

Book Review of **Adopting Older Children: A Practical Guide to Adopting and Parenting Children Over Age Four**

By

Janice G. Schuster

Adopting Older Children: A Practical Guide to Adopting and Parenting Children Over Age Four (Stephanie Bosco-Ruggiero, Gloria Russo Wassell, and Victor Groza. New Horizon Press, 2014) addresses issues that can arise when adopting children who are older when they come to their forever family. Research indicates that prospective families are willing to adopt an infant either domestically or internationally but are hesitant to adopt an older child due to “misinformation and fear regarding older child adoption.” (p. xiii.) At the same time, more families are considering older child adoption due to several factors, including a dearth of infants available for adoption since single parenthood no longer carries the stigma that it once did, and the domestic policies of countries that are limiting the number of infants available to adopt internationally. *Adopting Older Children* is intended to bridge the literature gap and to serve as a resource for older child adoption and parenting.

This book is organized into four parts: I. The Adoption Process (Chapters 1-5); II. Adoptive Families (Chapters 6-10); III. Understanding Your Child (Chapters 11-18); and IV. Adoptive Parents’ Problems. This book also includes an Appendix of recommended adoption resources organized by chapter. I focus my specific comments on eight chapters: 3, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13,

16 and 17.

Chapter 3 covers adopting within the United States. Bosco-Ruggiero *et al* recommend that prospective parents become familiar with the foster care system, since a child placed with them will most likely have spent time in foster care. This was the case with both of our sons. Our younger son had lived with five foster families before he became our son. So I can attest personally to how important it is to understand the foster care system and how multiple moves can affect a child. However, the authors omit an important factor here: in some states, an adoption can be finalized only after a child has lived in the pre-adoptive home, as a foster child, for a certain amount of time. In the case of Massachusetts, it is six months. I’m surprised that the authors didn’t mention this in their section on foster care adoption. The description of “special needs adoptions” was especially interesting to me. Our older son was considered special needs solely because he is bi-racial. He also had an individualized education plan (IEP) solely because he had been in foster care. My husband and I were told that many children in foster care are given IEPs because being in foster care creates educational delays and special needs.

I read Chapter 5: Post-Adoption Services eagerly, expecting to find more helpful information than was

available to us years ago after our sons' adoptions were finalized. I was disappointed. Although the authors quote an adoption professional as saying that "...there is a lot of support out there for adoptive families now." (p. 55), they provide few specific details to support that quote in this chapter, which is only 3 1/2 pages long. Also, some of the information in this chapter seems to be common sense: Did the authors need to mention that families living in rural areas might have less access to services than those living in urban areas? That seems obvious to me. Overall, this chapter was disappointing, and I don't think it will be useful to adoptive parents.

I found Chapter 9, on sibling relationships, interesting since our older son was almost 5 years old when we adopted our younger son in 1998. The book's advice is simple and straightforward: explain to children who are already in the family about the needs of the newly-adopted child; make time for the existing child and listen carefully to any concerns that he or she expresses about the adoption. Our older son was very happy to have a younger brother and even bought a small ball with his own money to give to our younger son at our first visit with him. Our sons continue to have a close relationship.

Chapter 10, "Navigating Biological Family Relationships," details post-adoption contact between adopted children and their biological families. Depending on family history, it may or may not be in the best interest of the child to have a relationship with her or his biological family. Both of my sons contacted their birth families years after their adoptions were finalized, and they, my husband and I currently have good relationships with their birth families. However, one of our sons experienced deep feelings of responsibility for his birth mother after he reconciled with her, to the point where he even felt financially responsible for her. We thought this was a heavy and unreasonable burden for a teenager. It put us in the awkward position of wanting to support his relationship with his birth mother while

at the same time needing to make him aware that he was not financially or emotionally responsible for her. The book's nonjudgmental discussion of the pros and cons of contact with birth families will be useful to adoptive and pre-adoptive families.

Chapter 11 covers traumatic experiences and how they might (but don't necessarily) cause traumatic stress in an older adopted child. The authors list behavioral symptoms that may indicate traumatic stress, including: moodiness; frustration; intense fear; temper tantrums; regression; and defiance. The list corresponds to my family's experience with our younger son, who had lived with five foster families before he became our son and who experienced serious temper tantrums until he was 6 or 7 years old. The authors recommend counseling or other professional help as well as therapeutic parenting for a traumatized child and include a list of questions to ask a prospective counselor. However, they do not offer specific characteristics of a good counselor, which, in addition to the list of questions to ask, would have been helpful to the book's audience. In my experience, the most important characteristics of a good counselor or therapist include an understanding of the adoption process and its effects on both the adoptive parents and the adopted child, and a respect for the losses that adoptive children have experienced. This comes at least partially from a negative experience that my family had with a counselor to whom we were referred for our older son. He formed a close relationship with the counselor, but the counselor was experiencing difficulties in his personal life and often had to cancel or reschedule our son's appointments. The counselor, even though he supposedly was familiar with adoption issues, did not seem to understand how the disappointment of canceled or postponed appointments affected our son and accentuated the losses that he had already experienced in his young life.

In Chapter 13, "Attachment and Adoption," there is a section on "Getting professional help for

attachment problems.” The section lists recommended interventions but includes no details or definitions of those interventions. I expected to find more details in the recommended resources list for that chapter but instead found a list of “Possible therapies for attachment problems” that also provided no details or definitions of the therapies and no suggestions for further resources.

In Chapter 16, the authors emphasize the importance of obtaining a medical record that is as complete as possible. We had problems with this when we adopted our older son. I had a lot of difficulty getting his medical records from the pediatrician while he was in foster care. I finally drove to the doctor’s office and was able to get the records in person. We learned a lot from the medical records that had not been shared with us before, including that our son had had a sixth toe removed when he was an infant.

In Chapter 17, covering development and learning, the authors advise that developmental age is frequently not the same as chronological age in adopted children who have experienced trauma. When we adopted our younger son at age two, his developmental age was much younger than his chronological age. We believe this was due, at least in part, to his many foster care placements before he became our son. The authors also argue that, in obtaining services to address developmental and/or learning delays, parents must serve as their child’s advocate. We experienced this with our older son, as I describe in my essay. In the first few weeks of his being our son, I insisted that the local school find a spot for him in their early intervention program, even though the teacher’s first reaction was that she did not have space for him. We learned early that it was our responsibility, as his parents, to be his voice and to make sure that he received everything to which he was entitled.

In conclusion, *Adopting Older Children* is a welcome addition to the literature on adoption. The authors include information and resources for diverse

family structures--single, LGBT, and older adoptive parents as well as for more traditional couples. Their writing style is clear and their word choices are sensitive to the many types of potential adoptive families.

This book will be most useful to readers who are preparing for, or are thinking about, the journey of adopting an older child. Its sections cover all aspects of the process of preparing to adopt an older child as well as the homecoming and subsequent finalization. The book’s conclusion offers a good summary, which includes a useful section on the benefits of older child adoption.

However, the book will be less useful for readers who have already adopted and are experiencing challenging issues from their child’s pre-adoption years. The chapter on post-adoption services is disappointing because the authors list services that may be available to families who need services but do not provide details about how to access them.

About the Reviewer: Janice G. Schuster is the adoptive parent of two sons that she and her husband adopted from the state of Massachusetts foster care system in the late 1990s. Their older son was 3 1/2 years old when they adopted him, placing him in the category of an “older” child and giving her the lens through which she reviewed this book. She is Associate Professor and Commons Librarian for Research, Education, and Collections, at Providence College’s Phillips Memorial Library. Schuster received a B.A. degree in German and an M.L.S. degree, both from Indiana University in Bloomington, IN. She can be reached at jschuster@providence.edu