

1 Roszia, Sharon & Silverstein, Deborah, “Seven Core Issues in Adoption,” 1997

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**Graham Wright** has worked in child welfare and adoption for forty years in both Britain and California. He has been a county social worker, supervisor and manager, a private agency founding director, and two-term president and legislative chairman of California’s state adoption association. He is currently program director of Kinship Center’s post-adoption programs. Graham has received many commendations from state governors and two presidents. In 2008, he was chosen by Congress to receive the “Angel in Adoption” award at the White House.