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# The Role of Prospective Adoptive Parents in Locating Their Future Child's Birth Family

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## Introduction

In the area of domestic infant adoption, the seeds of change have been planted and leading adoption professionals and prospective adoptive parents are taking notice. The adoption field is in the early stages of an important shift in the role required of families hoping to adopt domestically. The implication of this change is that prospective adoptive families will greatly benefit from taking a much more active role in locating expectant parents considering adoption. This is true even when the family's adoption professional is searching for a suitable match on behalf of that family.

Consider the following facts:

- International adoptions decreased 24 percent between 2004 and 2008 and another 27 percent in 2009.<sup>1</sup> They dropped even further in 2010.<sup>2</sup>
- The number of women making adoption plans continues to trend slightly downward.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Intercountry Adoption, Office of Children's Issues, United States Department of State. (2009). *Total adoptions to the United States*. Retrieved from [http://www.adoption.state.gov/news/total\\_chart.html](http://www.adoption.state.gov/news/total_chart.html)

2 [http://adoption.state.gov/pdf/fy2010\\_annual\\_report.pdf](http://adoption.state.gov/pdf/fy2010_annual_report.pdf)  
Reasons for the decline are generally linked to tighter restrictions due to The Hague Adoption Convention, more restrictive country-imposed requirements, and an emphasis on intra-country domestic adoption programs. The impacts on U.S. prospective adoptive families have been longer wait times to adopt and a decrease in the availability of healthy, young children.

3 Placek, P. (2011). National adoption data assembled by the National Council For Adoption. In E.A. Rosman, C. Johnson & N. Callahan (Eds.), *Adoption Factbook IV* (pp. 3-68). Alexandria, VA: National Council For Adoption.

With longer wait times and a decrease in the number of healthy, young children available for adoption from abroad, more prospective adoptive families will likely consider and proceed with a domestic adoption. Combining this with the fact that fewer women are making adoption plans makes it simple to conclude that, all else being equal, the length of time it will take to adopt domestically will increase. The experiences of many adoption professionals and prospective adoptive families back up this conclusion.

At the same time, some adoption professionals are noticing that expectant parents are taking a more proactive role in the process. As Susan Watson, Director for Domestic Adoptions and Birthparent Services at Spence-Chapin describes it, "More birthparents are approaching adoption professionals having already selected a family." This is a monumental shift and is in stark contrast to the more traditional domestic adoption process, whereby the expectant family learns about adoption from the adoption professional and selects an adoptive family from candidates screened by that same adoption professional.

What Ms. Watson and others are observing matches what one might expect from those from the Millennial Generation. People in their teens and 20s, sometimes dubbed "Millennials," are characterized as optimistic, inventive, and individualistic. They rewrite the rules and don't see the relevance of most institutions. They are

also masters of technology and social media.<sup>4</sup> It is reasonable to assume that this generation will continue to leverage technology to find ways to both learn about adoption and locate adoptive families.

So, if more families are hoping to adopt domestically, fewer women are making adoption plans, and more expectant parents who choose adoption are finding prospective adoptive families on their own, then prospective adoptive families must explore additional means of matching with expectant parents beyond what they have traditionally explored. Those families who continue to follow the traditional process and wait for their adoption professional to facilitate a match with expectant parents will be at a disadvantage compared with those who work hard to find and be found by expectant parents considering adoption.

## Adoption Outreach

Adoption outreach, adoption networking, and adoption advertising are terms used to refer to the actions that prospective adoptive families take to “find and be found.” Many prospective adoptive families spread the word of their adoption plans through e-mails to friends and family, holiday letters, and social networking websites such as Facebook. They purchase business cards and a toll-free number, and advertise in newspapers and online adoption profile listing services such as ParentProfiles.com.

In many respects, personal adoption outreach is similar to searching for a new job. Many job seekers partner with professionals, such as headhunters and resume writers, but the most successful job seekers simultaneously do their own networking and marketing to increase their chances of finding the right job as quickly as possible.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, R. (2009). *Why are you not like me? The generational gap in the workplace*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/200909/why-are-you-not-me-the-generational-gap-in-the-workplace>

Few if any job seekers would post their resume on an employment website such as Monster.com and then just wait for the phone to ring, yet many prospective adoptive families choose a similar, mostly passive approach when trying to build their family through adoption. Adoption outreach is something that families can do to complement what their adoption professional may already be doing. Just as in the job search, the key is to create as many opportunities as possible to find the right match.

## From the Perspective of the Pre-Adoptive Family

There are benefits and risks associated with adoption outreach. For some families the risks may outweigh the benefits, but many families carefully choose certain outreach activities over others while simultaneously mitigating the risks.

### *Benefits*

#### **Faster Placement**

The most obvious benefit for prospective adoptive families of complementing their adoption professional's outreach with their own personal adoption outreach is a faster placement. When a family adds their own outreach efforts to the work that their adoption professional is doing, there can only be one of two outcomes:

- 1) The match occurs through the adoption professional just as it would have without personal adoption outreach (a neutral outcome).
- 2) The match occurs more quickly because the personal adoption outreach resulted in a match (a positive outcome).

Personal outreach cannot lengthen a prospective adoptive family's wait time, and that is why those who do outreach, as a general population, will adopt more quickly than those who choose to wait.

#### **More Control**

Many families feel a greater sense of control over the adoption process and its outcome when they are doing their own networking and advertising to

match with expectant parents. Those families who harbor anxiety about why expectant parents would choose them to parent over other qualified families are likely to feel an even greater sense of control.

The additional control is also important for families who are more likely to wait longer for a match should they follow the traditional approach. For example, many adoption professionals report longer wait times for single and same-sex prospective adoptive parents compared to heterosexual, married couples. Similarly, the prospective adoptive family's age and their expectations regarding gender, race, and openness can also play a role in how long they wait.

## **Cautions**

### **Adoption Law**

For adoption outreach purposes it is critical that prospective adoptive families understand adoption laws, such as the use of advertising, interstate adoption, and reimbursable birthparent expenses. The best way for prospective adoptive families to mitigate the risk of making a poor legal decision is to partner closely with adoption professionals who have experience in adoption law in the state in which they reside.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the decision to do personal adoption outreach actually *increases* the need to build a strong relationship with your adoption professional.

It is also important for prospective adoptive families to remember that public advertising is only one of several components of adoption outreach. Even when advertising is prohibited, one can still network with friends and family, use business cards and a toll-free number, leverage Facebook, and pursue many other outreach activities.

### **Fraud**

Unfortunately, there are some people who will attempt to defraud prospective adoptive

families. Sometimes the prospective birth family “promises” their child to multiple families at the same time in the hopes of extracting money from as many families as they can before ultimately making a placement. Sometimes they may never make a placement or even be pregnant.

Families who do outreach are more likely to be defrauded when they lack adequate support from experienced adoption professionals. Adoption attorneys and social workers who have worked with hundreds of birth families and are less emotionally involved in the adoption than the prospective adoptive family are best suited to identify early warning signs of fraud and provide counsel on appropriate protective measures.

### **Emotional Stress**

The goal of adoption outreach is to find or be found by expectant parents considering adoption. The more expectant parents the prospective adoptive family identifies, the more likely it is they will find a good match. That being said, it is also true that the more expectant parents they identify, the more times they may experience *not* matching. The recurring sense of “failure” may have an emotional impact on the prospective adoptive family and may dissuade some from doing adoption outreach at all.

One alternative approach for limiting the emotional stress is for prospective adoptive families to use their adoption professional to screen expectant parents. Families can network and advertise as the law allows, but can share their adoption professional's contact information instead of their own. This approach not only reduces the risk of fraud as previously stated, but it also decreases the number of interactions between expectant parents and prospective adoptive families that do not result in a match.

## **Implications for Adoption Professionals**

The decision to promote adoption outreach to families can have an impact on the type of

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<sup>5</sup> The American Academy of Adoption Attorneys is a national association of over 300 attorneys who practice or have otherwise distinguished themselves in the field of adoption law. The Academy provides a membership listing on their website at <http://www.adoptionattorneys.org>

relationship professionals wish to develop with prospective adoptive families, the need for different types of domestic program models, and the methods for training and supporting families. These are all important considerations for those professionals who:

- are struggling to place children with their clients at a satisfactory rate;
- need to strengthen their domestic adoption programs to financially survive and prosper; and/or
- believe that the adoption field is changing in ways that require them to change as well.

## Relationships Between Families and Professionals

Adoption professionals who expect their families to network and market themselves create a different type of relationship with their families than those who do not. They create more of an equal partnership in the process instead of an outsourcing arrangement.

The language used by adoption professionals is an important element in developing the desired relationship. For example, first consider the adoption professional who believes that families do not want to do any outreach. This professional may be communicating something to the effect that: “You pay the fees and we take care of the whole process. We’ll call you when a prospective birth family shows interest in your profile.”

Contrast this approach with an adoption professional who expects families to take a greater role in the process and uses language such as this: “Here is what we will do and what you can expect from us, and here is what you can do, how we will support you, and what you can expect from your efforts.”

As you can see from these two simplified examples, even the language adoption

professionals use to describe their philosophy, approach, and services is critical in creating the desired partnership that can achieve success.

## Domestic Program Models

Adoption outreach initiatives create an opportunity to revisit existing service and pricing models. For example, some professionals offer two programs based on whether the adoption professional or the adoptive family finds the birth family. Some programs require the family to decide which program to enter at the beginning of the process, whereas other programs simply determine the final fee based on who identifies the birth family.

Adoption Connection in Cincinnati, Ohio, has embraced outreach training as a fundamental part of their services. Their fee structure requires families to pay a low monthly fee for outreach training and comprehensive support. “Providing outreach training aligns with our agency’s overall philosophy of empowering our families,” says Beth Schwartz, agency director. “The monthly fee provides even greater motivation for our families to do outreach. The sooner they match with a birth family, the fewer monthly payments they pay and the lower their overall adoption costs.”

## Training and Support

Adoption professionals who believe that families should take an active role in finding their future child’s birth family must consider whether they are providing adequate training and support to enable their families to succeed.

Many adoption professionals simply provide families with a list of outreach ideas. This approach is insufficient for three primary reasons:

- Providing a “to-do” list to a family who does not appreciate its role in the process and is not empowered or motivated will not yield satisfactory results.
- Adoption outreach is about creating opportunities for expectant parents and

prospective adoptive families to find each other, but it is also necessary to simultaneously prepare for exactly that to happen. Adoption outreach training that excludes topics such as how to talk with birth families and assess risk is like a career coach teaching someone how to network to find a job while ignoring the need to prepare for interviews.

- Although technology makes adoption outreach easier in many ways, it is also intimidating and a barrier for many.

The most complete and successful training programs will motivate and empower families to take action, help them develop their personal outreach plan, and provide them with the necessary support for a simple and smooth implementation.

## Conclusion

Technology, the role that expectant parents increasingly play in the adoption process, the rise in the number of prospective adoptive families, and the drop in the number of international adoptions are just a few of the driving factors that are creating change in the adoption field. The question that both adoption professionals and prospective adoptive families need to ask is: Are we doing all that we can to achieve success in this changing world?

Personal adoption outreach refers to the networking and advertising activities that prospective adoptive families can do to find their future child's birth family. It is something that families can do and adoption professionals can encourage and support to achieve success for all stakeholders. Adoption outreach may result in a faster placement. It also gives families greater control over the process, while simultaneously requiring them to partner closely with adoption professionals to ensure that they adhere to adoption laws, minimize the risk of fraud, and manage emotional stress.

Not all adoption professionals agree that prospective adoptive families should pursue their own adoption outreach, and in a limited number of cases, adoption outreach may not make sense. However, when either the adoption professional believes that he or she needs to offer additional support to their clients to either stay in business or meet their clients' needs, or when prospective adoptive families want to increase their chances for a faster adoption, adoption outreach is a valuable strategy worth exploring.