

# The Role of Extended Family in Adoption

*Guest presenters:* Susan Gregory, Narelle Nelles  
Hosted by Vanessa Corbridge (ICAFSS)



# Overview

- The unique needs of a child who has been adopted through intercountry adoption.
- The experience of extended family members in welcoming an adopted child into the family.
- The role extended family play in supporting a child and their parents.
- Parents and extended family working together to benefit the child.



# Extended family role

*Extended family can be important resources for the new family member and certainly can enhance the child's self-esteem'.*

*Extended family can also play a highly supportive role for the parents offering non-judgemental support.*

*'The Extended Family and Adoption' by Adoption Resources of Wisconsin*



# Safety is just the beginning

- *The child placed within the family is now in a safe and secure situation, but the story has just begun. A traumatised child brings their pain into his or her new family.'*
- *'When a child enters a family from a tragedy involving the loss of their family of origin, there is a process that must occur for this child to heal. Simply being in a safe environment is just the beginning of the process.'*

*'We Don't Know what we Don't Know; Post Adoption Support of Families Caring for Traumatized Children' by Patricia Lantis*



# The Family Circle

- *'The immediate family members are the first circle..... They function as the first layer of healing.'*
- *'A soft, protective **'cocooning'** of the child within the safety of the family is critical ..... in a highly structured, organized and predictable environment. This allows the child to gradually rest, knowing that the inconsistencies of their previous environment have given way to orderly, predictable days.'*
- *'Extended family may propose many invitations and celebrations during this cocooning period. However, these are best deferred for a time.'*
- *'This may mean that families say no to special family and functions and activities'*
- *"To the extended circle of family and friends, this can be painful. This can cause disappointed expectations and conflict with extended family members.'*
- *'This period is not forever ...as they adjust they will be able to accommodate to a busier social calendar. However depending on the degree of previous trauma, this recovery time may vary.'*

# Parenting approaches

- These children need specialised therapeutic parenting which is challenging work and parents need to be supported in this.
- *'Parents are often encouraged by well-meaning supporters to use punitive consequences or traditional parenting styles to deal with difficult behaviours. This is absolutely counterproductive and must be resisted by the family.'*
- *'Losing one's family of origin is one of life's harshest lesson so punitive measures are of no value.'*
- Shaming as a parenting approach holds no place in parenting and adoption – children already feel enough shame through being abandoned.
- At the same time it is important not to 'rescue' and 'feel sorry' for a child with these experiences but to parent from a place of compassion.

# Understanding the child's experience

- Understand that the child has been 'developmentally hijacked' because of their traumatic experiences
- Understand that adoption brings forward feelings of grief and loss.

*'We Don't Know what we Don't Know; Post Adoption Support of Families Caring for Traumatized Children' by Patricia Lantis*



# Facilitating Attachment

*'Adoptive families may catch flak for their parenting styles, especially when extended family doesn't understand that what you are doing is to facilitate attachment. This may come from a general lack of understanding of child development, or not understanding the type of environment your child came from, the effects of deprivation early in life, and the need to create a healthy, stable attachment between child and caregiver. You may feel judged in this situation, but extended relatives need to understand the why behind what you are doing (ie. Why you need to be the only one changing diapers and doing feedings, why you are not letting your child "cry it out", why you need to be the disciplinarian). This can be hard for extended relatives to watch - they want to love and help too!'*

*Helping Extended Family Understand Adoption' North Dakota Post Adoption Network*





# Extended family

- May be nervous about the adoption and the impact it may have on the family.
- May be concerned about the biological family tree.
- Didn't decide to adopt but adoption is now part of their family.
- Understand that they are essentially strangers to the child and build relationships slowly and at the child's pace – respecting personal space will help the child feel safe and respected.



# The Child's Story

- *'The child's story should be guarded by the family.'*
- *'Privacy is a vital consideration.'*
- *'This inquisitiveness of others does not need to be satisfied.'*
- *'The graphic details of the trauma do not need to be repeated and sensationalized to others.'*
- *'The child's story belongs to them and should be sealed by careful parents against curiosity.'*
- *'Extended families need to respect these boundaries.'*
- *'Healing is best done within the soft wrap of the nuclear family.'*

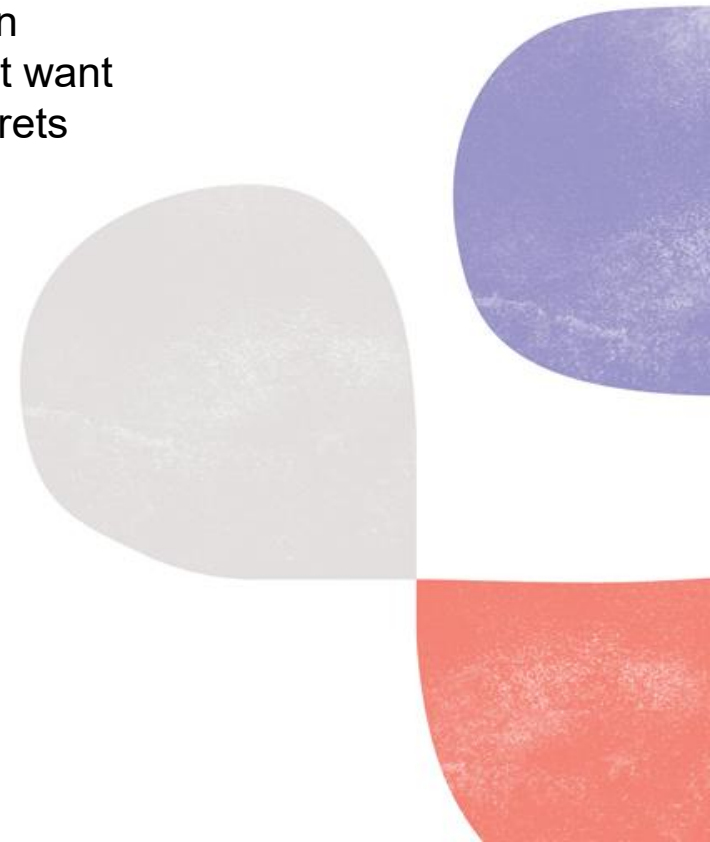
*'We Don't Know what we Don't Know; Post Adoption Support of Families Caring for Traumatized Children' by Patricia Lantis*



# Use positive adoption language

- Care must be taken with language.
- It is important for children to grow up hearing their biological family and their race talked about with respect.
- Innocent comments like, 'I just don't understand why anyone would give you up' or 'even though she's from Asia .....' or 'she is so amazing, I can't believe her birth mother didn't want her', may be said with good intentions but thought must be given to how the child interprets comments.

*Helping Extended Family Understand Adoption' North Dakota Post Adoption Network*



# Open Adoption

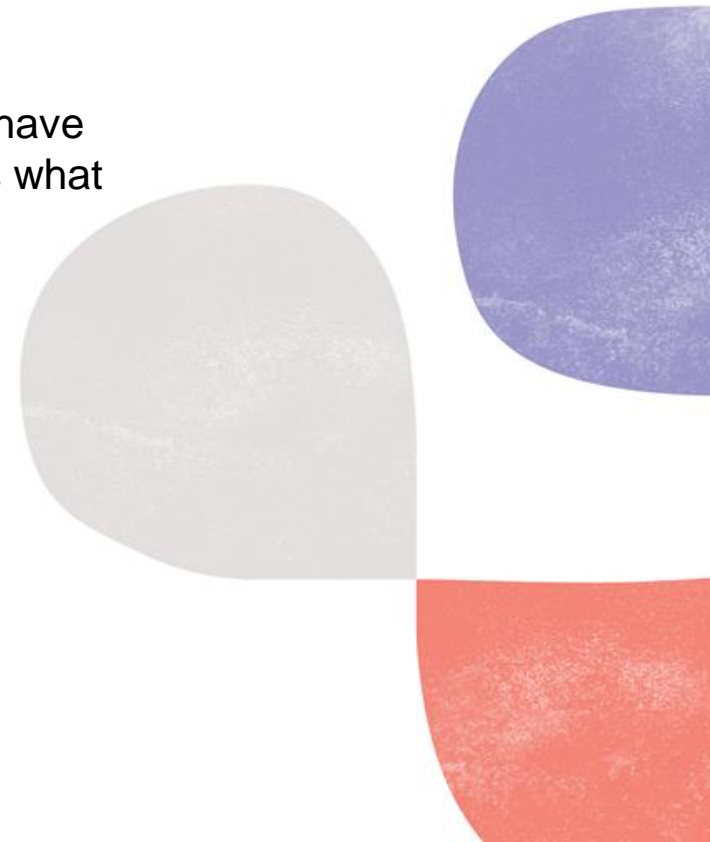
- Adoption of today may be different from stories you have heard of adoption of old.
- Openness around adoption is healthier for the entire family and will ensure that there are no secrets surrounding your child's adoption. Secrets are only kept if something is shameful.
- At the same time, the family may decide to keep private some detailed aspects of the child's story.

*Helping Extended Family Understand Adoption' North Dakota Post Adoption Network*



# Tips for extended family

- Remember the parents have attended many educational sessions and have done copious amounts of reading on raising a child who enters their family through adoption.
- The parents are the 'experts' on the type of therapeutic parenting required.
- Your role is to support their approach.
- Understand that traditional styles of parenting are not appropriate for children who have experienced disrupted attachments and environments. A non-shaming approach is what is required.
- Your role is very important in offering non-judgemental support to the family.
- Your relationship with the child will grow to be a very significant one.



# Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service

Free counselling, case management and education services Australia-wide

P. 1300 543 396

[E. icasupport@relationshipmatters.com.au](mailto:icasupport@relationshipmatters.com.au)

<https://relationshipmatters.com.au/all-services/icasupport/>