PARENTAL INFORMATION FOR
THE ADOPTED CHILD

A Descriptive Study of Relationships between
Adoptive Parents and Adopted Children between the Ages
of Six and Ten, Based on Children's Aid Society of
Vancouver Cases, 1947-1957.

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ABSTRACT

Because of the growing recognition that early, continuous and warm relationships are essential for a child's healthy development, it is important that children be placed in their adoptive home as early as possible and that the home be well chosen. But information about the origins of an adopted child is specially significant in several ways. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the subject of how adoptive parents tell their child he is adopted, and to assess their feelings and attitudes on this topic.

For exploratory purposes, seven adoptive homes were selected from the files of the Children's Aid Society of Vancouver for study. The adoptions had been completed from five to nine years ago. Each child had been placed in his adoptive home as an infant under 5 months of age.

All adoptive parents were interviewed, also the natural parents' file and adoption home files were studied. The study includes a brief description of the adoptive parents, their home, the child, and his adjustment in the home. The subject of telling the child he is adopted is focussed particularly on (a) method of giving the information; (b) time of introduction of the subject; (c) the child's reaction; and (d) questions asked by the child.

The analysis of the material obtained indicates that these adoptive parents accepted as their responsibility telling their child he was adopted. Typically, the simple facts of how he came to live with them were told to the child as soon as he was old enough to understand. However, none of the children in the group studied had asked any questions about their natural parents, and all parents signified that they would wait until their child asked specific questions.

This suggests that adoptive parents have difficulties in accepting natural parents, and their main area of concern is how and when to tell their child about them. It is indicated that adoption workers should give more guidance to adoptive parents before and after placement in this area, and that adoptive parents should be encouraged to return to the agency for help if needed.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I. The Practice of Adoption.

- Some early history. Trends in adoption practices on this continent; significant changes of the post-war decade; current standards and principles of adoption. Legal aspects of adoption; the Adoption Act of British Columbia. The adoption policy of the Children's Aid Society of Vancouver with regard to children placed as infants. Some aspects of the adoption home study. Objectives and method of study. ........................................ 1

Chapter II. Giving Background Information.

- Individual needs of adoptive parents; discussion of child; pertinent information to help adoptive parents identify with child. Anxieties of adoptive parents about unknown factors in child's history. Pathology in child's history. Guidance by adoption workers to adoptive parents with feelings about telling child he is adopted. .................. 19

Chapter III. Telling the Child He Is Adopted.

- Philosophy regarding telling children they are adopted. Recorded interviews with seven adoptive parents where child was placed in infancy and legal adoption was completed five to nine years ago. Feelings and attitudes of adoptive parents towards telling child he is adopted; method and type of information given to child; child's response. Adoptive parents' reaction to help given by agency in this area. ........................................ 30

Chapter IV. The Child Becomes a Member of the Family.

- Analysis of material obtained in interviews. Acceptance of child as a member of the family. Emotional conflict of adoptive parents; concern about and withholding information regarding natural parents. The Social Worker's role in this area of adoption practice. ....................... 53

Appendix A. Bibliography........................................ 63
PARENTAL INFORMATION FOR
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CHAPTER I

THE PRACTICE OF ADOPTION.

Adoption, a process involving the acquisition of legal parents other than by birth, has survived many changes and modifications through the years, and has gradually become a vital and important part of the present-day child welfare programme. The present widespread interest in the adoption of children is one of the most interesting developments in the field of child-care.

The purpose of adoption, today, in North America is to provide a child with healthy, secure family relationships, which are recognized as an essential for the development of a personality which can meet the challenges and problems of life. Adoption today has become the concern of social agencies, since social agencies, particularly those dealing with aspects of child welfare, understand the special needs of children, and are developing skills and techniques for successful adoptive placement of children.

Brief Historical Background

The problem of children without parents is as old as mankind. Records of the Babylonians, ancient Greeks and ancient Jews, reveal that they all practiced some form of adoption. In Oriental cultures, until recently, children who lost their parents were cared for by relatives, no matter how distant. In ancient
Roman times the law provided for the adoption of adults to save a family line from extinction or to provide strong leadership. Early Christians gathered dependent children together and placed them in large institutions, and later they were cared for in monasteries.

In England, during the period of the feudal system, these children were cared for within their economic groups. However, when the feudal system disintegrated, there was no longer this type of care available, and the government had to take some action. The Elizabethan statute of 1601 made each community responsible for the care of its dependent children. Under this system, older children were put to work and indentured and this sometimes led to adoption later.

Later, during the Industrial Revolution, dependent children were so exploited that religious and philanthropic bodies set up large institutions, which did much to alleviate suffering and exploitation. In time, placement in large institutions was replaced to some extent by boarding children in family homes, which sometimes led to the adoption of the children by their foster parents.

In the modern world, adoption has now almost universally, the sanction of legal statutes. The Greek and Roman laws formed the basis for adoption laws in most countries of the modern world. In the United States, the state of Massachusetts was the first state to recognize adoption legally and provide for it in state
legislation in 1851. Eventually all states recognized adoption, although the laws vary widely from state to state.

Canada, in the nineteenth century, provided for its dependent children by placing them in orphanages usually supported by the church. However, there were many children placed with families, and considered a member of the family group without change of legal status, until Nova Scotia enacted the first adoption act in 1896. Now each province has its own act. The Adoption Act differs in each province, in detail, but the basic principles are similar. All the provincial acts in this country hold that the adoption order divests the natural parents of their legal rights regarding the child, although in some instances the child may inherit from them as well as from the adopting parents. It confers on the adopting parents and adopted child all legal privileges and responsibilities inherent in the parent-child relationship.

Recent Adoption Practices

The post-war decade has brought much new knowledge about the development of children. Many old maxims of child rearing are being abandoned as the needs of the children are being better understood. Along with this deeper understanding of the child, there has been a shift and a change of emphasis in adoption practice,
This emphasis has shifted from protection of adopting parents against adopting a child with a "questionable background", to the protection of the child from adoptive parents with "questionable feelings and abilities" as adoptive parents. This shift of concern from the suitability of children to the adequacy of adoptive parents is evident, for example, in an address given by Florence Brown at the New York State Welfare Conference in November, 1950, pointing out the need for a careful evaluation of the applicants' readiness for adoptive parenthood. Miss Brown stresses the importance of assessing (a) personality adjustment, (b) family relationships, (c) motivation in adopting, and (d) attitudes towards infertility.¹

Formerly, child placement agencies were much concerned with "matching" the child to his adoptive family from the point of view of nationality, mentality and physical appearance. In a recent article, Dr. Shapiro, Chairman of the New York Department of Anthropology, makes an assessment of cultural, racial and national factors and questions the wisdom of placing any emphasis on matching. He states that a young child learns and acquires the attitudes of his adoptive parents, and encounters no more difficulty than the natural child in his learning from his own parents. Dr. Shapiro points out that "national differences" are cultural differences and should be regarded as such. He deplores the fact that particular personality and psychological characteristics are attributed to certain races. The only psychological

¹ Brown, Florence, "What Do We Seek in Adoptive Parents?", Social Casework, April 1951.
quality which has been explained to any extent on a racial basis is intelligence, as measured by various standardized tests that involve both verbal and non-verbal responses. The scores on these tests are apparently influenced in varying degree by education, milieu and other environmental factors. Therefore, to some extent, differences between races subjected to divergent influences can be discounted as non-genetic and non-racial. However, whether all the differences can be attributed to non-genetic factors is still controversial. But in any event the difference is relatively small compared to the range within any racial group. High and low I.Q.s are found in all racial groups, and from our present knowledge it appears that a variety of personality types are also found in all racial groups.¹

The new knowledge about the needs and development of children has resulted in earlier adoptive placement. Many authorities, such as Arnold Gesell, Florence Clothier, Margaret Ribble and John Bowlby, have pointed out that continuous mothering is of paramount importance to the progress and well-being of the infant.

Dr. Bowlby has pointed out the dangers of deferring adoption placement on the assumption that a more accurate evaluation of the child will be possible after a few months. The period of waiting in an atmosphere that lacks "psychological mothering"—such as institutions and crowded receiving-homes for babies—is likely to produce retardation, which is then taken as evidence

that the child is inherently backward. Hence, there develops a
paradoxical situation in which the delay in arranging for adop-
tion creates a condition in the child which may make him ulti-
mately "unfit for adoption".¹

The Los Angeles County Bureau of Adoptions obtained
excellent results with adoptive placements effected directly from
the hospital. All forty-five such placements made during the
period 1952-54 seemed to be favorable, within that limited period
at least. The placements had the three-fold advantage of serving
well the children, the natural parents, and the adoptive parents.
The children developed well in their permanent homes. The natural
mothers felt much more comfortable about giving up their babies
for adoption without having to wait for the infant "to prove him-
self good enough" for adoption. The suspense involved in delay
is often so difficult for the mothers that it hampers their rehabi-
ilitation. The adoptive parents were happy with the direct place-
ments, feeling the child more their own because they could partic-
cipate so early in his growth.²

To point up the changes that have been taking place in
agency adoption practice in the United States and Canada, even in
a brief period, comparison of the reports of the first and second
workshop on "Adoption Practices, Procedures and Problems" of the

¹. Bowlby, J., Maternal Care and Mental Health, Columbia

². Lynch, I., and Mertz, A.E., "Adoptive Placement of
Infants Directly from the Hospital", Social Casework, December
1955.
Child Welfare League of America will be enlightening. The first report was published in 1949 and the second in 1952. The first workshop was attended by 75 representatives of 51 agencies from the United States and Canada. The second workshop was attended by 103 representatives from 87 agencies from the same countries. On each occasion the information given by the participants at the workshop was supplemented by information compiled from answers submitted to a questionnaire by 67 agencies in 1949, and 94 agencies in 1952. In 1949, 80 per cent of the member agencies were looking for the "perfect child with the perfect background" for adoption placement, while in 1952 only 60 per cent of the reporting agencies gave as a condition for adoption that the child's background be altogether "healthy" and only 47 per cent of the agencies gave as a condition that children be "free from handicaps".

In 1949, the participating agencies did not approve of early placements, believing that there was too much risk for adopting parents. In 1952, however, the agencies believed that a child should be placed for adoption "as early as possible". The focus has shifted from protection of adoptive parents from possible risks, to planning for the best interests of the children.

A change of thinking was also revealed in agency attitudes towards investigation of reasons for the adoptive parents' infertility. The 1949 report states that this question was rarely discussed or investigated, in order to save adoptive applicants
embarrassment. In 1952, however, about 40 per cent of the participating agencies required a report on sterility, and discussion with the applicants regarding their feelings about their inability to have natural children.

Another important change in attitude is noticeable in the increasing willingness of adoption workers to accept the responsibility of deciding on the adoptability of the child. In 1949, 17 agencies reported that they relied almost entirely on the recommendation of a psychiatrist as to whether a child was adoptible, and 13 agencies reported that they delegated this decision to their physician. In contrast, the participating agencies in 1952 placed this responsibility where it belongs: the decision for adoption is a casework responsibility, although in some cases a specialist's opinion should be sought.

Today, adoption is considered the best plan for every child who is free to be adopted and who can benefit from the advantages of family life.

Legal Aspects of Adoption in British Columbia

Adoption Acts throughout Canada vary in detail, but their basic principles are similar. The adoption act of British Columbia provides that the child must have resided with, and been maintained by, the adopting parents for a period of at least one year, before permission to adopt may be requested from the court.
There are certain legal procedures which must be followed before the petition can be presented in Supreme Court, and the adoption order granted by the presiding judge. At least six months before the petition is filed, the adoptive parents must notify the Superintendent of Child Welfare of their intention to adopt. The Superintendent reports to the court before the date of hearing, recommending that the adoption order be granted or not, as the case may be. This report is prepared by the social worker who has been supervising the adoption home during the probation period. If, on the basis of this report, the Judge is satisfied that the home is suitable for the child he issues the adoption order. This order establishes all legal privileges and responsibilities between adopting parents and child.

The following written consents are required and presented with the report to the court:

1. Consent of natural parents;

2. Child's consent if he is 12 years of age or over;

3. Legal husband's consent if the natural mother was married at the time of the birth of this child (if the mother was unmarried her consent is sufficient).

Consent of the natural parents may be waived under special circumstances, for example, when the parents are incapable of giving consent, or if they cannot be located. An affidavit setting forth the reasons why the consent cannot be obtained is required when the court is asked to waive parental consent.
Children who have no parent capable of giving satisfactory care and who are judged unadoptable, are made wards of the agency (guardianship is transferred from the parents to the agency by a court order). However, if this child is in due course placed for adoption, parental consent is still required. This is so because parents have the right to apply to the court for the return of their child after guardianship has been transferred to the agency. In addition, natural parents sign a consent to the adoption of their child into a home which has been discussed with them, and to which they have given their approval. Consent in British Columbia, at the time of placement, is not relinquishment of the rights of the natural parents, as they must be contacted if the adoption placement fails, and if the child is placed in another adoption home, a new consent must be obtained from the natural parents.

Adoption Policy and Procedure of the Children's Aid Society of Vancouver with regard to children placed as infants.

Adoption involves responsibility to three groups of people:

1. to the children for whom an adoptive plan is being considered or has been decided upon;
2. to the natural parents;
3. to adoptive parents.

The Children's Aid Society of Vancouver, like all other
modern child placement agencies, believes that the needs of the child must be the primary focus of its policy and procedures. They believe, too, that adoption is the best plan for every child free to be adopted and who can benefit from the advantages of family life. They consider early placements, preferably directly from hospital, as best for the infant because of the importance to him of continuous loving care from birth. They feel the need to constantly remind themselves that a lifetime decision is being made affecting the natural parents, the child and the adoptive family. In most cases the child cannot speak for himself; his future therefore depends on the wisdom and integrity of the social worker, with some guidance from the allied professions of medicine, psychiatry, law, and the like. They further believe that research into the cause of their failures and success and the development of deeper understanding and greater skill can help them carry out their responsibilities with increasing confidence and security.

Planning for infants to be placed for adoption follows a well established procedure in the Children's Aid Society of Vancouver. Weekly conferences are held attended by:

(1) workers who have been working with the mothers and fathers planning adoption for their babies,

(2) workers who supervise children of various ages for whom adoption is being considered as a probable plan,

(3) adoption department supervisors and workers who work with adoptive applicants,

(4) placement supervisors, Child Welfare Division.
At this conference the mother's worker presents the background information and a description of the child. On the basis of this information, the adoption workers who feel they have a family that might meet the needs of this particular child state they have a home for consideration. The mother's worker and adoption workers who have submitted homes discuss in conference the suitability of the various homes and decide together on one (or two, if considered advisable) families.

The chosen home is then discussed with the natural mother who is given relevant information that is not identifiable. If she is satisfied with the description, the adoption worker is notified and she contacts the adopting parents and discusses the child with them. They are given information about the child's background, usually beginning with what the prospective parents want to know. Further discussion about the giving of background information will be dealt with in another chapter.

If the adopting parents are interested in the baby, arrangements are made for them to see him. Following the visit with the infant, sufficient time is given adopting parents to think and talk over between themselves and with their worker their decision about taking the child. If the couple reaches out for the child, and he responds positively, their worker arranges for their doctor to examine the baby. When the adopting parents' doctor is satisfied with the health of the infant, he advises the adopting parents who inform their worker.
On the day of placement, the adoption worker accompanies the adopting parents to the hospital or the foster-home, and makes sure they receive all necessary information about the infant's formula, care, habits and ways, and are feeling as comfortable as possible in their new role. Before effecting the transfer of the child, the adoption worker must ascertain that the necessary consents have been secured.

The probationary period has as its objective the further development of the potentials of the adopting couples as good parents, and the worker's role is to help with problems that arise in the adjustment of the child and the parents to each other. During this period, the parents should be encouraged to discuss with the worker their plan for telling the child he is adopted, and be given help if it is needed with this responsibility. Observation of the child and discussion with the parents will enable the worker to assess the child's development and his place in the home. His general health, his appearance, his activities and his relationship to members of the family are all indications of his adjustment. The adoption of the first child should be completed before a second child is placed in the home, except where siblings are placed in the same home. If a child beyond infancy is to be placed in the home, he should be placed first, never after an infant has been placed. A second child should be at least ten months younger than the first, as would be true in a natural family.
If during this period it is apparent that the child and the parents cannot make a good adjustment, the worker must help the parents to see this, and relinquish the child. This is a difficult experience for all, and requires skill and courage on the part of the worker.

**Brief Description of the Home Study.**

During the last decade more and more emphasis has been placed on the home study as the crux of successful adoption placements. The objective is to select families who will be able to give love, security, and understanding to a child not born to them.

There is considerable variation in the method of conducting the home study, but the basic information and assessment is very similar. The home study is conducted through a series of interviews with both parents together and with each parent separately. These are a combination of home visits and office interviews. The first interview with both parents is usually devoted to a description of the adoption programme of the agency and what the study will involve. An application is given when it has been established that the agency and the couple are ready to go on with the study. As a part of the home study a medical report is required - the Children's Aid Society of Vancouver requires the physician to complete a medical form given to the applicants by the agency. Any questionable medical reports are discussed with the agency medical consultants.
Following the medical clearance, the home study proceeds.

Dr. Peter Neubauer, who has had great experience in this area, has pointed out that one cannot predict what kind of parents applicants will make, but that one can measure the relationship between the motivations which led them to consider adoption and their life experiences which made them what they are.¹

The relationship of the parents to each other in the present plan to adopt is important. The question of emotional preparedness for a child needs to be investigated in the present. To get the answers to some of these questions, it is necessary to go back to some of the past experiences of the prospective parents. What kind of problems did they have in their own childhood—how did they handle their problems and how do they feel about them—what are their relationships with their families and with people other than their families? What do they expect or hope for from a child? How do they feel about their own inability to have natural children? What have their experiences with children been? Do they have the ability to meet dependency yet encourage growth? What are their feelings about heredity? What are their ideas about training and discipline? What are their feelings and attitudes about neighbors' and relatives' children?

It is preferable to place children with parents of an

age "natural" for the child. Thus infants are not placed with women over forty. In accordance with the law adoptive placements should never cross major religious lines, in order to protect the child from religious conflict. The child should be placed in a home where there is some religious belief but there is no set criterion of just how much religious belief is expected from adoptive applicants. Stability and continuity of income is expected, but the amount of income is of no primary importance as long as it suffices to keep the child in good health, to permit him to maintain his self-respect, and to provide him with a basic education. Attitudes about income are important, as is the capacity to use money wisely.

To help the couple participate in their own assessment is one of the most important considerations in conducting the home study. The success of the adoption will depend on the degree to which the applicants think through, understand, and accept what is involved in adoption.

The agency's responsibility to adoptive applicants makes it necessary to avoid unnecessary pain by effecting rejections as early and as skillfully as possible. It is important that applicants have the feeling that it is their application for a child, and not themselves as people, who have been rejected. Wherever possible applicants to be rejected should be helped to withdraw on their own initiative.
Method of Present Study

The special purpose of this study is to examine how a selected group of adoptive parents felt about telling their child he was adopted; how they explained to him the facts and circumstances of his adoption; the child's reaction to these facts, and the questions, if any, he asked.

The study is deliberately exploratory and qualitative in form. The families studied were chosen from the files of the Children's Aid Society of Vancouver and were cases in which the adoption had been completed between seven and eleven years ago. The families had similar economic and racial backgrounds and the children had been placed with them as infants, four months old or younger. Some of the families had adopted more than one child, but the discussion in this study concerns only the first child to be adopted. Information regarding the calibre of the marriage and the reasons for childlessness was obtained from the records.

The information was secured through interviews and was dependent upon the family's willingness to be interviewed. Because of limited time, one interview with each family had to be sufficient. In all but one family, the evaluation is given on the basis of talking with one member of the family, the adoptive mother. It was clear, however, that both mother and father had discussed the material prior to the visit.
The purpose of the study was explained to the family on initial contact, indicating that it would be of value in helping new adoptive applicants, if they could evaluate and share their experiences.
CHAPTER II

GIVING BACKGROUND INFORMATION IN ADOPTION.

The giving of information to the adoptive parents about the child and his family background is an important part of the adoptive process, but one which is often less well thought out than other parts of the over-all procedure. At the present time, there are differences in opinion as to how much information should be given, and considerable disagreement on what constitutes information that is dangerous or not necessary to share. It was agreed at the Child Welfare League of America National Conference on Adoption in April, 1956, that research is needed on this subject. It appears that objective data in regard to what adoptive parents have wanted to know about the background of their adopted children, and what children have wanted to know about their parents, is to a large extent lacking.

Agencies do in many cases learn of less successful adoption placements when problems arise with the children and come to light at Juvenile Courts or Child Guidance Clinics. Very successful placements are likely to be well known, too but few studies have been done in the large in-between group.

As was pointed out before, legal adoption has been known on this continent for almost 100 years, but it is still a
comparatively new field in which the professional social casework method has been applied. An excerpt from A Follow-up Study of Adoptive Families - Child Adoption Research Committee, reveals that "... adoption has been rooted in the tradition that adoptive parents afford a resource for the care of the dependent child deprived of natural family ties. The adoptive family, in consequence, was not thought of as applying to the adoption agency; but rather was offering to take a child into their home and assume complete responsibility for him. Unlike other clients of social agencies who were seen as people with problems, complex motivations and mixed feelings, having their own difficulty in applying for help other families managed adequately without, adoptive applicants were not approached as clients at all. Rather, in the beginnings of adoption work, the approach of the adoption worker was very much like that of the lay community seeing only the generosity and responsibility of the adoptive families, and the financial, social and cultural opportunities they could afford a child."¹

In recent years, however, as adoption came under the guidance of the professional caseworker it was recognized that there are three sets of clients, the child, the natural mother or parents, and the adoptive parents. From this new focus, new techniques have developed.

In spite of the varied opinions about the discussions of background information with prospective parents, it is generally agreed that a family should be given as much information as the agency has, which is pertinent to the child's future development. How much more information is still a controversial subject. A recent article, "Some Suggestions for Practice in Infant Adoption", suggests that "two things are essential to a child's healthy solution of his oedipal and pre-oedipal emotional life: (1) he should have a sense of being loved, with all the security implicit in such love; (2) he should believe in the simple decency of his natural parents. If he is illegitimate, he is much more deeply affected by such a sociological problem as illegitimacy than he would be otherwise. In order to achieve these two considerations, any history not pertinent to the child's future development should be withheld from adoptive parents. The thinking implied in taking this position with prospective adoptive parents must be worked through dynamically, so that one can be assured that the stand taken is thoroughly integrated. The article further suggests that these fundamental considerations can be put into effect by mature caseworkers who are carrying out infant adoption practices if (1) The agencies re-examine issues relevant to the physical and emotional health of a baby; (2) The responsibility for evaluation of the child be delegated to persons on administrative and consultative levels who do not work directly with the adoptive parents; (3) The worker dealing
immediately with the adoptive parents is given only the knowledge of the baby's potential for good health.¹

In contrast to this view, however, it is felt by most adoption workers and agencies that some facts about baby's natural parents, in addition to the pertinent facts about his present health and development, help prospective parents make a decision about a particular child and helps them to form a more secure relationship with him.

There is no set method of giving background information, but the material which is shared should be on an individual basis. This is most easily done in discussion of the baby himself. Parents are most receptive in this area and feel freer to ask questions. The adoptive parents want and should hear about the baby's progress, his feeding and sleeping habits, his reactions to people as seen by the doctor, hospital nurse or foster-mother. Workers, however, may be too enthusiastic, particularly if the baby is healthy and attractive and she is eager to have him placed in his permanent home. Too much enthusiasm on the part of the worker, however, may not leave the parents free to express any conflicting feelings and concern, which they may feel when they first see the child.

Generally speaking, in giving information about the family background, the worker should begin with what the prospective parents want to know, and then give additional information

which will help the adopting parents identify with the child. Some adoptive parents have well thought out ideas regarding illegitimacy and can understand the difficulties involved for the natural mother. Other couples need more specific information as to how the mother arrived at her decision to give up the baby, so they can relate to the natural mother as a person and arrive at a sympathetic understanding of why she made this decision.

Since it is generally understood that most babies available for adoption are born to unmarried mothers, attitudes and feelings towards illegitimacy have usually been discussed with the prospective parents during the home study. In the past, some applicants had real feelings about adopting a baby born to an unmarried mother as they feared the child would "inherit his mother's immorality". They preferred to adopt a child of married parents. These feelings and fears are less prevalent in prospective parents today, although they occasionally come to light.

By contrast, some applicants have mixed feelings about married parents who surrender their child for adoption and may even wonder whether the child should be leaving his own parents. It is necessary then, that these feelings and attitudes be discussed, as it is important for adoptive parents to be satisfied and comfortable with the knowledge that their child's natural parents gave him up for his welfare. This may come up later, if
the child asks questions regarding his natural parents, and adoptive parents should know their child's need to identify himself with good natural parents.

Information about fathers of infants placed for adoption is often unavailable; sometimes, however, the father has been concerned about the welfare of the mother and has helped her during her pregnancy. These facts can be used with some adoptive parents to further their positive feelings towards the child's background.

Information regarding nationality may be of interest to some adoptive parents and may be another factor in helping them to relate to the child, particularly if this nationality is somewhat comparable to their own.

Educational background is often of interest to adoptive parents, but it is important to have a clear understanding of what educational achievement means, to adoptive parents. The fact that the natural parents had a limited education does not necessarily mean that their intelligence was limited. It may be necessary to point out to some adoptive parents the reasons why the parents left school early, if this information is known. Often there were circumstances such as economic need, or lack of encouragement from parents which made other activities rather than school appear necessary or more interesting and created a desire to stop school. Explaining these factors to adoptive parents can help them to understand and not feel disappointed
that the child offered to them does not have higher academic achievement in his background. Some adoptive parents, themselves, lack educational background and interest and can accept this lack in themselves and potentially in their adopted child.

Many adoptive parents like to hope the child offered to them will in some way resemble them. Many workers feel, however, that a detailed description of the natural parents is not necessary, as long as there is some reassurance that in general the child's natural parents were similar in many ways to the adoptive parents. This too, helps to further the acceptance of the child's background by the parents and by the child.

In discussing background information, the adoption worker must be alert to any unspoken anxieties about background and allow these anxieties to be expressed and material relating to them to be discussed. These anxieties may concern areas of difference in the child's background or areas of similarity to traits or circumstances a parent rejects in himself. Lack of information about the baby's father sometimes causes anxiety in some adoptive parents. This is usually known as these feelings are expressed and discussed during the home study. If, then, there is no information about the father the worker should choose adoptive parents who can accept this lack of information without undue anxiety, but they should be given the opportunity to discuss again their feelings about it.
When there is some factor in the child's family background that might have an important bearing on the child's future development, the agency should have specific information related to whatever medical, psychological, psychiatric and neurological consultation is required to determine the hereditary implication for the child's future development. If it is decided after this consultation that the so-called pathological background is not significant with regard to the child's future, the information in question should not be discussed with the adoptive parents. Adoptive parents must accept the agency's responsibility for making decisions about the child's probable adoptability. To share information about pathology and abnormalities may give it undue significance, although adoptive parents should realize that there are some risks for them as there are for any parents. Workers realize there is a certain amount of anxiety present in every parent-child relationship, and by discussing irrelevant pathological factors they may unduly increase the otherwise normal anxieties in the relationship.

In some instances, the information about the child's background is conclusive that there are certain hereditary factors which may influence the child's development or that of his offspring. In these cases, it is necessary to select adoptive parents who have shown qualities which lead the worker to believe they can accept a child where there is more risk involved.
These adoptive parents must be able to face the uncertainty of the disease developing and must examine their own feelings about being offered a child with this background, and equally important, re-examine their real feelings about the disease itself.

In other situations when the significance of the pathological background for the future development of the child cannot be determined after consultation the agency must decide, on an individual basis, what information should be given to the adoptive parents, making sure they understand the situation, and what it means to them.

It is recognised that in these situations the worker has certain responsibilities. He must evaluate his own feelings about such heredity. If he cannot sort out these feelings successfully, he may not be able to present the material in a way which supports and encourages the prospective parents and yet leaves them free and comfortable to look at their own feelings regarding the infant being discussed with them. The worker should be prepared to give the family some scientific knowledge, if the family lacks this knowledge. It is agreed that the worker has a difficult task in determining whether a set of parents can or cannot accept a child with a possible future handicap, without impairing their ability to function as parents.

It is interesting to note that the 1948 Workshop – Adoption, Practices, Procedures and Problems, – revealed that
80 per cent of the agencies were looking for the "perfect" child with the "perfect" background for adoptive placement. In 1951, 60 per cent of the reporting agencies gave as a condition for adoption that the child's background must be altogether healthy, while only 40 per cent specified that the child must be free of handicap. This contrasts with almost 90 per cent of reporting agencies in 1954 which do not rule out conditions heretofore considered handicapping. The 1954 Workshop also states that nine out of every ten participating agencies state they do not rule out adoption for a child if he is the product of incest or if his family background included any of the following conditions: epilepsy, tuberculosis, heart disease, cancer, diabetes or venereal disease. Each child is studied individually and his adoptability or unadoptability is based upon such factors as current findings of the physician, the geneticist, the psychiatrist and the social worker.¹

Adoption agencies and workers have a large responsibility in helping adoptive parents with their anxieties and feelings about telling the child he is adopted. It is almost universally recognized and accepted that the child should be told he is adopted. Experienced workers in the field of adoption and child psychology know that the child must grow up with the knowledge that he is adopted in order to have the foundation for a sound personality.

In sharing background information with adoptive parents, the worker should keep in mind that this discussion about background serves another purpose, that is, it should ease the way if and when the child wishes to know something about his natural family, and make this less frightening to adoptive parents. It also gives the opportunity for the adoptive parents to discuss with the worker their feelings about telling the child he is adopted, ways of handling such questions as "Why did my mother give me up?" and "What was my mother like?", and generally smoothing the way as much as possible. It should also leave the way clear for them to come back to the agency, if they feel they need more help in order to discuss this with their child in a comfortable matter-of-fact manner.

Mrs. Lila B. Costin states in her article:

"Thus the social worker conducting the history-giving interviews has both an opportunity and a responsibility to help in the situation that may arise years later when the child brings questions about his background to his adoptive parents. This does not imply that we are able to give adopting parents specific answers to their child's future questions. In our attempts to help adoptive parents with this aspect of adoption we are faced with the fact that there is no large body of experience growing out of social work or psychotherapy with adults who were adopted as children.... We do not know that large numbers of adopted children have wanted to know their natural parents' age, appearance, nationality, occupation, or education. Perhaps they have wanted to know quite different things. Perhaps we have sometimes failed to acknowledge this problem with adopting parents, and instead have given them the feeling that we believe there are ready answers to the questions their child will bring to them about his adoption. But even when we cannot give adopting parents specific guidance in anticipating their child's questions in future years, we can help in laying the groundwork for this part of the adoptive parent-child relationship".

CHAPTER III

TELLING THE CHILD HE IS ADOPTED.

Most people who adopt children today feel it is a natural and satisfactory way to have a family when it is not possible for one reason or another to have their own children. Adoption is accepted by these parents and most often it is a fact which is pushed into the back of their minds as they come to love the child as deeply as they could have loved a child born to them. Adoptive parents, however, are concerned that the child feel about them as they do about him, and thus have worries about telling him he is adopted. In the past parents had an initial struggle as to whether to tell the child he was adopted or not. Fortunately there has been a change in recent years, and the struggle today is not whether to tell him or not, but "when and how". Experience and knowledge have proven that there isn't any other way to build a strong, stable adoptive family than to give the adopted child this information which belongs to him. 1

In addition to the stability of the family which is built on acceptance by all members of the adoptive relationship,

there is the enormous peace of mind that comes from being able to behave naturally in occasional situations where the adoption must be brought to the attention of others.¹

In spite of the fact that parents know they will be faced with the task of telling their child, they do have feelings of anxiety and tension regarding it. Perhaps it goes back to the fact that they may not feel quite as adequate as natural parents, because the child is not biologically their own. There may still be feelings around accepting their infertility, and they may be involved in pretending they are fertile. These are emotions which over-ride common-sense and reason. The barriers they set up make adopting parents wonder if they are sufficiently confident when faced with talking to their child about being adopted. They may fear the child will reject them. Additional fears are added because parents realize that it is important to the future well-being of their child that this area be handled wisely and well.

Methods in the placement of children have changed and evolved with the growth of social casework. Despite various changes in procedure, and even in the evaluation of adoptive families, there has been among reputable social agencies one requirement made of all prospective parents, namely, that the child be told of his adoption. Therefore, in planning this project it was decided to discuss with the selected group of adoptive families

¹ Raymond, Louise, Adoption and After, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1955.
their feelings towards the child in the first months, when and how they brought up the subject of adoption, how they gave this information, whether the child asked questions about his natural parents, and whether they felt they gave an explanation which was satisfying to the child. In addition the adoptive parents were asked if they had felt they needed more help from the agency and whether they would have been interested in group meetings with other adoptive parents and an agency adoption worker, either before or after placement.

The adoptive parents were families in which the legal adoption had been completed between five and nine years ago. They had been given pertinent facts regarding their child's background. The study consisted of interviews with one or both adoptive parents.

Illustrative Cases

(1) The McLeans are both in their late thirties; both had high school education and Mr. McLean operates his own business. They live in a good residential district and their home standards are in keeping with those of the neighborhood. The home study revealed that there were no physical reasons for the McLean's childlessness, and they applied to adopt because they wanted a family. The marriage appeared sound and secure and they impressed the worker as a happily married couple.
Billy, now age 9 and a half, was placed with the McLeans when he was 3 months old. Mrs. McLean said they would have liked to have had him directly from hospital, as they feel they missed something in his early weeks. However, they feel that Billy is as much a part of their family as if he had been born to them, and as much accepted by their relatives.

When Billy was 3, another baby was placed with them, and Mrs. McLean used this event to bring up the subject of adoption with Billy. She gave him a simple explanation about not being able to have babies of their own, so they had asked the agency to find one for them. Because they had been so happy with him they had asked the agency to find them another little baby. Mrs. McLean said Billy didn't ask any particular questions, but was interested in all the equipment the baby needed, and wondered if they had obtained the same things for him. Following this the McLeans began reading him stories about adopted children, substituting their names for the ones used in the stories. Mrs. McLean said they have always used the words "adoption" and "adopted".

Recently Billy asked a particular question about how babies got out of their mummy's tummies and Mrs. McLean answered him in simple terms and followed this by telling him that he didn't grow in her tummy, but in another mummy's tummy, but since this mummy had not been able to look after him, but had wanted to make sure that he would have a mummy and daddy, she gave him to
them. Billy seemed to accept this explanation and has not asked any further questions. Mrs. McLean assumes this explanation has been satisfactory to Billy to date, and she felt comfortable when telling him.

Mrs. McLean said, however, that she and her husband would have liked to have known more about how other adoptive parents discussed this subject with their children. They both feel group meetings would have been helpful to them, and would have liked to be a member of a group just before they introduced the subject of adoption to their child. Mrs. McLean had wondered about contacting the agency again but felt the workers were busy, and perhaps would feel they should be able to handle this question themselves.

Mrs. McLean realizes that they still have another area to cover, as she expects Billy will ask some definite questions about his natural parents. At present they have some anxiety about this, but hope when the time comes, they will be able to answer his questions comfortably and leave him with the feeling that his parents did what they thought was best for him. Mrs. McLean said she feels that Billy's parents must have been healthy, intelligent people to have produced such a fine child.

Billy is a handsome, well-built boy, with brown hair and blue eyes. He is in grade four and doing above-average work in school. He is friendly and outgoing with many friends and
participates with enthusiasm in community and school activities. Mrs. McLean remarked that many people including some of their relatives think that Billy resembles Mr. McLean and this pleases both Mr. McLean and Billy. It seems quite evident that Billy is an important part of this family and accepts his responsibilities as a member of the group.

(2) The Barbours are both in their early forties. Mr. Barbour is a professional man, doing well in his chosen profession. The home standards are high, and the home is situated in a good residential district. No physical reason was ever detected for the Barbour's apparent sterility, so after ten years of marriage they applied to adopt. According to the case record the worker was impressed by the apparent quality of their marriage and their sincere desire for a child.

Jimmy, age 8, was placed with the Barbours directly from hospital at the age of ten days. They both agreed that this is the best time for placement, as they did not miss any of the baby's early development, and they also feel that the infant benefits by being placed in his permanent home as early as possible. Mrs. Barbour feels that the early placement helped her to feel more like a natural mother, although she qualified this by saying she has no way of comparing her feelings with those of a natural mother.

Mrs. Barbour said she began telling Jimmy about his
adoption by stories of how they went to the hospital to see him, and how attracted they were to him. She told him about shopping for blankets and clothing and what they took to the hospital to bring him home. They have woven these details into a story and have introduced the fact that he was not born to her, but to another mummy. To date Jimmy has not asked any questions about his natural mother, and Mrs. Barbour wonders if he thinks all babies are born to other mummies and then placed for adoption. This may be reinforced by the fact that there are several adopted children in their immediate neighborhood.

Mrs. Barbour said she wanted Jimmy to know of his adoption as young as possible or as soon as he could understand the simplest facts. She was emphatic about this as within her own family group an adopted child discovered the fact she was adopted when she was 18, and it was an unhappy and distressing experience for her, an experience that Mrs. Barbour felt could and should have been avoided.

Mrs. Barbour said Jimmy has asked a few questions about "where babies come from" and she answered these simply and directly, bringing in that he was not born to her. Mrs. Barbour said she had read as much as she could on the subject of adoption and feels this was helpful to her in talking with Jimmy. She thinks that when the time comes and Jimmy asks direct questions about his natural parents they will tell him as much as
they can and if necessary obtain more information from the agency, as she feels it would upset a child to answer his question with "I don't know".

Mrs. Barbour thought group meetings would be helpful, probably after placement but before the time to begin to tell the child. She expressed her appreciation for the adoption worker's help, as she brought up some facts that would not have occurred to Mrs. Barbour. Mrs. Barbour believes that all adoptive parents should anticipate the fact that the child will ask some questions about his adoption, and give this some thought so that they will not be caught totally unprepared when the questions come.

Jimmy is a quiet, thoughtful boy with a somewhat tense anxious manner. He is in grade two at school, but not doing as well as his ability would indicate he can. Mrs. Barbour said that Jimmy seems to worry about school and she feels his experiences at school are not happy, although Jimmy does not talk about them. This worries Mrs. Barbour, and seems to make her over-protective of the boy. However, she expressed some concern because Jimmy prefers quiet activities in the house to the more vigorous outdoor play with boys his own age. She seems to want Jimmy to be more like boys his own age, yet protects him.

(3) The Johnsons are both in their early forties, both have professional training, and Mr. Johnson is engaged in his
profession. Mrs. Johnson carried on with her profession after marriage since she enjoyed her work, but she stated she had always been ready to stop work when she became pregnant. After ten years of marriage and there had not been a pregnancy, both Mr. and Mrs. Johnson went through extensive tests, but no physical reason could be found for their apparent sterility. They applied to adopt as they both stated they had always wanted a family. They were able to speak of their disappointment at not having a natural child, and their decision to adopt was based on sincere, mature thinking.

Nancy, now age six, was placed with the Johnsons at the age of ten days, and both Mr. and Mrs. Johnson agreed that this is the ideal time for placement, as they felt they did not miss many of the joys and upsets accorded natural parents in the first weeks. When Nancy was about three, Mrs. Johnson introduced the subject of adoption. She told the child they had not been able to have a little baby of their own, so they had gone to the hospital and specially picked her out from a number of babies. Whenever they drive past the hospital Mrs. Johnson points out the building telling Nancy that it was in that building that they first saw her and specially picked her from all the other babies. Recently Nancy asked her mother why they specially chose her, and Mrs. Johnson told her that they felt that she looked like the little baby they had hoped God would send to them. Mrs. Johnson said they have read stories about adopted children to Nancy so
she will learn that many children are adopted. To date Nancy has not asked "where babies come from", so Mrs. Johnson has not introduced the "other mummy". The Johnsons have always used the words "adopted" and "adoption", and Mrs. Johnson believes that in Nancy's mind these words are connected with good things that happen to children. Mrs. Johnson believes the explanation so far is quite satisfactory to Nancy, but she expressed some anxiety about telling the child about her other parents. The Johnsons don't feel they will be as relaxed and comfortable, and were able to say that they hoped Nancy would not ask any further questions, on the other hand realizing that she probably will, and they must prepare themselves for them.

Mrs. Johnson was not enthusiastic about group meetings, she thought they might be helpful for discussion of general things in relation to adoption, but that adoptive parents have to use an individual approach for their particular child.

Nancy is an attractive child with dark brown curly hair and wide-set, thoughtful grey eyes. She is quiet, almost solemn in manner, and appears to be listening and watching attentively to all that goes on around her. Mrs. Johnson says she has an enquiring mind and learns quickly. She gets along well with the other children in the neighborhood, but is gentle and quiet in her play. Mrs. Johnson said that Nancy is much like Mr. Johnson in temperament and fits into their family "just as if she had been born to them".
(4) The Andersons are a couple in their mid-forties, in good financial circumstances. Mr. Anderson is employed by a large industrial firm, and has a better than average income. They live in a good residential district and their home is pleasant and comfortable. One feels the interests and activities of the children are of primary importance.

Mrs. Anderson was previously married, and her first husband died suddenly following a brief illness. He left Mrs. Anderson financially independent. There were no children by this union. About three years after her first husband's death, Mrs. Anderson married Mr. Anderson, and this appears to be a mutually satisfying marriage.

Gordon, age 9½, the oldest of three adopted children, was placed with the Andersons at the age of four weeks. Mrs. Anderson was satisfied with this age for placement, as they could be a little more sure that the baby was physically normal.

In talking with the Andersons about their children's adoption, Mrs. Anderson admitted that she and her husband would like to forget that the children are adopted as she is sure they feel the same about these children as natural parents feel about their children. However, they both realize the children could hear about their adoption outside the home, and because of this they plan to tell each child as soon as they feel that he is old enough to understand.
Consequently when Gordon was nine, his father took him aside and told him he was born to another mummy, but this other mummy and daddy died when he was born, so he came to live with them, because they had always wanted a little boy for their own. Mr. Anderson added that they had taken Douglas and Linda the same way. (Douglas and Linda are the younger adopted children.) Mr. Anderson told Gordon not to tell the other children, as they weren't old enough to understand. Gordon was quiet during the discussion, and didn't ask any questions. However, a few days later he asked Mrs. Anderson if she had known his other mummy, and what did she look like. Mrs. Anderson replied that she had never seen his other mummy, and didn't know anything about her. Gordon then replied that he was sure he would have loved his other mummy, but not as much as he loved Mrs. Anderson. From this statement Mrs. Anderson was satisfied that Gordon was content with the information they had given him. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Anderson are concerned about future questions as they feel if the children are happy and secure they will not concern themselves with facts that have no meaning for them.

Mrs. Anderson did not think group meetings would be of much value, as she felt that ways of telling a child he was adopted was an individual matter for adopting parents to work out for themselves. Mrs. Anderson thinks if the children have enough security and affection in their adoptive home, they will not be interested in their natural parents. If perchance their children
should ask any questions they will stick to their original story, that the parents are dead and there is no information available about them.

Gordon is a tall, good-looking boy, polite and friendly in manner. He is taking piano lessons and performs for visitors at his mother's request. He is well liked by his teachers and playmates and enters into all school and neighborhood activities. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson are proud of Gordon and feel that he is a credit to them.

(5) The Fosters are both forty years of age, and both have high-school education. Mr. Foster operates his own business, which is expanding steadily. They live in a pleasant, attractive home and can be described as a happy couple who thoroughly enjoy their children. Mr. and Mrs. Foster were married seven years before they applied to adopt. Previously they had gone through extensive tests, but no reason could be found for their apparent sterility. When they had married they had hoped to have several children, so their apparent sterility was a great disappointment to them. However, their doctor talked with them about adoption, and since children were important to them they applied to adopt.

Gerald, now age six, was placed with the Fosters at the age of one month. When he was $2\frac{1}{2}$ a second child was placed with the Fosters directly from hospital. Mrs. Foster said they were sorry they had not been able to take Gerald directly from hospital.
as they had enjoyed the second baby's first weeks so much. The Fosters took the opportunity to bring up the subject of adoption to Gerald when the second child was placed. Gerald went to the hospital with them to bring the baby home, and they explained to him that they had brought him home the same way. This apparently was a pleasant experience for Gerald as he still talks about it and tells Pamela (the younger child) how he went to the hospital with mother and dad to bring her home. Following this Mr. and Mrs. Foster started reading stories about other children to Gerald and these have become his favorite stories. Gerald has not asked any particular questions, apparently assuming this is the way all babies get homes. However, Mrs. Foster is now expecting a baby of her own and they both feel this will give them an ideal opportunity to explain to both the children that some babies are born to their parents, and other babies are born to other mummies and daddies and then placed with mummies and daddies who do not have any babies of their own.

Mr. Foster feels adopted children should be told something of their adoption as soon as they can understand the simplest words. He believes that the words "adoption" and "adopted" should be used, so that the child can associate them with pleasant feelings. Mr. Foster thinks adoptive parents have an obligation to be honest with their children and should not fabricate stories to make the telling of adoption easier for the children or for the parents. The Fosters have asked the agency for a typewritten copy
of the background information which was discussed with them at the time of placement so they will be able to answer any questions correctly the children might ask. Mr. Foster feels that both the children can be proud of their heritage, so there is no reason for not telling them what they may want to know, but they will give the information only if either child expresses a desire to know something about his natural parents.

Mr. and Mrs. Foster thought group meetings would be helpful to adoptive parents, particularly just before the subject of adoption is introduced to the child. They felt discussing the situation with other adoptive parents would have given them support and courage with a difficult problem which they admitted had given them many moments of anxiety. Mr. Foster felt that it was of the utmost importance to handle this subject skillfully to foster the child's confidence in his parents, and the parents' confidence in the child.

The Fosters expressed their appreciation for their adoption worker, as she had discussed many points with them and had encouraged them to introduce "adoption" to Gerald when the second baby was placed.

Gerald is a well-built, healthy, out-going boy with blonde hair and blue eyes. He gets along well with the children and adults in the neighborhood. He is adventuresome and likes to know what is going on. Mr. Foster describes him as a "real boy", 
full of fun yet kind and considerate of his companions. It is quite apparent that Gerald has a secure place in the Foster family and is a favorite among the relatives.

(6) The Ames are 44 and 39 respectively; they both have high-school education and Mr. Ames holds a responsible position in a large industrial firm. He enjoys his work and has advanced rapidly in the firm. They maintain a comfortable home where the standards are high. After Mr. and Mrs. Ames had been married about five years and there had not been a pregnancy, they both underwent extensive tests and learned that Mr. Ames was sterile. In view of this unhappy circumstance their doctor suggested that they consider artificial insemination, and after due consideration they decided to follow his suggestion. As there were no facilities for this treatment here, the Ames went to New York, but much to Mrs. Ames' disappointment this treatment was not successful. Accordingly upon their return to this city, they applied to the agency to adopt an infant and in due course a baby, Betty, age one month, was placed with them. Betty is now 10 years old and Mrs. Ames said they were delighted with her from the day of placement, that she was such a beautiful baby and had thrived so well that they had enjoyed every minute with her.

When Betty was 2½ another baby was placed with the Ames and Betty helped her mother get all the clothes and equipment ready for the new baby, and Mrs. Ames mentioned that they were
adopting this baby as they had adopted her. They took Betty along when they picked up the new baby and told her that they had brought her to their home the same way. Mrs. Ames followed this beginning by telling Betty that since they had been unable to have a baby of their own, they had applied to the agency for a baby, whose mother could not look after her, because this mother could not give the baby the kind of home she thought the baby should have. These facts have been repeated to the other adopted child, so Betty has heard this story many times. Recently Betty has asked her mother why some mothers have to give up their babies, was it only because they could not look after them? Mrs. Ames replied that sometimes these mothers have to work and there is no one to care for the baby properly. She is not sure that this answer satisfied Betty, but so far Betty has not asked any questions about her own mother, although Mrs. Ames has tried to give her the opportunity.

Betty was born to a married couple, who were separated at the time of Betty's birth, and Mrs. Ames admitted to having mixed feelings about this at the time of placement. She didn't admit to these feelings to the adoption worker, because Mrs. Ames said at that time a baby was the most important thing to her. She doesn't blame the agency either, but realizes now that she should have made her doubts known. These feelings are being re-activated now, as Mrs. Ames thinks that Betty will be wanting to know something about her natural parents any time. Mrs. Ames
plans to tell Betty the truth, as she believes that the child is entitled to know as much as she wants.

Mrs. Ames said the second child was born to an unmarried mother, and she feels more comfortable with these facts.

Mrs. Ames said she probably would not have been in favour of group meetings to discuss adoption before the baby was placed, or even just before she introduced the subject of adoption to Betty. She believes that adopting parents do not realize the anxiety that will arise when they think more seriously about telling their child he is adopted, more especially when they feel they are going to be faced with explaining why their parents gave them away. In spite of this, Mrs. Ames believes that it is every adopted child's right to know that he is adopted, and that adopting parents should begin to tell the story as soon as the child can understand the simplest facts. She believes this first step was made easier for them because they adopted a second child, and used this as an opportunity to introduce the subject.

Betty is a bright, attractive girl, inclined to be plump in build. She is in grade five at school and her grades are better than average. Mrs. Ames describes her as a "bookworm" and would like to see her participate in more school activities because she feels that Betty needs the companionship of girls her own age. Betty, on the other hand, likes domestic activities and is most helpful to her mother around the house. Both Mr. and Mrs.
Ames feel that Betty has lots of ability and encourage her to maintain her grades. Mrs. Ames said Betty has fulfilled her expectations as a daughter and there is a close bond between them.

(7) The Stewarts are both 40 years of age, both have public school education, and Mr. Stewart is employed as a salesman, work which he enjoys. The Stewarts' income is adequate and their home is comfortable with good standards. Mr. and Mrs. Stewart were married when they were in their early twenties, and hoped to have their family while they were young. However, Mr. Stewart joined the army shortly after their marriage and spent three years overseas. On his discharge from the army after the war, he returned to his former employment, and they re-established their home. Subsequently Mrs. Stewart had three miscarriages and following the last one, her doctor told her that it was unlikely that she would ever be able to carry a pregnancy full term. This was a major disappointment to the Stewarts and it was some time before they applied to adopt. However, their decision to apply to adopt was based on their desire to have a child, and they impressed their adoption worker as a sincere and mature young couple, really interested in a baby.

Freddy, now age 8, was placed with Mr. and Mrs. Stewart when he was four months. Mrs. Stewart particularly expressed the fact that they would have liked to have been able to take him
earlier, as she feels they missed an important part of his
development in the first months.

When Freddy was about 3½, Mr. Stewart's brother and
his wife adopted a baby girl. The families were close and Mrs.
Stewart took this opportunity to tell Freddy that his uncle and
aunt were adopting a baby, as they had adopted him. She fol­
lowed this introduction by weaving into a story how much they
had wanted a little baby of their own, and when they learned
that they could not have one, they had asked the agency to help
them find one. She told him about all the preparations they had
made before taking him and showed him snapshots of himself when
he first came to live with them. Mrs. Stewart said that Freddy
loved the story when he was younger and she repeated it many
times. He doesn't ask for the story any more, but she is quite
sure that he remembers it very well. Freddy has not yet asked
any particular questions and therefore Mrs. Stewart has not given
him any more information. Mrs. Stewart said that if he wants to
know more when he is older she plans to answer his questions as
truthfully as she can. She doesn't remember many details about
his background, so thinks she will just tell him that they didn't
know his real parents, but she believes that they were probably
much like Mr. Stewart and herself. Mrs. Stewart said she had
read as much as she could on the subject of telling children about
their adoption, and believes this type of answer is sound and it
is also truthful. Mrs. Stewart admitted that if she thinks too
much about how she will handle these questions if they are asked, she becomes quite anxious, but believes that all adoptive parents must have similar feelings and anxieties.

When asked about group meetings with other adoptive parents, Mrs. Stewart said she believed they would be most useful and helpful particularly to learn how other adoptive parents plan to tell their children about their natural parents and why they gave them up. Mrs. Stewart said she felt quite comfortable in telling Freddy the story of how he came to be their little boy, but believes the most difficult part to be told is still ahead of them.

Mrs. Stewart summed up her feelings about telling Freddy about his adoption by saying that Freddy had brought much happiness into their home, and they are sure they feel as close to him as they would have to a child born to them. She hopes that Freddy feels as close to them, and if he does, she thinks his natural parents may be just shadowy figures who have little meaning to him. However, if he wants more information, they will tell him as much as they can.

Freddy is a likeable, friendly youngster with mid-brown hair and brown eyes. He is in grade three and doing average work at school. He appears to be a "typical boy", enjoying all the activities of an eight-year-old. Mr. and Mrs. Stewart like many outdoor activities and Freddy has always been taken along on
their outdoor jaunts, so he has developed a taste for this type of life too, much to the delight of his parents. Although the Stewarts are a closely-knit family group, Freddy does not appear to be stifled by too much family, in fact his parents encourage him to enjoy the companionship of other children and participate in neighborhood and school activities. Freddy's place in the family seems to be well established.

In this selected group of adoptive parents the interviews point out that all these parents had warm and positive feelings towards their baby right from the day of placement. The babies were placed directly from hospital in two of the families, while in five of the families the babies were placed between the ages of 1 month and 4½ months. In this latter group a second baby was placed directly from hospital, and three of these families where the second child was placed said they appreciated the direct placement, acknowledging that the baby's first weeks were satisfying to them and beneficial to the baby.

The whole group, with the exception of one family, introduced the words "adoption" and "adopted" and used them in a simple story telling the child how he came to live with them, as soon as they thought their child could understand the simplest words and facts. Three of the families, where a second child was placed, used this event to introduce the story.
No questions have been asked about natural parents by any of the children in the whole selected group, but the parents thought their explanations of adoption were satisfactory to their child. Did these parents unconsciously block any questions by their children, because they themselves had not fully accepted the natural parents?

All the adoptive parents in the group studied stated that on the whole, they were satisfied with the help they had received from the agency. Two families mentioned that they had appreciated some points introduced and discussed with them by their adoption worker, but admitted they did not realize at the time that the discussion would prove so valuable. Group meetings with other adoptive parents were not felt to be of primary importance by most of the parents, although three families said they would have enjoyed discussing some general points after the baby had been placed. Group meetings may not appeal to adoptive parents generally because they have not had the experience of group discussion on such emotionally charged material as telling a child he is adopted.
CHAPTER IV

THE CHILD BECOMES A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY.

After a child has been placed in an adoption home, he changes from an isolated individual to a member of a family group. Whatever the explanations of adoption which are given to him depends not only on the child, but also on the kind of adoptive family with whom he is placed. The feelings of the adoptive family are mingled with those of the child, and the ability to face adoption realistically depends on how well these feelings are blended.

As soon as adoptive parents are asked to share background information with their child, a situation charged with emotion develops. In reality, adoptive parents are asked to go beyond the point at which they themselves started with the child. They are being asked to discuss freely a phase in their child's life when they were not his parents. Adoptive parents are expected to do something which natural parents are never called upon to do, that is, to share their child with other parents. This study reveals that it is expecting a lot of adoptive parents to handle, with complete objectivity, something in which they are so closely and emotionally involved.

If it were possible to interview every family, who have
adopted a child, it seems highly probable that even today one would come across some families who for one reason or another have not told their children they are adopted. However, all the adoptive parents in the group studied recognized the need to tell their children they were adopted. In addition to recognizing the need for telling the children, they accepted the responsibility for discharging what they looked upon as their duty to the child as well as to themselves. All admitted it was a situation in which they did not feel completely comfortable. But as uncomfortable and anxious as they might be, they introduced the subject when they felt the child was old enough to understand the simplest facts and terms. Except for the Andersons, in all the other families studied this was done when the child was between two and four years of age. Four of the families interviewed took the opportunity when a second baby was placed in their home. The preparation for the new baby gave the parents something concrete on which to build a story. They told the child the simple facts of how they had not been able to have a baby of their own and because they had wanted one so much, they had asked the agency to help find one for them. They explained to the child how they had prepared for him just as they were now preparing for the new baby. They told him of going to the hospital to see him, that he was a beautiful baby and how excited they were when they brought him home. This seemed to impress the child that he had been wanted, planned for, and that his coming into their family was
an event filled with excitement and pleasure. The families who did not have the advent of a second baby to introduce the subject, told a similar story, stressing how much they wanted him. All the parents were anxious that their child feel that his coming into their family was of great importance, and that he brought much happiness and joy to them.

The adoptive parents chose to tell the child "his story" as soon as he could understand simple words, because they felt that the child should know of his adoption from them as his parents; none wanted to risk the child's discovery from outside sources.

It is interesting to note that all the parents used the words "adopted" and "adoption" realizing that even if they were just words to him, the use of these words and the story of how he came to live with them, must precede any real understanding of the concept of adoption. They felt it necessary that the story be surrounded with pleasant and loving over-tones, so that when he understood the actual facts of his adoption he would take it in his stride and accept it as something which happened to him, perhaps different from other children, but still satisfactory to him.

By contrast, the Anderson family felt it was not necessary to tell their children about their adoption until they were old enough to understand that they had been born to other parents, but these parents had died. This, to the Andersons, was a sound enough reason which the children could understand, that it was
necessary for another home and other parents to be found for them. In addition, the Andersons stated they believed that if the children were secure and happy in this chosen home, their natural parents would have little meaning for them and would be just shadowy figures in a past about which they have no recollection. The Andersons, however, like the other adoptive parents, did not want their children to hear of their adoption outside their home, feeling that what had to be told should come from them, as their parents.

Another point of interest is that only one family, the Johnsons, emphasized the fact that their child was specially chosen from a number of babies. The other families felt it was sufficient to emphasize the joy and pleasure the child brought them but not set him apart as being specially chosen.

In discussion with these selected families, it was learned that it was the adopting mother who told the initial story, fathers often re-enforced the story by reading to the child stories of other adopted children, which helped the children to understand that there were many adopted children, and not something which had happened only to them. The Barbours and the Fosters wonder if they have emphasized too much that there are many other adopted children, since their children seem to think all babies come into homes and secure parents through adoption. This might well suggest that while these parents have conscientiously told the children of their adoption, they have not been able to freely accept and show
acceptance to the child, that he had been conceived by and born to another mother.

None of the children in the families studied have asked any particular questions about their "other parents", and none have asked where babies come from. Billy McLean had been told that babies grew in their mummy's tummy and he wanted to know how the baby got out of its mummy's tummy. Mrs. McLean's simple explanation seemed to satisfy him, as he didn't ask what Mrs. McLean thought would be the next logical question "Did I grow in your tummy?", so Mrs. McLean didn't pursue the discussion any further.

None of the children in these families have asked any leading questions so far, but all the adopting parents have stated that they will use as a lever any question the child might ask that will give an opportunity to bring out the fact that he was actually born to "another mummy" and answer any more direct questions the child might ask. However, it is interesting to speculate that in a comparable similar age group of children who remained with their own parents, some would have asked more questions about conception and birth. All these parents felt that their children were still too young to ask this type of question, but all realize that they may come at any time. They also realize that they may have to deal with the fact that the child was illegitimate and they all admitted that they have not yet formulated a plan of how they will discuss this with their child. Mrs. Ames thought it would be more accep-
table to a child that his mother gave him up for adoption because she was unmarried, and therefore did not have a proper home for him, than to explain that his parents were married but still gave him away. This may be giving Mrs. Ames some worry because her child is the only one in this study who was born to a married couple.

None of the parents have initiated questions from their child in order to give him information about himself. Therefore in this group there is no child who has been given any of the information which his parents learned about him at the time of placement. The parents in the group, stated that they had forgotten most of the background information they had received from the agency. Mr. Foster felt it was important to have the correct and accurate details, in case his children ask definite questions. In order that he will be able to answer truthfully, he has asked the agency to send him a typewritten copy of the children's background. Mrs. Barbour also thought it would upset a child to answer questions with an indefinite "I don't know". The Andersons, on the other hand, plan to stay with the story that the natural parents died, and there is no information available about them. On the whole, however, the adoptive parents expressed their readiness to answer their child's questions. All felt these questions will not be raised until the child is in his teens, so admittedly have not given too much thought, as yet, to how they will handle and
discuss them. The parents realized it is necessary for the child to feel that his natural parents were "good" people and gave him up for adoption because they wanted to be sure he would have loving and kind parents. It would appear that this group of adoptive parents have not realized nor given any thought to the effect of introducing "other parents" to a child when he is in his teens, a time when he needs the security of belonging to a family against which he is rebelling. The question might well be asked, then, "At what age should the knowledge of natural parents be introduced?"

The families where placements were arranged directly from hospital expressed their appreciation, feeling this is the ideal time to take the baby, because it is better for the baby to be placed in his permanent home as soon as possible, and because they enjoyed his earliest development, perhaps since it is a part of natural parenthood to have the full care of the infant as soon as he is discharged from hospital. The families where the placement was delayed until the baby was several weeks old, said they would have preferred to have had him directly from hospital, thinking as the other parents did, that a baby's first weeks are an important part of his development and a satisfying experience for the parents. None of the families, except the Andersons, thought the placement should be delayed in order to be sure that the infant was physically normal. Mrs. Anderson stated that she
thought the doctor could evaluate the baby's development more accurately when he was a month old.

In discussing the amount of help which was given by the agency workers, all the parents said some of the points about telling the child about his adoption were brought out, and they all had agreed that it would be necessary to tell the child. However, they had not given it enough specific thought to realize how important it would become when they were faced with the actual telling of the story. Some discussed it more fully during the probation period, but all felt the most difficult part has yet to be told, and it is in this area that they had needed and still need help. They expressed anxiety about how and what they will tell their child about their natural parents. Some go so far as to admit that they hope they will not be faced with this difficult task. This anxiety may stem from the fact that these adoptive parents have actually come to feel that the children are their own. "Almost all adoptive parents are threatened by the idea of including the natural parents in their own thoughts and in the child's life. To them the life of their child actually begins at the time of placement into their family. Emotionally, they have given birth to the child they have wanted and waited for. As time goes by and acceptance of him intensifies, this emotional birth may also seem to them a physical one, to fulfill their inner wishes that he be a product of them."  

Most, however, felt it was only fair to the child to give an explanation which is true and satisfying. All the parents have expressed to a greater or lesser degree that it will be difficult, because to them it means "sharing" their child with other parents, something which natural parents are never called upon to do.

This study revealed that all adoptive parents interviewed agreed that their child should be told that he was adopted. It was apparent that there were feelings of anxiety and many of the parents were able to express these feelings. All believed that the child should be told as soon as he could understand the simple facts and agreed that it was a responsibility they had assumed when the child was placed with them. The simple facts of how the child came to live with them was used as a basis for the story and the words "adopted" and "adoption" were brought into the story. The parents felt this was a satisfactory way to introduce the subject and was appealing to the child. None of the parents, however, mentioned the "other" parents and it is interesting to note that when these children became older they did not ask any of the usual questions asked by children in their age group about conception and birth. Two families felt their children believed that all babies obtained parents and homes by adoption. Could it be that these adoptive parents had not fully accepted or shown acceptance to the child of his "other" parents?

All the parents said they were prepared to discuss the
child's natural parents with him, but none had fully decided "how or when". They guessed that the child would probably ask some questions when he is in his teens. "Usually in adolescence the adopted child does learn of his 'difference' and the degree to which this is disturbing to him often varies with the degree of concealment of information about his natural parents and difference in status which he experienced in early years."¹ Is there a possibility of greater ease and less anxiety for the adoptive parent and the child if he were told from the beginning of his birth to "another mummy", who could not care for him so gave him to the adoptive parents because they could and did love him so much?

This study revealed that adoptive parents should be encouraged to discuss the pertinent facts about the natural parents with the child when telling him he is adopted. This should be discussed with the parents before the child is placed and during the probation period, with acceptance by the adoption worker that the introduction and the telling of the story may produce anxiety. Adoptive parents should feel free to return to the agency to discuss special problems and should be encouraged to do so.

Contrary to popular belief, these adoptive parents participated with interest and enthusiasm in this study. In fact, they expressed an interest in discussing at a later date the questions their children may ask about "other" parents, their own anxieties and difficulties and their children's reactions.

APPENDIX A

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Periodicals


BROWN, Florence, "What do we Seek in Adoptive Parents?", Social Casework, April 1951.


