pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Looking At Kinship Adoption

Hammering Out Bits And Pieces Of The Elephant

An Interview with Sharon Kaplan Roszia

Interviewd by Gail Steinberg

Q. There are so many different forms of adoption: open, closed, cooperative. What do you mean by kinship adoption?

A. Most people are not aware that kinship models are prescribed by culture. Western society traditionally defines kinship through consanguineal models (lineage based on blood ties). But how we live today is often in families created through affinal ties (connection based on marriage or caring). Single parents, alternative families, blended families, families built through high-tech medical assistance, adoptive families, transracial families, extended families; all are models of kinship systems based on caring connections. Adoptive families are a very clear example of families connected through caring. Adoptive families are living examples of what society needs to look at to define kinship through affinity. Adoptive families have always been in the forefront of defining family relations. We are involved in a very exciting, healthy, child-oriented evolution. We can be leaders. We should take pride in that.

Q. How is kinship adoption different from other forms of adoption?

A. In a kinship adoption, the child's basic family unit is extended to include adoptive parents, birth parents, extended family from both sides and across the generations, and all the significant adults in that child's life. We are looking for ways to help children grow up safe in society with lots of adults who are committed to them. Kinship is a constantly evolving process - always in the becoming stage. Becoming family is not connected to blood ties. Kin are who you share meals and values and caring with. We have to reject the fact that non-blood kin have a low level of value in our society. We have to take a look at how we put down our in-laws, for example. People are becoming family by caring. People are breaking free from unhealthy family systems and creating new families. I think it's most useful to look at kinship from a child's perspective. Who do children consider to be in their circle? Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao's model of the family orchard is a wonderful model. A family orchard is very different from a family tree. It is more like how we live. A child might consider a family orchard to contain the people who are there for them: the people who provide support. Parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers, social workers, friends, community leaders, committed adults - all the people who provide nurture. We have to give credence to that as a culture. Everyone ought to be encouraged to stay connected to children we care about. We become the people who are historians for that child's life.

Q. Who do you think should get to stay connected to children?

A. In our work at Parenting Resources, we tell birth parents they are obligated to stay connected to their child after placement. Annette Baran, LCSW, describes it by saying that they may not be able to care for their child, but they must care about them. Social workers and foster families have an obligation to stay connected to the children with whom they have significant relationships. We know how important that kind of stability is to a child. We know how devastating a lack of continuity can be. But the highest number of adoptions in this country are step-parent adoptions. What that means is that when parents divorce and then marry new partners, the system encourages the new parent to adopt the children. Why? What are we doing? Recreating blood ties? Severing connections from one family and recreating a second family. What are we asking adoptive parents to do? We're asking them to play "let's pretend they're blood-related." Is this connected to what children need or to what society needs?

Q. What are the barriers to kinship adoption?

A. Our legal system. We need to redefine our laws to allow the people who are important to each other to stay connected. Old ways in adoption are breaking down families. Children are missing out because of constant disconnects. We must start finding new ways that can save children's connections. A sense of sacredness and stability have to be rebuilt into adoption models. We are the only culture in the world with the nuclear family kinship system, the Eskimo system. It puts great pressure on the parent-child dyad to be there for each other and it's based on a notion that families are supposed to be a certain way. This expectation creates a tension for people who are trying different ways. We need to look at a broader base of support for children. One African model is that it takes a whole community to raise one child. We need to redefine everybody's role in relationship to the child. In a kinship adoption, everyone is still family. Everyone still cares about the child. When you expand out the responsibility around this principle of caring, everyone can stay connected and everybody has value. What we should be doing is encouraging that, not discouraging it.

Q. Do you know any families who are living in a kinship adoption? Could you describe a situation that is working?

A. I know so many families, families filled with light and joy. The adoptive parents are always people of good heart, living a child-focused experience. When they adopt a child, they look to see who has given that child sustenance and they scoop those people up. They redefine who the extended family is. Some have had non-legal or non-blood relatives move in with them, creating expanded families in that way. Many families are doing that. I know of an adoptive family who live on a ranch in Montana. They are involved in more than one adoption and recently they adopted an older child. They've taken time to welcome all the people of this child's history to their ranch. You know what? This child has settled in with this family in an amazingly fast way. Another family I know took in a homeless person. They had the idea that if everyone reached out and took in a homeless person, the homeless problem would be solved. So they did it. They took in a homeless woman and she became a member of their family, a grandma to the children. They have in every way afforded her the grandmother title, even naming her in their will. These are the kind of people who are living out new ways, but they get a lot of flack. What they need is our support.

Q. We've seen some families who think they're damaging their child because circumstances make it impossible to achieve openness. What would you tell families who can't manage to create a kinship adoption including participation from the birth family?

A. This is an attitude issue. We know there are times when the birth family is not available. An open attitude is what's essential. You can't force what other people will do. You have to stay alert to what other people can become. The important family belief is that the door is always open. Families who believe this have a very different feel to them. An open attitude gives the child permission to include significant adults in his circle. Attitude is what's important here. I see a vision in people with an open attitude. They stand for loving in an open and fierce way.

Sharon Kaplan Roszia is a founder of Parenting Resources in Tustin, California and the American Kinship Institute on the Monterey peninsula in California. She has worked in the field of adoption for thirty years. With Lois Melina, she is the author of The Open Adoption Experience: A Complete Guide for Adoptive and Birth Families, available through Pact.