

## Post Adoption Information Sheet No 25

### Adoptive parenting and infertility

The decision to apply to become adoptive parents is often one made after many medical investigations and procedures and much soul searching following a diagnosis of infertility. Infertility may also be secondary to a medical condition which precludes a pregnancy. Whatever the individual situation, infertility is a commonly accepted term to describe the situation where one's family is not able to be grown biologically. Prospective adoptive parents come to adoption via many routes. All, however, have made a decision to form or expand their family through adoption.

Applying to adopt is not a decision taken lightly. It involves mountains of paperwork, medical checks, references, police checks, interviews and a home assessment. It is an intrusive process where one's life and relationships are laid bare for others to evaluate and judge. Throughout the process is the ever present reminder that 'we are infertile because if we weren't infertile we wouldn't have to apply to become parents and justify ourselves to an agency'. Once approved there is a huge sigh of relief followed by the waiting game until 'the phone call'.

Those not involved in adoption might think that 'the phone call' is the end to infertility as parenthood is finally embarked upon. What we know however is that infertility plays a profound part in the 'doing' of adoptive parenting. In fact, it can be argued that infertility is the single biggest risk factor to the success of an adoptive placement. The opposite is also true, with knowledge and understanding; infertility can be the single biggest strength for adoptive parents. The key to infertility being a strength rather than a risk is in the adoptive parents' understanding of how their loss and grief experiences of infertility have been accommodated and incorporated into who they are now – as individuals, as a couple and as parents.

Often the doing of adoptive parenting means that adoptive parents have little time to think about infertility and its impact, but it is in fact crucial that adoptive parents are aware of their ongoing feelings around infertility. Some key events or situations which may trigger these feelings are times like major celebrations; birthdays, Christmas, mothers'/fathers' days, etc. These are days that by the very nature of being a family through adoption are 'shared' with someone else; a parent. Whether you have contact or not with your child's family, these are days that can 'push buttons'. Other things that can trigger feelings around infertility might be seeing your child's pain as they grapple with their own grief around adoption and knowing you as a parent are powerless to make it go away; or hearing your child say they hate you and want to live with their parent or hearing your child say 'my mother would let me do that'. Feelings may also be triggered as you talk with your child about who they look like and what genetic characteristics they share with whom and knowing that forever your bloodline stops with you. Another trigger might be when

your child starts their own family and you move into the role of being a grandparent. There are a myriad of circumstances where your understanding of your own losses around infertility are significant.

Triggers around infertility happen in the living of life. They are events that cause a strong emotional response to a normal situation. The key is in how you respond as a parent. If you feel an overwhelming or significant emotional response, then it is likely that feelings of grief around your infertility are being triggered. Another way to check-in with yourself is to look at your behaviour. If you find yourself displaying increased behavioural responses to an event, then your grief has probably been triggered. If you are not able to support your child with their emotions because yours are taking precedence, then it is also likely that your feelings of grief around infertility have been triggered.

Whenever anyone has experienced a major loss, feelings of grief can be triggered by different events and situations. For example, you start to cry unexpectedly when you hear a song on the radio that reminds you of someone you have loved and have lost.

It is important that we are aware of what is being triggered, because it is this knowledge that assists us in understanding our feelings and then working through them. The reason this is vital in adoptive parenting particularly, is that adopted children have many losses that they are facing and they need adoptive parents who are emotionally aware and intuitive to assist them in understanding their own experiences of loss (see Information Sheet: Supporting a Child Through Loss). If you as an adoptive parent don't understand your own experiences of loss, how can you assist your child?

What do you need to do? Be aware of your responses - are you being child-focussed when responding to your child's grief? Understand that infertility is a life-long issue and does not end with the process of parenting. Talk to your partner about your feelings and don't be afraid to share your feelings around adoption with your child. Make sure, however, that your conversations are appropriate. It's ok to say to your child that you feel sad that they didn't grow in your tummy; it's not ok to talk about your feelings of devastation and isolation. Be honest with those who are close to you and help them learn about the ongoing impact of infertility. Finally, be aware that feelings of sadness around infertility are normal and not a betrayal of the child whom you have adopted. It is ok not to feel grateful; adoptive parenting is hard and complex.

If you feel that you need further assistance, talk to a counsellor who understands adoption and infertility.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

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