

# **TAGS: Disruption-Dissolution; Parenting to Prevent Disruption**

## **Examining the Issues of Re-Homing and Adoption Disruption**

The demographics of children being adopted, especially from abroad, are changing. The children available for adoption now tend to be older and have more special needs. Adopting older children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or institutional living is hard work — often wonderful and immensely rewarding, but always hard. It is the type of parenting that requires intensive preparation pre-adoption, continued education post-adoption, and lots and lots of support for the family and the child throughout the family's life together. In short, it is not for everyone. It bears repeating: Not every loving, caring, well-meaning, and spiritually strong family should adopt these children from hard places. Period.

Weeding out the loving, caring, and well-meaning families who should not adopt is not easy, even when adoption agencies are trying their best. The sad truth is that not all adoption agencies are trying their best. Preparing families for all the possibilities when adopting abused and neglected kids is also hard work, and not all agencies are up to the task. As a result, we are seeing a rise in adoptions that are falling apart.

The correct term for an adoption that falls apart is “adoption dissolution” but it is more often called “adoption disruption” or a “failed adoption.”

Several years ago, NBC News, Reuters, and the Today Show did a series on adoption and the “underground world of ‘re-homing.’” There were the typical grumblings in the adoption world of “more negative press about adoption” but considering that the topic is the ultimate welfare of children, it's pretty important to embrace the scrutiny, while also discerning what is media hyperbole. We can only improve if we are open to learning. Playing ostrich is not an option. Looking back on what was covered by the media and what was in the actual Reuters lengthy report was good practice for understanding more about dissolution and how to prevent it.

### **Problems with the Reuter and NBC News Investigation on The Child Exchange**

The Today Show and Reuters both ran their stories on “an underground world of ‘re-homing,’ where parents give their children to new caretakers, sometimes people they have met only over the internet, with little or no government oversight.” They focused primarily on two cases – one child adopted as a teen from Liberia and the other adopted at almost 13 from China.

In both cases, desperate adoptive parents posted online to find a new family for their daughter. No agency was involved, no home study was completed, and no pre-adoption education took place for those prospective new families. The children were simply dropped off with the selected new family presumably with a power of attorney transferring guardianship. The new homes in both cases were disasters. One family had a record for child abuse, and the other should have.

However, when you dig through [the actual 261 cases Reuters listed at the bottom of the 2013 report](#), many, perhaps most, of these cases involved a legitimate adoption agency, or the family working with an adoption agency, seeking a new home for a child from an adoption disruption. A home study, with background checks, and adoption education would be required just as with all adoptions. In other

words, if there is “an underground world of “re-homing,” where parents give their children to new caretakers, sometimes people they have met only over the internet, with little or no government oversight”, it likely is not a very large world, and clearly not as large as is being reported by the media.

Of the 17 postings for children between the ages of 0-4 listed in the Reuters report, only 5 did not clearly state that an agency was involved and that a home study would be required. And even in those 5 cases, it is not clear that the families were seeking to re-home on their own without a completed home study. A quick sampling of the postings for the other age groups reveals similar information. Here’s a sampling of the postings for 0-4-year old children listed:

- An agency looking for a home for a 3- and 5-year-old sibling group adopted from Ethiopia less than a year before being listed. They were up front with the challenges the children were facing and what type of family would be best for their specific needs. It was clear that a home study and new adoption would be completed.
- Two cases where a family posted asking for advice on what agency or attorney to use to help them find a new family for their child.
- An agency looking for families for two separate kids from disrupted adoption. Stated up front that any family responding must have a home study.
- A mom who adopted from foster care posted seeking advice about how to handle behaviors and her own lack of attachment, not looking for a new family. I would assume this case was included because the word “disruption” was used when she mentioned that he came from an adoption disruption.

There are many opinions on the matter, but in this age of social media, online child listings to seek families to adopt harder-to-place children are quite common and often very helpful for finding good new placements, as long as no identifying and sensitive information is shared online. (For the record, in some of the postings included in the Reuters report, far too much sensitive information was indeed shared publicly.)

The practice of online child listings is not new. In fact, it is used by every state in the US to find adoptive homes for children in the foster care system. Further, in theory, an online group specifically where people understand that these will be harder-to-parent children with special challenges, can be a very good starting place to find competent families. The next step, of course, is to complete a legitimate home study with an agency who will also prepare them to be successful parents to these children. It could be, if one reviews the media stories, that the investigative reporters simply didn’t understand how families are usually found for these children.

### **The Danger of Defensiveness**

When reviewing the reports and thinking about how the media portrays the stories of dissolution and re-homing, it is so easy for those of us who care about adoption to slip into defensive mode: “There are all these flaws mentioned above with the reporting.” “They sensationalized the stories for ratings, the problem is not as bad as they stated it to be,” and on and on.

But the reality is that even one case of dumping a child with no home study or preparation is one too many. The other reality is that far too many adoptive families are ill-prepared for the realities of parenting children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Reading through the postings listed by the Reuters report was heart wrenching. While this was not the focus on the Reuters and NBC News

investigation, perhaps it should have been. They would not have needed to inflate their numbers for that report.

### **Limited Options**

Parents who adopt abused, neglected, and institutionalized kids sometimes feel like they are drowning once they get home. While this feeling is not unexpected in the first months post-adoption, with support most families move past it. Others do not. When the situation become unbearable, parents have few options. Residential treatment is expensive and most often not covered by insurance. Relinquishing custody to the state foster care system may require that the parents receive a record of neglect or child abandonment. Some states require parents to remain financially responsible for the child, including the cost of residential treatment.

Once parents have reached the edge of their coping abilities, they are often very hard to help. The key is to be there with resources, support and education as soon as they get home. Once at the edge, they want the child removed, and they want it done immediately.

It is easy to judge from the outside, but it's necessary to remember that doing so does not serve anyone well. These parents are not evil people; in fact, in most cases, they are very often good people who went into adoption with the highest of hopes and best of intents. They are almost always scared and confused. They are likely unprepared for the depth of challenge they are facing. They feel like a failure. Interestingly, this mirrors the exact feelings the child is experiencing. Failed adoptions are a tragedy for all concerned.

### **When Adoption Disruption Becomes Inevitable**

However, once this point of no return has been reached, there are ways to protect the child. Creating a Family has a one-hour long interview with adoption experts on [How to Disrupt or Dissolve an Adoption When it Becomes Inevitable](#). The information within is crucial to navigating the challenges that come after the point of no return has been reached.

### **We Have To Ask Ourselves Hard Questions**

Again, if even one adoption fails, it's one too many. We know that we need to take a serious look at why so many adoptions are failing. Adoption disruptions increase when more children from hard places are placed. (Children "from hard places" is a wonderful phrase coined by the late Dr. Karyn Purvis – check out [this interview](#) with her.) Some measure of failures is surely to be expected, but we must do better.

Here's some helpful starter questions to guide you in thinking about how to help these kids and help their families.

- Why are the children involved with the "re-homing" described in the original Reuter's report overwhelmingly adopted from abroad? (Reported then to be at least 70% of re-homed children.)
- How can we better prepare pre-adoptive families for the realities of adopting children who have experienced abuse, neglect, institutional living and other very hard starts to life?
- Why are parents turning to the Internet to find families to take their troubled children rather than going to their adoption agency?

[NACAC has a resource called Support During Disruption Is Crucial](#) that also lends practical ideas on how to support families – both parents and children - who are facing the hard questions of disruption or dissolution.