

Special parents for special children

Information published by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare falls into different categories. This publication is categorised as *Information for the general public*. It contains information for members of the public, for patients and/or clients and the people close to them, and covers law, reforms and the guidelines issued by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare regarding care, treatment etc..

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the MIA, the Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority.

Preface

Society plays a major role in creating families through adoption. For the sake of the child, the preparation given to prospective adopters must be as thorough as possible. Anyone resident in Sweden who wishes to adopt a child from abroad is therefore assigned a compulsory preparation course for adopters by the municipality where they live.

The course material has been produced by the MIA, the Swedish Inter-country Adoptions Authority, in collaboration with the National Board of Health and Welfare, on assignment from the Swedish Government. Social workers Marie Alm and Lovisa Kim [Sammarco] of the MIA have compiled knowledge and experience and drawn up the present material. In carrying out this assignment the MIA has received valuable support and help from a reference group consisting of the authorised Swedish adoption organisations, organisations for adoptees, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and individual experts in the field.

In the preparation of the material for this course we have taken advantage of experience gained by colleagues in Denmark and Holland, where courses for prospective adopters have been compulsory for several years.

The course material is primarily intended for intercountry adoptions but can be used equally effectively with regard to domestic adoptions.

Our ambition is for the course material to show the positive aspects of adoption while preparing prospective parents for difficulties which might emerge.

Inger Widén Cederberg
Director
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Social Welfare Department
Swedish National Board of
Health and Welfare

During work on the material, the MIA has received helpful ideas from many experts in the field.

The following have been particularly generous:

Anna Elmund, Institute for Women's and Children's Health at the University of Uppsala; Frank Lindblad, Institute of Psychosocial Medicine and Karolinska Institutet; Malin Irhammar, University of Kristianstad; Magnus Kihlbom, child psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and former Head of Clinical Department at the Erica Foundation (Ericastiftelsen); Christina Lagergren, Kungsholmens Psychiatric Clinic for Children and Young People and NU-team at Sachs' Children's Hospital; Lotta Landerholm, registered psychotherapist and supervisor, teacher at Stockholm Academy for Psychotherapy; Heléne Mohlin, Family Association for Intercountry Adoption (FFIA); Monica Norrman, Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare; Anita Sundin, Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions; Elsa Nyberg, certified social worker; Margret Josefsson, Adoptionscentrum (AC); Gudmund Stintzing, senior lecturer, University of Dalecarlia; Gunilla Syrén, registered psychologist; Hanna Wallensteen, Adopted Competence, and Maud Zackrisson, Family Association for Intercountry Adoption (FFIA). Anders Broberg, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Gothenburg, has reviewed the fact content of sections. *Wanting a family, Becoming a parent, Nature and Nurture, Early Interaction, Attachment, Secure and insecure attachment, Parental attachment.*

This English version of the Swedish course material is part translation and part adaptation. It has been produced in response to questions from various states as to the scope and content of the preparatory courses in Sweden. At the same time it caters to the needs of English-speaking prospective adopters resident in Sweden.

The use of the word "you" in the following pages may refer to men or women or a man and a woman together as a couple, as appropriate.

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Introduction

Aims and purpose

In connection with adoption, society has a special responsibility of ensuring that the child's new parents are as well-prepared as possible. In Sweden, preparation takes place partly during the compulsory course for prospective parents. It continues during the home study and assessment which forms the basis for the local Social Welfare Board's formal permission to adopt. Your local municipality is responsible for assigning you a suitable course. The purpose of the course is to provide you with information and an opportunity to gain a better understanding of adoptive children and their needs: a better insight into what adoption entails for you as an adoptive parent and for the child to be adopted. The course also informs you about the legal provisions involved, the adoption process and what help is available if problems should arise after an adoption.

During the course you will be shown what a child's experiences might have been prior to adoption, how a child might experience the actual adoption as it happens and later on in life. There will be time for discussions with others in the same position and a chance for you to enter into the process of adopting. Hopefully the preparatory course will provide food for thought and for further discussion at home with the people closest to you.

Our aim is to give you all you need to reach a well-founded decision as to whether or not to make a formal application to adopt. The decision as to whether or not you believe you can fulfill the needs of an adopted child rests with you. Information can make it easier to cope with the sometimes unforeseeable process of adopting. It can also clarify what you can expect of the Swedish authorities and the authorised Swedish adoption organisations. If you enter into the process of adopting and make it a positive experience, it will give you the best possible preparation for the arrival of a child in your home.

Reading instructions

The book is divided into seven themes: Intercountry adoption, Having a family, Becoming a person, Which children need a family? Travelling to meet your child, Becoming an adoptive family, Life as a family.

Some of the quotations included represent different individuals' actual experiences, others have been taken from specialist literature. At the end of each chapter there are questions for you to ask yourself, and suggestions for further reading on that topic. At the end of the book we have compiled lists of suggested further reading, references, internet resources and the names of the individuals who have participated in the reference group.

The book can be read from beginning to end but you can choose to read excerpts in any order you wish. The contents should be seen as an introduction to intercountry adoption. For more extensive knowledge, we recommend further reading. The point of this book is for you to be able to use it for reference now and in the future.

To make the most of the preparatory course it would be to your advantage to have read the book beforehand. This would make it easier for you to participate in discussions, and allow you to prepare questions on topics you don't understand or would like to know more about.

Preparation

Parents are expected to cope, even when confronted by the unexpected. This is what makes parenting one of life's greatest challenges. Before you have children it is difficult to know what sort of a parent you would make. You are able to prepare, however – by obtaining information, by thinking about your own experience of children, and by reflecting especially on your own childhood.

As a parent you develop through interaction with your child. This is why the term 'preparation' is a more suitable term than just 'information' for what we aim to achieve as you read this material and take part in the preparation course for prospective adopters. Children don't necessarily need parents who always do the right thing in every situation. What they do need is parents who are so secure in themselves that they can assume responsibility for the results of their actions, regardless of their outcome.

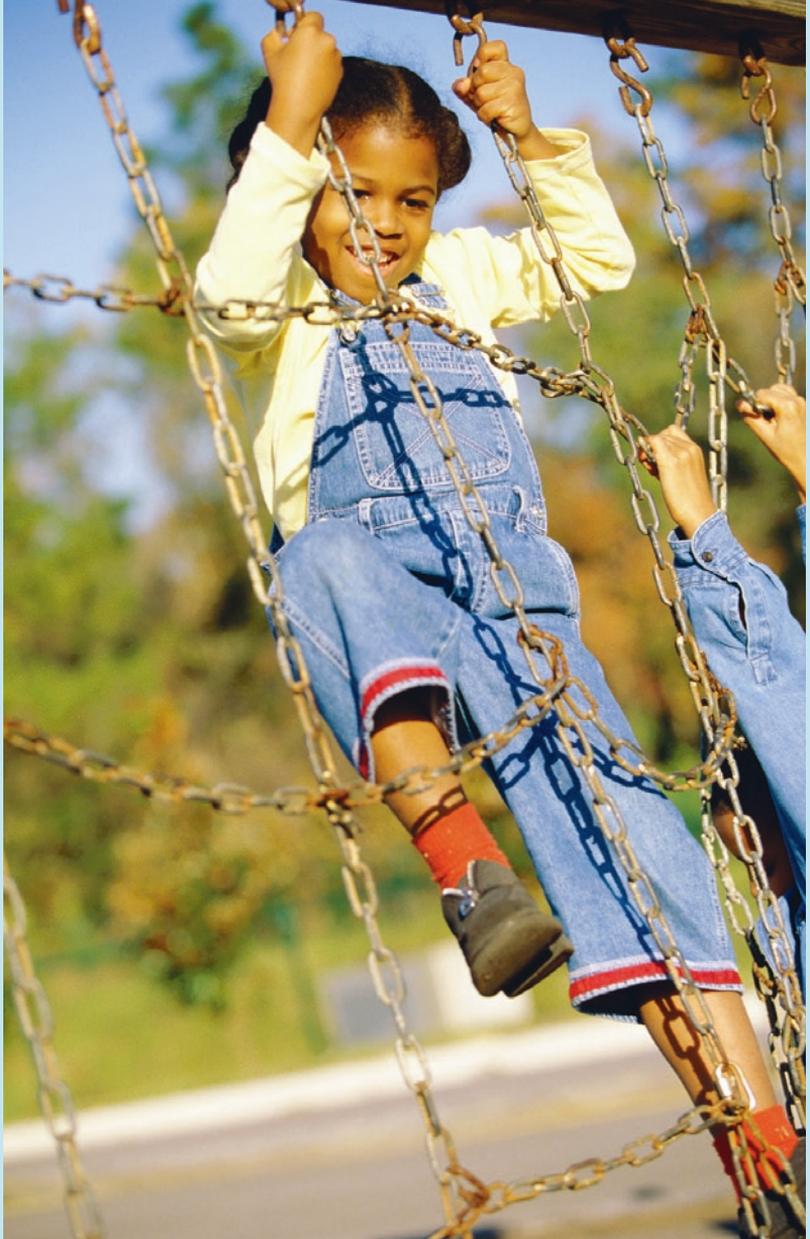
Theoretical starting-point

There are many theories describing human beings. They attempt to organise what we know in order to understand and predict people's feelings, actions and development. Theories are not truths, but constructions of ideas formed within a cultural and historical context.¹ This course material is primarily based on modern infant psychology and attachment theory.

Our world is always changing, but children are born with the same basic needs irrespective of time and place. They are born with the ability to develop through interaction with their surroundings. To develop well, they need a secure environment and continuous contact with one or more adults. What is written in this book about children's needs is therefore universally applicable. What is special about adopted children is that their experiences before and during the adoption can affect their ability to actually feel their needs and make them known to others. In this they can well differ from children who grow up in their family of birth.

¹ Landerholm, 2005, 19

Intercountry adoption



Adoption in Sweden

Adoption creates a relationship between parent and child. This relationship is formalised through a legally binding court decision, which cannot be revoked. During the administrative process leading up to the adoption, any authorities, organisations or individuals involved must have the best interests of the child as their primary objective.

In brief, an intercountry adoption in Sweden comprises the following steps for the adoptive parents:

- Anyone wishing to adopt must take part in the preparation course for prospective parents assigned by their local municipality and go through a home study and assessment. If the applicants are judged suitable as adoptive parents, their local municipality will grant them formal permission to adopt.
- The prospective adoptive parents send their application overseas via one of the authorised Swedish adoption organisations. In special cases, an adoption can take place without the assistance of any of the authorised Swedish adoption organisations. In any such cases the MIA (the Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority) has to give its formal consent.
- In the child's state of origin, the authorities decide whether it is in the child's best interests to be adopted by a person or family in another country. If so, the child's representatives choose a person or family from the applications they have received.
- The presumptive adopter(s) are given information about the child for whom they have been chosen.
- The presumptive adopter(s) travel to the child's state of origin to meet and take charge of the child.
- The adoption is finalised in a court of law either in the child's state of origin or in Sweden, depending on which state the child comes from.
- When the adopter(s) come home with their child, the child must have a medical examination.
- Most states of origin require at least one progress report (generally known as a post-placement or post-adoption re-

port) about the child's situation and how he or she is developing in his or her new family. The reports are written by a social worker employed by the local municipal Social Welfare Board, or by the adoptive parent(s).

- The municipal Social Welfare Board has the responsibility of providing any support and assistance which may be necessary after the adoption.
- The parents have the responsibility of staying close and being supportive when the child wishes to know more about his or her origins.

In the brochure "Adoption in Sweden" ("Så går det till att adoptera") you will find more information about the assessment process and how to go about adopting in Sweden.

International adoptions as part of society

Swedish laws on adoption in a historical perspective

A state committee at the end of the 19th century established that children taken into state care in Sweden were treated very badly. The inquiry showed that children were sold as workers and that unwanted babies were murdered when farmed out to others for pay (baby farming). This gave rise to wide-reaching changes in legislation which in turn led to Sweden's first Adoption Act in 1917. According to this act, the child's position in his or her adoptive family was still weak. The adoption could be revoked if it emerged that the child was suffering from some disability or illness, and the child inherited only his or her adoptive parents, not his or her adoptive relatives.

In 1958, adoption in Sweden was reformed and became the "strong" form of adoption that exists today. Adoption now terminates all legal ties between the child and his or her family of birth and the adopted child's position is equal to that of a child born into the adoptive family. A couple of remnants of the old Adoption Act were still applicable for many years, however. The first of these was abolished in 1971, when it was made impossible to revoke an adoption. Another amendment of the Act came into effect on 1st January 2005 whereby it was made impossible for adopter and adoptee to marry .

The Swedish Social Service Act has stipulated for many years that the municipality has to give its formal permission prior to the adoption of any child. In 1998 another amendment was made to clarify the Social Service Act. The municipalities were made responsible for providing any specialist assistance and support which might be necessary after an adoption. As of the 1st January 2005 anyone wishing to adopt is obliged to participate in a preparatory course for prospective adopters.

Intercountry adoption in a historical perspective

Views on childlessness and adoption vary between different religions. Apart from religion, there are different popular notions of how children are conceived and what constitutes a family, and there are different attitudes to women's and children's social and legal rights. One example of this is that adoption is not permissible according to the Koran. Therefore there are no legal provisions for adoption in Muslim countries. In some countries, adoption is only permissible within the same religious community, and in others adoption occurs within the extended family.

The first intercountry adoptions in Sweden took place towards the end of the 1950s. The adopters were Swedes who had come into contact with children while working abroad. They helped friends and acquaintances to adopt, too.² From the mid 1950s the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare was able to provide information regarding international agencies which could act as mediators for intercountry adoptions.³

The number of intercountry adoptions increased, and by the end of the 1960s there were more intercountry adoptions than domestic ones. There were several reasons for this. The number of Swedish children put up for adoption had decreased steadily. This was due to improved living conditions in Sweden, changes of attitude with respect to children born out of wedlock, social reforms and the use of contraceptives. Another reason was that it had become increasingly common for Swedes to travel and work abroad. In the mid 1960s, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare signed a mediation agreement with one orphanage in Greece and with the state of Korea.⁴ In 1974 the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare constituted the

² SOU 1994:137, 47

³ Ds S 1978:6, 26ff

⁴ SOU 1967:57, 36 & 40 36, 40

NIA, (the Swedish Council for Intercountry Adoptions) in order to meet increased public interest in intercountry adoptions.

Active adoptive parents formed associations with a network of contacts able to assist people in adopting without their actually having to travel abroad themselves. They also worked to establish the adoptive families' right to social benefits such as parental insurance and to develop methods of support for adoptees and their families.

When private individuals went out into the world to adopt children, there were no means of public control. There were arguments for regulating intercountry adoption.⁵ An inquiry resulted in the Mediation of Intercountry Adoptions Act, (1979:552) which came into effect in 1979. Mediation was to be carried out by authorised adoption agencies under the supervision of the NIA, now renamed the Swedish National Board for Intercountry Adoptions. By channelling all mediation to these agencies a certain amount of public control could be exercised.

There are different views as to how much public control is necessary with regard to intercountry adoptions. Some people maintain that adoption is a private matter, while others are of the opinion that public control is necessary. The field has become subject to an increasing degree of regulation. Today, the authorised Swedish adoption organisations are involved in mediating roughly 90 per cent of the 1000 or so intercountry adoptions which take place annually in Sweden. Several different acts govern the field of adoption. The Children and Parents Code, the Social Service Act and the Mediation of Intercountry Adoptions Act are a few of them.

In 1997 Sweden acceded to the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. The Hague Convention is the fruit of several years of international work. Its aims are preventing the abduction of, the sale of and illegal traffic in children, safeguarding the best interests of the child and enabling adoption to take place in a secure and ethically acceptable manner. The NIA was designated the Swedish Central authority according to the Hague Convention. Since Sweden acceded to the Hague Convention, private adoptions are limited to the adoption of related children and other individual cases where there are special circumstances.

⁵ Ds S 1978:6, 3, 26 & 46 3, 26, 46

On the 1st of January 2005, the NIA was reformed and re-named the MIA, the Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority. The demands made on the authorised Swedish adoption organisations are now more stringent and the new central adoption authority has been given wider powers to supervise the authorised organisations' work abroad.

Ethical dilemmas

The uneven distribution of resources in the world is one of the causes of intercountry adoptions. At the same time it is one of the reasons for it continuing. This raises many ethical questions.

Intercountry adoption cannot solve the global fundamental problems which cause children to be abandoned. For the individual child, however, adoption can be the best solution if all other possibilities have been exhausted. In the long-term, the way to improve conditions for children in difficult circumstances is to further general development and welfare in their countries of origin. The goal of such measures would be to promote development which can lead to fewer children being abandoned and make intercountry adoption superfluous.⁶

The fact that they are wanted in other countries has changed the general view of these children in their countries of origin. In some countries, the number of domestic adoptions has increased. In some countries international co-operation regarding adoptions has contributed to better conditions for orphans and disabled children. The authorised Swedish adoption organisations also operate various development projects and programs in the children's countries of origin, to make it possible for families to keep their children and to improve things for the children who remain in orphanages.

There is a certain risk, however, that the income from intercountry adoptions might give rise to economic dependence in the children's countries of origin. There is also a certain risk of intercountry adoptions contributing to the conservation of social structures comprising views on women, children born to unmarried parents, and disabled children, which we in Sweden regard as unacceptable.⁷

One question worth asking is whether or not intercountry adoptions today are prompted more by a wish to help children or a wish to help the childless couples.

⁶ SOU 2003:49, 144.

⁷ Ibid. 169

Most adopters want a child as young and healthy as possible. Since the number of childless adults who want to adopt exceeds the number of healthy newly-born infants who are available for adoption, competition can arise. It also means that many children who are available for adoption are never adopted, because they do not fit in with the criteria of prospective adopters.

Again, it is debatable whether it is ethically defensible to move children from one side of the earth to the other. Many of the countries of origin have an excess of deaths over births. Are we draining them of their most valuable resources when we adopt their children?

Think it over:-

- *What are my views on intercountry adoption?*

Conventions

Every adoption must be in the child's best interests

One of the fundamental ideas of both the 1989 United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child and of the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of Intercountry Adoption is that "the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding." When birth parents cannot take care of their child for various reasons, adoption can be a solution and provide the child with a new family.

In such cases, the child is extremely vulnerable. This is the reason why Swedish law and international conventions stipulate that the child's best interests are to be paramount when reaching a decision on adoption.

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the child's best interests is the guiding principle for interpreting all the other provisions. What constitutes the best interests of the child is sometimes obvious, eg. that the child has an inherent right to life and to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse. At other times it is a question of taking various

factors into account and reaching an overall judgement in each individual case. In the context of adoptions, the home study and assessment is one example of an overall judgement. Many different factors are taken into account when considering whether or not a person or couple is suitable for an adoptive child. A similar overall judgement in the child's state of origin is the inquiry made to establish whether a family might be found for the child in his or her state of origin or whether it would be in the child's best interests to be found an adoptive family in another state.

Different child perspectives

The Swedish Children's Ombudsman describes the child perspective of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as follows:

"...a child perspective which entails combining demands for children and young persons to be treated as more vulnerable than adults, in need of special protection and support but at the same time treated as capable and resourceful individuals with the right to exercise influence in decision-making in all matters affecting them."

excerpt from *The Best Interests of the Child – from Vision to Reality*
(*Barnets bästa – från vision till verklighet*)

There are different sorts of child perspectives: an adult's child perspective, society's child perspective and each individual child's own perspective.⁸ The adult's child perspective is based on the adult's own childhood experiences, knowledge and cultural context. Society's child perspective is based on general popular opinions as to children's rights and needs. This, too, is based on knowledge, values and ideas which stem from a specific cultural context. Each individual child has his or her own perspective regarding him- or herself and his or her personal situation. This depends on the child's age and maturity and what the child sees, experiences and feels within his or her social context.⁹

Intercountry adoption is a topic where different cultural points of view regarding children and adoption are brought into focus. Children's representatives in states where many children live in institutions do not automatically regard adoption as an alternative to care in an institution. Some states have never had any

⁸ SOU 2001:72, 93 ff

⁹ Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare 2004, 10

formal co-operation with other states regarding intercountry adoptions, and others have discontinued theirs.

The child's experience of adoption is purely individual, characterised by the specific circumstances of the case. What all adoptions have in common is the tremendous change which they entail. Before becoming accustomed to his or her new life and learning to feel secure with his or her new parents, the child can experience the whole situation as frightening and precarious. This is why adoptions need to be organised so as to give the child the best possible chance of coping with the radical changes involved.

The Hague Convention

The Hague Convention was drawn up with a view to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It allocates specific responsibility to the receiving states and to the children's states of origin. One of its basic principles is that society is responsible for ensuring that adoptions take place in the best interest of the child; the convention makes the states ultimately responsible for ensuring that this principle is observed.

The authorities of the state of origin are responsible for determining whether or not an intercountry adoption is the best solution for the individual child. A child whose family is unable to take care of him or her should be found another family as close to his or her origins as possible. An intercountry adoption cannot be considered until it has been determined that the child cannot be given suitable care in the state of origin.

The authorities of the receiving states are responsible for ensuring that the prospective adoptive parents are prepared, eligible and suited to adopt a child from another country. In Sweden, this is achieved by ensuring that everyone interested in adopting takes part in a course for prospective adoptive parents and goes through an official home study and assessment. This in turn provides the foundation for the decision of the municipal Social Welfare Board to grant them formal permission to adopt. The municipality has the responsibility of providing any support and assistance which may be necessary after the adoption.

When representatives of the authorities, or other people responsible for the child in the child's state of origin, entrust us with their children, we must naturally make sure that their confidence is not misplaced.

Preparation course and assessment – in the best interests of the child

In Sweden, the local municipality assigns a preparatory course and carries out the assessment of whether or not an applicant is eligible and suited to adopt. The preparatory course for adopters aims to provide applicants with information and insight about adopted children and their needs, and about what adoption entails. The home study and assessment provide the basis for the formal decision of the municipal Social Welfare Board but can also be seen as part of the preparation. The purpose of the assessment is not primarily to question the prospective adopters' application: it is to make sure they are suitable and eligible, bearing in mind the best interests of a prospective child. The assessment pays special attention to the applicants' knowledge and insight into adopted children and their needs and into what adoption entails. It includes information about the applicants' age, health, personal qualities and social network.

The formal decision of the municipal Social Welfare Board does not signify that the applicants are now ready to become adoptive parents. It is merely one stage in a process and a productive relationship between the applicants and the social worker in charge of the assessment can help make the process of adopting a positive one.

The assessment is also important for the children's representatives in their states of origin. When they choose adoptive parents for a child, the assessment provides the information about the applicant/-s on which they base their decision.

Ethnic discrimination in Sweden

But I managed to avoid the worst of the bullying, because:

"You're not an immigrant!

said the others in my class. A minute after, they'd be going on about how they ought to expell all the wogs. About how they only came to get rich. The wops. The blacks.

When a lad from Hungary started in my class he quickly became the official class wog. Not me, even though my hair was the same colour. He got bullied, not me.

from *Blood is thicker than water* (*Blod är tjockare än vatten*) by Astrid Trotzig

Children adopted from abroad are classed as first generation immigrants in Swedish statistics. Adoptive families can be affected

by the different views on immigration in Sweden. Appearance-wise, many adopted children differ from what is regarded as typically Scandinavian. This leads to adoptive families being conspicuous and being unable to remain anonymous.

An overview of current facts put together by the Swedish Integration Board shows that discrimination does exist in Sweden today. The overview points out that this is not just a question of isolated events but "a system of oppression which permeates the relationship between people in practically all areas of society".¹⁰ The authors are of the opinion that ethnic discrimination is related to racist ideas which in turn are used to justify social imbalances in post-colonial societies.¹¹

Another reason for prejudices about other races is the human tendency to view our own context as the centre of the world. Whatever we are used to we regard as natural and superior.¹² The further away something is, the less we are able to see it in all its detail and complexity. This affects people's general view of the states from which we adopt, since these are often geographically and culturally speaking far removed from our own country.

When information about the children's states of origin does occur in the media, it is often difficulties which are brought up. War, famine, natural catastrophes or illnesses are often the subject. Things which the Western world regards as having kudos and prestige, such as the shares index, design, literature, technical innovations etc. are seldom featured. Such reports can affect our expectations regarding different countries and the people who come from them.

This leads to adoptees and adopters having to deal with discrimination, everyday prejudices about ethnic differences and racist attitudes. Notions such as these can influence adoptive parents' expectations regarding their adopted children and adoptees' expectations regarding themselves and people around them.

Think it over:-

- ***How do I normally react when I hear people voice opinions I regard as discrimination?***

¹⁰ de los Reyes & Wingborg, 2002, 76

¹¹ Ibid. 74 ff

¹² Skovdahl, 1996, 23 ff

Further reading:

Barnets bästa – från vision till verklighet (The best interests of the child – from vision to reality) can be ordered from the Swedish Children's Ombudsman's website. See www.bo.se

Regeringens proposition 2003/04:131 *Internationella Adoptionsfrågor* (Swedish Government white paper 2003/04:131 *On Intercountry Adoptions*). See www.regeringen.se

Adoption – but at what price? SOU 2003:49 (Available in English)

Vardagsdiskriminering och rasism i Sverige, Integrationsverkets rapportserie 2002:13, (*Everyday discrimination and racism in Sweden*. The Swedish Integration Board report series 2002:13). Paulina de los Reyes & Mats Wingborg, see www.intergrationsverket.se/upload/Publikationer/vardagsdiskriminering.pdf

Intercountry Adoption, Innocenti digest 4, www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/

Shanti Holmström, *Mitt okända hemland (My unknown homeland)*. This book is partly autobiographical. The book centres on Shanti and what her childhood and adolescence were like: adopted, dark-skinned, with divorced parents and living in rural Sweden. When Shanti was 17, she decided to travel to her unknown homeland, India.

Lasse Lindroth, *Där inga änglar bor (Where no angels live)*. An autobiographical tale of growing up after being adopted from another country. The book paints a dark picture of reality which not everyone notices or wants to see but which is the only reality for many young people, both Swedes and immigrants.

Frank Lindblad, *Adoption*, chapter 6, Prejudice. The book describes what is scientifically established with regard to adoption. The author presents answers to questions on adoption based on current research. Furthermore, he gives suggestions as to what stances adoptive parents can take regarding the various topics raised.

Having a family



Wanting a family

A desire for children can be prompted by many motives. For many people it is just a matter of course, part of living. Some people dream about their future family when they are still children themselves. Having children might be a matter of wanting to give all your love and security to a child and re-creating the affinity you felt in your own family. Having a child can also be a way of affirming your relationship with your partner. Alternatively, it might be motivated by not feeling any affinity with your original family and wanting to create this by having a family of your own. Some people think of it as a way of becoming immortal, of creating something and leaving a mark. Others are influenced by the people closest to them: having a family is what is expected of them.¹³

For people who cannot conceive, there are other paths to follow – looking for other ways of having a family, or making a decision not to have children. Confronted with a choice like this, the question of why you want children comes to a head. Taking the time to think things through can provide you with valuable insight.

Think it over:-

- *Why do I want a child/children?*
- *Do my partner and I both want children?*
- *Could I imagine a life without children?*

¹³ Möller & Fällström, 1991

Fertility problems and involuntary childlessness

Summer and autumn pass. Sigge and I have inseminations done every month. I begin to despair, read everything I come across about fertility problems, and I'm ridden by guilt. I ought to stop drinking coffee. I ought to try hypnosis, acupuncture and healing. I'm envious of Sigge, who rushes around the same as usual. Not that I want to sit there at the kitchen table and go over our childlessness again and again. Doing more than scratching the surface feels threatening, something might snap, particularly anything to do with sex. We've got our roles. He propels me forward. I keep a tight rein, force him to find the right words and draw conclusions from what happened.

from *Children of longing (Långtansbarnen)* by Kerstin Weigl

Most adoptive parents have experienced fertility problems. But even common experiences can have different details which individuals interpret and feel differently. Some people may have spent many years on in vitro fertilisation (IVF) or other methods of assisted reproduction. Others may have only been trying for a family for a short time and may have had little or no medical treatment. Some people have always known that they would be unable to conceive.

Some people are unable to become pregnant due to infertility, but others choose not to become pregnant. Sometimes this is due to a genetic disorder which the parent(s) have no wish to pass on to any children. Others have given birth to one child but either are unable or unwilling to give birth to another, although they would like a sibling for their first child. This could be due to doctors advising against a second pregnancy or because of not wishing to undergo any form of assisted reproduction again. It might be due to not having found a partner with whom to have a child. This can apply to single people as well as same-sex couples in registered partnerships.

In our society, contraceptives are a commonplace method of avoiding pregnancy. They can create an illusion of being able to plan *conception*: that we can actively plan when we *do* want to have children. Being unable to conceive can therefore come as a shock. For some people it feels as though their body has let them down or that they are no longer in control of their life. Being un-

able to contribute to carrying on the family line, not being part of the chain of life can prompt feelings of inadequacy. People affected sometimes feel incomplete – defective as a man or woman.

Fertility problems and involuntary childlessness can lead to feelings of guilt. People affected can start mulling over how their own actions might have something to do with their infertility: They might have had abortions or chlamydia, used contraceptives or had a number of sexual partners. They might have guilty feelings towards their partner for denying him or her the experience of pregnancy and childbirth – or towards their own parents for not giving them a grandchild.¹⁴

Not being able to have a baby can be divided into two losses: not being able to experience and/or complete a pregnancy, and the loss of the baby one had hoped for. These two losses are interlinked but still different. The physical inability to reproduce cannot be changed. But there are other ways of having children, and there is the alternative choice of life without children.

Some people find it relatively easy to find ways of carrying on when it transpires that they cannot have children. Others find it an emotionally gruelling process. The way people experience it is linked partly to how they cope with other difficulties in life. Sometimes it is comforting to know that your feelings are shared by others in similar situations.

Secondary infertility

Secondary infertility is the term used when someone has already given birth to one or more children but has difficulties having any more children. A couple might have had a child previously but experience problems when trying for a sibling. Having had one child together and then trying in vain to have a second child can give rise to a very real longing to re-experience pregnancy, childbirth and infancy. An elder child might have friends who have siblings and want a little brother or sister too.

Other couples might have already had children with their previous partners but be unable to conceive together.

¹⁴ Lalos, 1985, 25

Fertility problems and your relationship

We've grown close to each other, and that's an advantage. Björn and I have seen each other in moments of despair. Other couples never have the chance of saying "We want a family." It just happens. But we've seen each other's longing. It's hard to take. But it's taught us a lot.

from *Children of longing (Längtansbarnen)* by Kerstin Weigl.

Since the feelings evoked by involuntary childlessness are so personal, you can sometimes feel very lonely within your relationship. Women and men often have different strategies for coping with childlessness. It is common for women to give themselves up to their grief and longing for a child, while men are more preoccupied with their partner's feelings and assume the role of consoler. This sometimes results in the husband avoiding talking about his longing for a child, which in turn can be misconstrued by the wife and interpreted as lack of interest.¹⁵

Your sex life can come under pressure during the medical investigation and treatment.¹⁶ It is easy to feel more like production units than like a man and woman.

Childlessness can complicate your relationship with your partner.¹⁷ It can lead to a separation, but the difficulties you go through together can just as easily lead to a deepening and strengthening of your relationship. If you seem to have reached a deadlock in your relationship, professional counselling is available to help you find your way back to each other. Your local municipality offers family counselling, and there are family therapists who work on a private basis.

It can be difficult knowing how to tackle the people closest to you. Lots of people feel misunderstood or that expectations and questions increase if they mention the planned treatment. Sometimes it feels like a tightrope act, balancing a need to talk about things and the need to protect the integrity of your relationship. People close to you can react or express themselves in a way that feels like an added burden. It can be an added strain, coping with their emotional reactions at the same time as you have to manage your own hopes and disappointments.

¹⁵ Wirtberg, 1992

¹⁶ Möller, 1985

¹⁷ Lenneér-Axelsson, 1989

Think it over:-

- *What did it feel like when I realised that I have difficulties having a child?*
- *What reactions have I met with when I have told people about my difficulties having a child?*
- *How have I handled those reactions?*
- *How have our difficulties having a child influenced my relationship with my partner and the people closest to me?*

Choosing a life without children

In some cases, after a lot of consideration and discussion, people decide to carry on in life without children. After getting over their grief at not being able to have children they discover other things which can give life enough meaning.

In other cases, people really do long for a child but do not want to parent a child born to someone else. In such cases, adoption would never be a good choice, however much you long for a child.

Choosing adoption

A child with a past

Adoption involves shouldering a special sort of parental responsibility, since you choose to parent a child who already exists. When a child is born into a family, the parents are involved in the baby's life from the very beginning. When a child is adopted, the child has already had a whole host of experiences before meeting the adoptive parents. So adoptive parents have to be able to embrace both the child and its past.

The child's birth parents – irrespective of whether they are known or anonymous, dead or alive – will always be part of life for the adoptive family. The child has its birth parents' hereditary disposition. The child's genetic make-up will be noticeable in its appearance and in talents, weaknesses, susceptibility to illnesses etc. which become apparent in the long term.

The fact that the child comes from another country may have positive side-effects on the family. Through the child, the family

develops a special relationship to another country, another culture and a different social sphere. The child's birth family can grow to feel like part of the family. The ethical questions raised by intercountry adoptions can widen your perspectives and enrich your lives.

A whole-hearted, lifelong decision

An adopted child must be able to come to a family which has made a whole-hearted decision to adopt. Attempts to have children by other methods must be suspended when the adoption process has been started. An adoption is also an undertaking for life. No-one can tell what an adoptive child will have to struggle with in life, or what challenges lie in store for adoptive parents. Whatever happens, adoptive parents have to be able to answer for their decision in their own minds and when confronted by their child. That is why you need time and space to examine your thoughts and feelings. A well-founded decision will make it easier to handle possible difficulties in the future and increase the chances of this adoption being the starting point for a good relationship. Few things in life are as emotionally charged as having a child. For adoptive parents it is a question of taking a very conscious decision; step by step, certainly, but finally there comes the day when your application is to be sent to the child's country of origin. While the process is underway you may find yourself swayed one moment by reason and the next by your emotions.

Men and women sometimes view having children in different ways. Experience from the Dutch courses for prospective adoptive parents reveals that men need more time than women to get used to the idea of adopting. Furthermore, spouses/partners are not necessarily in agreement as to whether or not they should adopt at all. Choosing adoption is a process, and spouses/partners are not always synchronised. Sometimes you need more time so you each feel that you have made up your own mind in the matter.

For single people, the reactions of the people closest to them are perhaps even more important when reaching a decision. If the people closest to them show a lack of interest or a negative attitude towards adopting it can give rise to feelings of unease about the future. One question which arises is then "Will the people closest to me be willing to help me and my child – or will they leave me all by myself to be a parent single-handed?"

Choosing a special way of becoming a parent

The adopted child is not the only one to end up in a family in a special way. The adoptive parents are having a family in a special way, too, which makes special demands on them. If involuntary childlessness is the reason for your wish to adopt it is vital that your feelings about not being able to give birth to a child have subsided and given way to a sorrow that you can live with.

The process of becoming adoptive parents can prove to be a long and difficult wait. It can also be the sort of challenge that helps you to know yourself better. In hindsight, many adoptive parents have stated that the emotionally taxing aspects of the adoption process add an extra dimension of satisfaction to being an adoptive parent. Since adoptive parents have to give so much of themselves in order to have a child, the child, when he or she finally comes, is important in a special way.

The actual decision to adopt can give rise to feelings of expectation but also involve uneasiness and uncertainty. Many people find it helpful to talk to others. Apart from discussing your questions and thoughts with the people close to you, you can also contact the social worker in charge of your home study and assessment. You could get in touch with the authorised Swedish adoption organisation you have chosen, or find ways of contacting other people in the same situation. If you discover that all your previous experiences of childlessness are still painfully present you might be right in considering seeing a counsellor or psychologist. You could also ring your fertility clinic for help, if you have previously been in touch with one.

Think it over:-

- ***What do I need to make up my mind about and discuss with the people near to me before making a decision on adoption?***

Becoming a parent

Becoming a parent signifies the start of a new phase in life. Parenthood provides a new aspect to your identity and gives access to new social contexts. The needs of your child involve creating a new set of priorities. New parents usually say that they could

never have envisaged life changing so radically. It takes time to grasp this new you in all the other newness, at the same time as you are pushing prams, discussing nappies, singing lullabies and wondering when you are going to be allowed to sleep a whole night again without being interrupted.

The period while you are expecting a child and your initial period at home with your child are periods of change, irrespective of whether you are now parents by birth or by adoption. The situation demands that you change and mature, psychologically.¹⁸ Very often, people are more emotional when they are expecting a child. Their state of mind becomes more and more focused on meeting the needs of a child. It is common for parents expecting a child to dream a lot and to be more in touch with their subconscious.¹⁹

Children are a source of joy, but at the same time, parenthood can be very hard work. Mixed feelings can originate in a fear of being insufficient and not being able to cope with being a parent or in a sense of one's own personal freedom being curtailed.²⁰ It is natural for a period of personal development to be followed by a crisis. The new challenges involved can feel overwhelming at times. If it becomes impossible to move on then serious problems can arise. Fighting the feelings that change arouses can also be cause for concern.²¹

Many people review their lives and discover things that they want to change or develop. Having the responsibility for a little child's well-being and development can cast a new light on matters and lead to a reassessment of things you had previously taken for granted. Many people find themselves taking a longer view of things. It is common for prospective parents to ponder existential questions such as the meaning of life, God and the universe.²²

Your relationship to your own parents

From having been someone's child, you are now going to become someone's parent. The most important role models for prospective parents are their own parents. Memories of your childhood

¹⁸ Kihlbom, Mattson & Ström, 1994, 9

¹⁹ Brodén, 2004, 75

²⁰ Ibid. 78

²¹ Cullberg, 1996

²² Brodén, 2004, 65

can spring to life or become much more vivid than before. The important thing is not so much what your childhood was like, but your ability to reflect on your relationship to your parents.

Your own parents take on a new meaning when you are about to become a parent yourself. They are about to become grandparents. Maybe the question will arise of how close you want them to be. Can they be helpful and supportive, and if so, how? Might you want to keep them at a distance in certain respects, so that they don't come too close or take over?²³

Different sorts of families

When two become three

The arrival of a child can strengthen the ties between you as expectant parents. At the same time you become mutually dependant, and this makes new demands on your ability to work together as a couple, so that the practicalities of everyday life run smoothly. Couples often find their relationship shifting towards traditional gender roles.²⁴

Developing your relationship with your spouse/partner as co-parent while preserving your sexual relationship and your comradeship is a challenge.²⁵

Single parents

Relations and friends are of enormous importance to single parents. The fact that your child only has one set of relations makes the rest of your network even more important. For your child's identity to develop normally it is important that he or she has ordinary, everyday contact with adult role models of both sexes. Single parents may need someone close enough to talk to and to sometimes ask for relief or a respite.

A child can never be a substitute for contact with other adults. As a single parent, you run the risk of trying to compensate for the missing parent and binding a child so tightly that breaking free later in life can be threatening.²⁶

²³ Brodén 2004, 85

²⁴ "New tools for parents – suggestions as to new forms of parental support" Swedish National Institute of Public Health. (Nya verktyg för föräldrar – förslag till nya former av föräldrastöd, Statens Folkhälsoinstitut)

²⁵ Kihlbom, Mattsson & Ström, 1994, 45

²⁶ Brenckert, 2003

Think it over:-

- ***What is my network like? What sort of support can I get, and from whom?***
- ***Who can be role models from the opposite sex?***
- ***In my network, what do people think about my adopting?***

Registered partners

In our society there are prejudices and ignorance regarding single-sex couples and their families, and parents in single-sex relationships need to be prepared to confront this. Single-sex couples need to be open about their partnership, so that their child never needs to take responsibility for telling other people about it.

As parents, you need to be able to talk openly with your child about your partnership. A child can have a lot of thoughts and questions on the subject, either tacitly or openly expressed. As your child develops, these questions can recur and become clearer. Your child needs to be given ways of expressing himself/herself. Your child will see how you cope with the people around you and form strategies for answering questions while preserving his or her own integrity.

In Sweden, registered partners have been able to apply for permission to adopt since 2003. Up until now, the states that Sweden collaborates with on adoption have taken a negative stance, but this may change in time.

Think it over:-

- ***How do I handle people's reactions to our partnership and how can I help a child cope with these issues?***
- ***What are the most common reactions and what strategies do I have for coping with them?***
- ***In my network, what do people think about my adopting?***

Your network

You need a village to raise a child.

African proverb

Your capacity as a parent will be influenced by the safety net that your family has. Parents need other adults who can be supportive and provide relief. Sometimes you need some sound advice or to share your thoughts and feelings on children and parenting. Everyday contact with other adults than their parents is an advantage for children, too.

The reception given to a child by the people closest to the family affects the child's sense of security as he or she grows up. A child needs to feel welcomed and cherished by friends and relatives. It is also important for a child to know that his or her parents are accepted and supported as parents. The earlier friends and relatives are involved, the better their chances of feeling part of the adoption process. They, too, may need time to think through the various aspects of adoption before they can truly accept your child.

Apart from their own personal network of relations, people of today are a part of various other social contexts which affect family life: places of work, for example, clubs or associations, groups of friends, etc.. When you have children, kindergarten and school become important social meeting-places.²⁷

Think it over:-

- ***How would the people in my network take the idea of adoption, and an adopted child?***
- ***How can I make it easier for the people closest to me to feel part of this adoption?***

Networks for adoptive parents

Many adopters find other adoptive parents supportive during the adoption process and even after the arrival of their child. It can be worthwhile sharing your thoughts and feelings with people who have had similar experiences. Some things that crop up ap-

²⁷ Broberg et al, 2003

ply so specifically to adoptions that adopters can gain more from the advice of other adoptive parents than advice from people with birth children.

There are associations for adoptive families and plenty of ways of contacting other adoptive families via the Internet.

Further reading:

Anna Elias, *Det livet ger (What Life Gives)*. The book describes the whole process from infertility, home study and assessment to the adoption first of a boy from Colombia and later another boy from Korea. Anna Elias compares being a birth parent to being an adoptive parent.

Eva Brenckert, *Att adoptera som ensamstående (Single parents as adopters)*. One of the series of booklets jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Petter Lidbeck, *Linnea från Yujiang (Linnea from Yujiang)*. This book deals with the journalist Petter Lidbeck and his wife Lotta, their road from fertility problems to the adoption of a girl, Linnea, from China. Their path, leading from the sperm samples and artificial insemination, to appointments with social workers and embassy staff, up to their meeting with Linnea, is lined with waiting and littered with obstacles, but at the same time the book is full of humour and hope.

Kristina Thulin and Jenny Östergren, *Längta barn (Child Yearning)*. An anthology about childlessness in which people longing for children and people who have been through the same yearning tell their different stories. They tell their whole story: from the effects their longing has on their relationship to their partner, family and friends, to the way things turn out after the arrival of their eagerly awaited child.

Kerstin Fredholm and Ingela Johansson Rosander (ed.), *Vill ha barn (Want children)*. This book lets experts and childless couples speak; its object is to provide facts, information, comfort, inspiration and encouragement to carry on.

Ben Elton, *Fruktlösa försök* (*Inconceivable*, originally published in English). Sam and Lucy are a successful couple. They have everything they could wish for except a child. When Sam's career starts going downhill he decides to write a film script about their fertility problems, but without telling Lucy. The book is written as a diary, where alternate chapters are written from Lucy's and Sam's points of view.

Magnus Utvik, *Anna, min älskade* (*Anna, my love*). The narrator, Marcus, tells how life is shattered when his girlfriend Anna develops uterine cancer. The reader follows the couple's progress through cancer treatment, the crisis of childlessness and their decision to adopt. Grief, hope, comfort and love are all portrayed straightforwardly and honestly.

Kerstin Weigl, *Längtansbarnen* (*Children of Longing*). The book tells different stories of childlessness and adoption. The main thread running through the book is journalist Kerstin's progression from in vitro fertilisation, via assessments and waiting, to adoption.

Becoming a person



Knowledge of children's general development can help you to understand how a child might be affected by being separated from his or her origin and being adopted. It can highlight what these children have been deprived of, or not been given enough of, prior to adoption.

Nature and nurture

At the moment of conception, the mother's and father's genes merge and create the baby's unique genetic code. The possibilities contained within a child's genetic set-up are developed, shaped and limited in a complex interaction with factors in the world round about. This interaction begins in the womb and continues throughout life.

Not only does children's environment affect their development, but children affect their environment, too, from the moment they are born. Researchers into temperament are of the opinion that children have their own individual characteristic way of dealing with and relating to factors in their environment. Children can be easier or more difficult to take care of, depending on their temperament. What is crucial for children's development is how well parents and other important adults can relate to their children's special characteristics.²⁸

Major parts of a child's brain develop after birth. This is an advantage in that the baby's brain can be geared to its surroundings as it grows up.²⁹ In the womb and during the child's first year, there is an over-production of nerve-cells. The nerve-cells which are used most are preserved, and the ones which are not used are discarded. This means that deficient parenting just after birth may lead to children developing a lasting biological vulnerability.³⁰ Human children have several such critical developmental periods during their first thirteen years of life.³¹

For each age-group, there are central developmental tasks which each individual child has to master. The way one developmental task is mastered forms the starting-point for tackling and solving the next ones. These different developmental tasks make different demands on parents' ability to help their child solve the

²⁸ Broberg et al, 2003, 61 ff

²⁹ Broberg, 2004, 25

³⁰ Broberg et al, 2003, 61

³¹ Solms & Turnbull, 2005, 231

tasks as well as possible – based on the child's inherent capabilities.³²

Think it over:-

- ***What are my thoughts on parenting a child with a different genetic set-up?***
- ***What would it feel like adopting a child who has come from a deficient environment?***

Early interaction

The child's competency consists of his ability to make use of people round about him – if they allow themselves to be made use of.

from *Developmental psychology (Utvecklingspsykologi)*
by Leif Havnesköld and Pia Risholm Mothander

Parent-child relationships begin during pregnancy. The parents' or the mother's situation in life, her state of health, whether or not the baby is wanted etc. are all factors which affect the foetus. If this is a wanted pregnancy, the pregnant mother often pays extra care to looking after her health and avoiding anything which might harm the foetus, such as cigarettes and alcohol.³³ Prospective parents often read books, think and fantasise about how the growing foetus is developing.

Inside the mother's body, the foetus shares her experiences. A foetus reacts to taste and pain from the fifteenth week of pregnancy, and its hearing is developed at about 20 weeks.³⁴ It can react to stimuli such as sounds or pressure from outside. By coordinating its movements with impressions from outside itself the foetus practises communication and relating to the outside world.³⁵ Newly born infants seem to prefer the sounds they have been used to hearing in the womb.³⁶

³² Risholm Mothander, 2002, 268

³³ Brodén, 2004, 64

³⁴ Risholm Mothander, 2002, 281

³⁵ Ibid. 285

³⁶ de Chateau, 1999, 30

Newborn infants have all their senses developed and ready to provide information about the world. They can co-ordinate their impressions and use willpower to steer their actions and behaviour towards what they perceive as being important.³⁷ Infants are calmed by their mother's voice and the sound of her heart. As early as the first week, infants can distinguish their own mother's smell from that of another woman. An infant's sense of feeling is well-developed and being touched or held usually has a calming effect.³⁸

The daily pattern of interaction between infant and caregiver, circling around the infant's need for food, waking time and sleep, forms the first stage in the process of infant-parent adjustment. Each child has his or her own particular rhythm when being breast-fed. Researchers into infant behaviour have observed that nursing mothers usually fall in with this rhythm, which is the very first example of give and take. This sort of rhythmic exchange of responses forms the basis for all forms of communication. Infants communicate through eye contact, too. By looking away, infants can show that there is something they don't like or that they need to rest or relax for a while. Infants show from a very early age that they prefer their parents' or caregivers' voices and faces. They use facial expressions to convey interest or dislike. At the age of about four weeks they start to smile. Infants can copy other people, and when parents and children copy each other they create a feeling of affinity and understanding.³⁹

Attachment

During their first year of life, infants need to establish an emotional relationship, an attachment, to their parents – or to caregivers who take the place of parents.⁴⁰ Infants need everyday care, protection and stimulation so that they can make use of their abilities and develop well.⁴¹ Attachment forms the starting point for exploring the world and a safe haven to return to when they feel threatened or unsafe. Parents' sensitivity, predictability and trustworthiness are crucial elements which determine what sort of attachment pattern an infant forms.

³⁷ von Hofsten, 1999, 75 ff

³⁸ Heiman, 1999, 93 ff

³⁹ Ibid. 97 ff

⁴⁰ Broberg, 2004, 30

⁴¹ Brodén, 1999, 131

The infant's attachment pattern is important in that it yields lifelong templates for social interactions. Interaction with parents or with other attachment figures moulds infants' perception of who they are, whether or not they are loveable and what they can expect of the people closest to them. This perception affects their behaviour and interaction with the rest of the world.⁴²

Secure and insecure attachment

Professionals generally distinguish between one secure pattern of attachment and three forms of insecure attachment.

- A child who has been able to develop a *secure attachment* assumes that he/she can always turn to parents or caregivers for protection. Children with secure attachment can explore the world secure in the knowledge that their parents will always be there if needed.
- Children whose interaction with their parents has taught them that their parents don't like "clingy" children who need things develop an *avoidant attachment* pattern. They learn that closeness only comes when they hide their need for comfort, care and attention. They differ from children with secure attachment in that they do not use their parents as a secure base in life.
- *Ambivalent or resistant attachment* is a pattern developed when parental care is unforeseeable. Parents or caregivers can alternate between being very concerned with their child's needs and being totally insensitive to them. Parent-infant interaction is governed more by the adults' needs than by the child's signals. Children with an ambivalent attachment pattern have a weaker sense of self and can become passive or else very anxious and clingy.
- The fourth attachment pattern is *disorganised attachment* which develops when parent-infant interaction contains elements of fear. This is often due to the parent/caregiver being overwhelmed by traumatic past experiences that have not been processed. As a result, the parent misinterprets the child's signals and reacts with aggressiveness or fear. For these children, the situation is impossible in that the people supposed to guarantee their protection and security are the very ones who pose the greatest threat.⁴³

⁴² Broberg, 2004, 38

⁴³ Ibid. 35

Children who see their parents as a secure base are the ones best equipped for exploring the world and developing well. Children who do not see their parents as a safe base spend a lot of energy keeping an eye on them – so much so that it actually limits their own development. Children with secure attachment develop confidence in sharing experiences and feelings with other people. Children with avoidant, ambivalent or disorganised attachment find it difficult to trust other people at all. This affects their behaviour and makes it difficult for them to build up trusting relationships. These basic assumptions can however be modified by new experiences of interacting with other people.⁴⁴

Parenting skills

Parenting is always influenced by the social, cultural and political context in which it takes place. Ideas of what makes a good parent and what children need change over time, between different generations and situations.⁴⁵

For a long time now, two basic parenting skills have been acknowledged as being invaluable for children's well-being and development. One is parents' ability to show warmth and affection to their children, and the other is their ability to provide terms of reference and boundaries for their children's behaviour. It is generally acknowledged that affection and boundaries help children's rational development, too.⁴⁶

By showing warmth and affection we mean that adults notice the child's signals, interpret them and show that they understand. Adults have to be able to meet their children's need for contact and interaction and their need to withdraw and be alone. When parents understand their children a trusting pattern of interaction emerges, which encourages children to see their parents in a positive light. This in turn affects the parents, who begin to find their children easier to understand and relate to. The opposite occurs, with a negative spiral of diminishing trust, when parents are unable to understand their children.

Children are born not only with the ability to communicate, distinguish, foresee and grasp meaning. They are also born with an urge to explore the world. If their parents can be clear, reasonable and consistent about boundaries and drawing the line for

⁴⁴ Landerholm 2005

⁴⁵ Stenhammar, 2001, 16

⁴⁶ Bremberg & Hagekull, 2005, 48

what is acceptable, children need not worry about where that line goes. Within the framework set down by parents, however, it is vital for children to have a certain amount of independence.⁴⁷

Establishing what sort of framework and just where to draw the line is a crucial and demanding task for all parents. Children's urge to explore the world comes much earlier than their ability to understand the consequences of their behaviour, and parents need to help them throughout their childhood and adolescence, so that they come to no harm. Parents' ability to lay down a framework based on respect and care is subsequently incorporated by their children. It comes to form part of the child's and the adult's pattern of behaviour when coping with their own and others' impulsiveness.

Parents who are 'good enough' carers are emotionally available to their children. They are sensitive to their child's needs, they show that they usually understand and can help, and they behave in a predictable way. No parents are perfect, however, and this interaction can be upset by misunderstandings now and again. This is natural and will not harm children as long as parents realise what has happened and can put things right.⁴⁸ Indeed, handling the actual process – from making a 'mistake' in a relationship, through realising what has happened, putting things right, and restoring faith in the relationship – is an important part of parenting. In the long run, it is an essential aspect of any human relationship.

Parental attachment

How responsive parents are to their children depends largely on their own childhood experiences of attachment. The crucial aspect is not what has happened in childhood, but what interpretation the adult puts on memories and within what context they are seen.⁴⁹ It is generally accepted that relationship patterns are passed on from one generation to another. Research shows that the way adults describe their childhood experiences of relationships is a reasonably accurate guideline for predicting what sort of attachment pattern their children will form.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bremberg & Hagekull, 2005, 50

⁴⁸ Broberg, 2004

⁴⁹ Risholm Mothander, 2002, 268

⁵⁰ Brodén, 2004, 45

Adult ways of viewing childhood experience can be divided into the following categories:

- Adults with a *free, or autonomous attachment pattern* can view their childhood experiences objectively. They can reflect on what effect they have on their life.
- Other adults are *dismissive and deny that their childhood experiences have had much effect*. Adults showing this pattern have difficulty remembering childhood relationships. They often generalise and normalize how they view important people, eg. "She was nice, I suppose, like most mums." They generally think that their childhood has no bearing on their present life. Some people tend to idealise their childhood by describing their parents as 'really nice', without being able to relate any specific memories of anything their parents said or did which was 'really nice'. Other people describe their parents in terms which are in effect derogatory: "The old man wasn't right in the head. If it had been nowadays, he'd have been sent to jail for what he did." At the same time, they maintain that this has had no adverse effects: "Lucky no-one's a kid for ever, though; I've become very strong and independent thanks to the way I was brought up."
- Some adults are *preoccupied with their childhood relationships with their own parents*. They are still engaged in trying to work through unsolved conflicts from their childhood. Their accounts of their childhood are sometimes incoherent and sometimes characterised by intense anger, over which they have no control. Sometimes the adults' preoccupation with their childhood experiences is due to having been subjected to violence or abuse during childhood.
- *Unresolved feelings of grief* are often linked to experiences of loss or trauma (such as violence or abuse) during childhood or later in life. When the adult tries to talk about what has happened, the narrative becomes incoherent. The person involved has been unable to work through the loss or the trauma enough to see things in perspective.⁵¹

⁵¹ Brodén, 2004, 43 ff

Think it over:-

- *How do I think my childhood will affect me as a parent?*

Linguistic development

Linguistic development, just like the child's development in general, depends on both hereditary and environmental factors. A newborn baby has an ability to learn language and an urge to speak and communicate which develops if the child has close, continuous contact with at least one adult. An infant has the ability to distinguish and imitate any sound from any of the world's languages. The sounds which an infant does not hear repeated are gradually no longer produced and then later no longer recognised or distinguished.

The driving force in communication is response. Dialogue involves taking turns, so that both sides have space to express themselves. Infants express themselves with their voices, their body-language and eye contact. The response they receive shapes their grasp of the possibilities of language.

Children need to experience the world. By tasting, hearing, feeling, seeing – i.e. by experiencing the world around them and then having their impressions interpreted verbally by an adult caregiver, infants develop their understanding of the world. The adults interpret, and the infants "answer". Experiencing the world incorporates the infants' need to do things for themselves, such as crawling, falling, messing with food, sand or other materials. Everything they do provides experience and stimulation.

Language develops within a meaningful context when we do things together and talk about our experiences. For the world to be meaningful there must be connections and patterns. Infants begin to experience connections when things they experience with another person are repeated. For a connection to be established, the events that are linked must be close in time and space, so that the infant can realise that they are related to each other. Without connections, life is chaotic and unpredictable.

Language is an important part of human identity. We use language to define ourselves and the world around us. Language gives us the ability to think about who we are and our relation-

ships to other people. Later, language becomes the tool we need for learning, abstract thinking and solving problems; but of course primarily it plays a social role.⁵²

Think it over:-

- ▶ ***How would I be able to stimulate a child's linguistic development if I was a parent?***

Betrayed and forsaken in early childhood

A baby, just like a bird, has no language for voicing thoughts about the future or the past.

A baby doesn't think "I miss her".

A baby lies on his back, moves his hands and studies the movements carefully.

He feels no terror. Not for the moment.

This moment is all there is, and the emptiness when he stretches out his hand.

No skin.

Not the right smell.

Not.

The baby's muscles contract around that "Not" and he starts to whimper.

No arms there now.

from *The needy (De behövande)* by Maria Küchen

What happens to a child whose parents disappear? We cannot give a general answer, since each child's experience is individual. Children's age, maturity and personality affect how they experience what happens before, during and after their parents' disappearance. Their disappearance might take on one meaning if the birth mother had already made adoption plans for her baby while she was pregnant. It might take on a different meaning if the birth mother or birth parents had intended to take care of their baby themselves and their disappearance took place after he or she had been in their care for a while. It always entails an inter-

⁵² Lagergren, 2000, 4 ff

ruption, however – a break in the continuity of life. The parent-child interaction which had begun is broken off and never resumed.

Some babies are subjected to extra stress even before birth. If the baby's mother was an alcoholic or substance abuser during her pregnancy, then her baby will have developed in an unsuitable environment. The birth mother's living conditions might have led to a premature delivery and an undernourished baby. A premature birth might have been caused by some physical weakness, an illness such as diabetes, or by some sort of infectious illness from which the mother or baby was suffering at the time. Most premature babies weigh less and are shorter than full-term babies during their first year, and they are often slow to develop motor skills. Usually these babies' development is normal, however, and they have neither intellectual nor behavioural problems.⁵³

All adopted children have experienced separations. The interaction which the children had started has been broken off. If their caregivers have changed repeatedly then they have had to start off on new attempts at interaction again and again. Children, striving to fit impressions into a context, can find their whole grasp of the world and of themselves in shatters.⁵⁴

What does a small child understand? We often ask ourselves the question when we come in contact with young children. We are amazed at their ability to remember events and people; we laugh at their childish versions of adults' fussy admonitions, wonder at the way they show sympathy. When tragedy strikes the lives of really small children, this question is even more to the point. Do they understand? What do they understand? And what can they do with their knowledge, if they have understood?

from Ami Lönnroth's introduction to *En stor och en liten är borta*
(A big one and a little one have gone away) by Elisabeth Cleve

Before being adopted, most adopted children have been looked after in an orphanage or by foster carers. Hopefully there has been some sort of attachment between them and their caregiver(s). This is positive for the children, but at the same time, it means that they have had even more experience of losses before being adopted.

⁵³ Nordström & Stjernquist 1999, 198 ff

⁵⁴ Kats, 1990, 38

If the worst comes to the worst, the children have had no chance of relating to anyone at all. At orphanages where members of staff change all the time and care is impersonal, children experience the world as somewhere where their needs are met – or not met – mechanically. Children who have not been given the opportunity to bond with anyone have difficulties right from the start in understanding themselves; this means they will have difficulties understanding other people as well. For these children, just wanting to be close to someone can become associated with a feeling of being threatened. As early as the 1940s René Spitz described the life-threatening condition developed by infants aged 6–12 months when they were separated from their mothers and raised in orphanages. Although their bodily needs were met, they became apathetic and stopped eating and their overall development slowed down. When they were placed in a foster-family and were given the opportunity of attaching to at least one person, their condition improved and they developed normally.⁵⁵

Children can have experienced traumatic events like war or a natural disaster; they may have been subjected to physical or psychological abuse, in their birth family or elsewhere.

It is impossible to predict how experiences like these might affect them. Spending their first few years of life in an orphanage, with no chance of attachment to anyone, is a set-back which can have long-term and maybe permanently damaging effects on their development. Past events cannot be changed, but usually the crucial aspect is not just what has happened but rather how we subsequently relate to what has happened.⁵⁶ Since human beings can develop and change throughout their lives, even children with traumatic experiences in early life can recover, if they are given help.

The adoption triangle

A child's birth family is irreplaceable: it will always be his origins, his start in life, the source of his inherited characteristics. A child's adoptive family is irreplaceable too: it gives him his moorings in life, gives him a base from which he travels out into life to form his own existence.

from *Becoming an adoptive family (Bli adoptivfamilj)* by Gunilla Andersson

⁵⁵ Broberg, 2004, 34

⁵⁶ Broberg et al, 2003

The formal adoption order creates a parent-child relationship between the adopter(s) and child and cuts the child off from his or her birth parents. At the same time, the two families are woven together in the life-history of the child. As they grow up and form an identity, children's experience of parents and their fantasies about parents will all prove important. Their adoptive families are with them here and now. If their birth families are known, they are a long way away and any contact with them will usually be limited. It therefore depends on the adoptive parents what picture their child gets of all his or her parents.

Adopted children and birth families have lost each other. If their motive for adopting was fertility problems, adoptive parents too have suffered a loss. When sorrow and grief are accepted and allowed their own place in our lives it becomes easier to enjoy the things we actually have. If that sorrow finds no means of expression, the chances are that unprocessed feelings will throw a shadow over the relationships we have.

The child

*Once there were two women who never knew each other
 One you do not remember, the other you call mother
 Two different lives shaped to make yours one
 One became your guiding star the other became your sun
 The first gave you life the second taught you to live it
 The first gave you need for love the second was there to give it
 One gave you nationality the other gave you a name
 One gave you the seed of talent the other gave you an aim
 One gave you emotion the other calmed your fears
 One saw your first sweet smile the other dried your tears
 One gave you up – it was all she could do
 The other prayed for a child and God led her straight to you
 And more you ask me through your tears,
 The age old question through the years
 Hereditary or Environment, which are you the product of?
 Neither my darling – neither. Just two different kinds of
 love.*

from *Ours by choice* by Nilima Mehta

Most adopted children have questions about their birth families. The questions vary from one individual to another and from one period in life to another.

As children grow up and develop, they see things in a larger perspective, and their questions change. Common questions are "What do they look like?" "What sort of life do they have?" "Why was I put up for adoption?" or "Will I ever meet them?" Knowing things like this can help adoptive parents be prepared for when their child wants to talk about his or her birth family. It is important to let your child steer things: when to broach the subject and how much to talk about it.

When you talk to your children about birth families, it is a good thing to remember that your children's understanding is based on what phase they have reached in their development. It might be a good idea to brush up on how children think and how they learn to grasp meanings and context. But the essential point is for you to take time to listen to your child and let the conversation follow his or her questions and reflections. If your child can choose a level for the conversation he or she stands a greater chance of understanding what is said.

A little child who has lost a parent can't find the words to express the catastrophe that has happened or his longing for his dead parent. A little child can't tell you what he feels or imagine what the future holds. Little children live in the present and expect everything to stay the same. For small children it is inconceivable that a parent can disappear for ever, since fantasy and reality exist simultaneously in their world.

from A big one and a little one have gone away
(*En stor och en liten är borta*) by Elisabeth Cleve

Adopted children fantasise about their birth parents and siblings without always telling anyone about their thoughts. The problem is that fantasy can easily turn into wishful thinking or horrific imaginary tales. Parts of them might be true, and other parts might be nowhere near the mark. By talking about what you know or simply don't know you can help your children paint a realistic picture of their life history.

Your children might have conscious or unconscious memories of their birth parents. When older children are abandoned it is by no means unusual for birth parents to have promised that they will come back to fetch them.

Personal problems or problems in relation to adoptive parents can trigger adoptees' thoughts of their birth parents. Then it is an easy step for them to start thinking of what life might have been like if they had not been adopted. Adoptive parents' openness and acceptance of their child's origins seems to be extra important when adopted children are in their teens; after that, their individual situation in life seems to be crucial to how adoptees relate to their origins. Adoptees are sometimes afraid of seeming ungrateful towards their adoptive parents or afraid of causing themselves grief if they try to find out more about their birth parents.⁵⁷

Birth parents

I've tried not to think about my daughter, but it doesn't work. Whenever I saw a pretty girl walking along a street, I'd wonder how big my child was. Whenever I saw a girl in school uniform, I'd wonder how my girl was doing in school. Whenever I see a young woman, I wonder if my daughter has grown into just such a lovely woman, somewhere out there in the world...

A father

from *Who am I, who do I want to be?*

(*Vem är jag, vem vill jag vara?*) av Margret Henningsson

Most parents who put up their child for adoption hope that they will continue to have a special place in their child's life. Birth parents don't forget their children – and their thoughts carry on affecting their feelings and decisions. Feelings of sorrow, helplessness and guilt can follow them for the rest of their lives. Anything at all which is associated with pregnancy can waken memories of their children. They often wonder what their children look like and what sort of upbringing they have had. Birth mothers who have given up their child straight after the delivery rarely have any visual memories of their baby. They may not have been able to look – or may not have been allowed to see the baby. It is not unusual for the sound of the baby crying after the delivery to be a sound that haunts them for the rest of their lives. Many birth mothers have a desire to get in touch again. But there are birth mothers who want no contact at all.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Irhammar, 1997, 1999

⁵⁸ VIA, 2003–2004

Adoptive parents

One special task for adoptive parents is to give their child the freedom to examine his own thoughts and feelings on the subject of his birth parents. Adoptive parents need to have thought over what they feel about these birth parents. Adoptive children are influenced by what parents think and feel, even when they don't actually voice their thoughts.

Any talk about birth parents must be on the child's terms. It is a matter of psychology rather than education. Parents need to be sensitive to when their child is ready and wants to ask about his origins. Then is the time to offer information. One way of showing interest and acceptance is to have a box to keep things in which have something to do with your child's origins. Then anyone can come and look at them whenever they want to.⁵⁹

A lot of adoptive parents describe their feeling of having a sort of relationship with their child's birth parents. Some families view birth parents as part of their extended family.

Sometimes there is a photo of the child's birth parents or birth mother. By giving this photo a prominent place amongst all the other family photos, adoptive parents can show that birth parents have their own place in the family.

Families where adoptive parents show this openness and interest in their children's origins stimulate a better sense of self-esteem in their children and seem to encourage them to take an active interest in their birth families. The adoptive parents' openness on the subject contributes to their children's knowledge about their background and reaffirms them and their origins in a positive way. This in turn minimises their experience of being different.⁶⁰

Think it over:-

- ***How might I make it easier for a child to retain memories of his or her country and culture of origin?***

⁵⁹ NIA informerar No. 4, 2002, 8

⁶⁰ Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000

Further reading:

Philip Hwang, *Spädbarnets psykologi (Infant Psychology)*. Ten chapters written by various authors to describe the psychological development of infants from foetus to the age of six months. Can be read from start to finish but the index makes the book easy to use for reference purposes.

Frank Lindblad, *Adoption (Adoption)*, Chapter 2.2 Infants' memory

Lotta Landerholm, *Lämnad, vald och sedan (Abandoned, chosen, and then what?)*. This book covers the position unwanted children have had through the ages, adoption from a historical perspective and a long-term appraisal of being adopted, viewed over a whole lifetime.

Jesper Juul, *Här är jag! Vem är du? (Here I am! Who are you?)*. A book about boundaries and respect between parents and children.

Ann Mari Orrenius, *Trygga relationer (Secure relationships)*. The author describes different sorts of attachment by narrating the lives of three fictitious families. The author allows the stories to alternate with thoughts and reflections and includes a separate, easily accessible chapter on theory.

Daniel N. Stern, *Ett litet barns dagbok (Diary of a Baby* originally published in English). A description of what an infant sees, feels and experiences, seen through the eyes of a little baby boy. An exhilarating mixture of imaginative writing and popular science.

Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhusets skriftserie 2004:2, *Att knyta an, en livsviktig uppgift*. (Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhuset's series of booklets, No.2/2004 *The crucial task of attaching*). This booklet provides a scientific account of the process of attachment between infants and the people who care for them. It explains why attachment is so important and also covers what might prove to be an obstacle to successful attachment.

Lars H. Gustavsson, *Leva med barn. (Living with children)*. This book contains practical advice for parents, points of view, ideas and topics to discuss.

Ylva Ellneby, *Titta vad jag kan! (Look what I can do!)*. A very readable book about child development, containing suggestions and advice for parents who want to use play to stimulate their children.

Which children need a family?



The reasons why children are put up for adoption

Sweden became a welfare state during the 1900s. Up until roughly the middle of the last century, the reasons for Swedish children being put up for adoption were the same as the causes of inter-country adoptions today.

Parents' ability to look after their children depends on what social safety net they have. In Sweden there is a social safety net composed of both private and public welfare components, i.e. the individuals' family, relatives and friends, and the support of the state. In the children's states of origin, support offered by the state is limited or non-existent. Having a family and keeping on the right side of it are essential for survival.

Family members who live according to traditional family values have the right to receive help towards their upkeep and support. If they break the family rules, however, they can be cast out of the family circle. An extramarital relationship very often constitutes just such a violation of traditional values. A baby born to parents who are not married can be a source of shame for the whole family, and an unmarried mother has difficulties finding a husband. Women in a predicament like this sometimes relinquish their babies in order to give the child a future and so as to survive themselves. Abortions are often illegal, even if the mother is very young or if the pregnancy is the result of incest or rape. Widows and divorced women sometimes relinquish their children so as to be regarded as 'marriageable' again.

The family and its position in society is vitally important for how things develop. Children who are adopted to Sweden from other states generally come from families which are socially disadvantaged and have poor living conditions. Their parents have either died or abandoned them for some reason. They might have to contend with substance abuse or mental problems.

Children born to parents of different ethnic backgrounds are unacceptable in some states. Children with illnesses or disabilities are left in the care of orphanages in a great many countries. Some children are put up for adoption because they are the result of rape or incest.

In certain cases parents are active in wanting their child adopted. In lots of cases, children are placed in the care of relatives or in an orphanage because their parents are facing some sort of crisis. If the parents are unable to find a solution, their children can be put up for adoption. Many children have been found

abandoned. There are special rules for establishing whether or not they really have been abandoned.

But in other cases the decision to separate the children from their family is taken over the heads of the parents. Some relative might be responsible for deciding that the child should be put up for adoption. Or the child might have been taken into care by the authorities because his parents are judged incapable of taking care of him.

Here are some adopted children's stories:

Matt, age 1 month

His mother was 14 years old, and since her parents threatened to throw her out she put up her baby for adoption.

Christian and Hanna, siblings aged three and four.

Their mother died two years ago. Their father moved in with a new woman who didn't want the children. They were handed over to an orphanage and never had visitors. Their father was asked if he wanted to put the children up for adoption but said no. He was refused guardianship of the children because he was a cannabis addict. After another ten months the authorities tried to get in touch with him again, but he had disappeared. They were unable to track him down, despite advertisements in the press; eventually the children were declared abandoned and put up for adoption.

Amy, age two months

Found on the hospital steps. She was nice and chubby and had been well-looked-after. No relatives have been traced.

Charlie, age two months

His mother was a maid. His father was probably her employer. His mother was found a bed at a maternity home for the last month of her pregnancy and she had taken the decision to put him up for adoption before he was born.

Inez, age eight months

Her mother was a 20-year-old student. Her parents were unaware that she had had a baby – they are conservative and

would disown her if they knew. She told them she had a job in the town of C but was admitted to a maternity home. She had attempted to have an abortion in the third month of her pregnancy. Inez was born prematurely, with a slight disfigurement, probably due to the attempted abortion. She has three toes missing.

Maria, age four.

Had "always" been at the orphanage (which is of a very poor standard). Clingy and attention-seeking. Had never been beyond the concrete yard and was scared the first time she stepped on grass. Was panic-stricken the first time she saw a car without the protection of the orphanage fencing between her and the car. Was moved to the special adoption orphanage for the few weeks leading up to her adoption.

Ann-Marie, age six.

Found on board a bus. Too scared to explain where she had come from. Dirty and undernourished. She had probably been living on the streets with other children. Since no-one knew what to do with her, she was placed in an old people's home and stayed there for about 6 months. Was subsequently moved to an orphanage in another town, and from there to an adoption orphanage.

Loosely adapted from material jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Children who are not available for adoption

There are lots of children in the world who cannot be adopted even though they are in need of a family. Children who actually live on the streets may still have a family somewhere and cannot be adopted because of this. Some of the children who live in orphanages have a family which has not given its permission for the child to be put up for adoption and therefore they have to stay there.

In war and natural catastrophes, families are split up. Authorities in the countries affected are generally quite restrictive about putting children up for intercountry adoption, since many of the

children are known to have family members and relatives with whom they could be reunited. Firstly, the authorities need to investigate if there is anyone like that. Hasty decisions about adoption in circumstances like these would result in even more suffering.

Many states have neither the laws nor the authorities necessary for carrying out adoptions.

The referral arrives

When adoptive parents have been chosen for a particular child, the prospective adopters are sent information about the child – a referral. The referral often contains a social report, a medical report and photographs of the child. Sometimes it contains information about where the child was born, which orphanage/s or foster-carer/s have taken care of the child, the names of the child's birth parents etc.. The amount of information varies between different states of origin.

The medical report

When you read the medical report, you need to remember that it is extremely difficult to identify and diagnose medical conditions in small infants. When reading the report, you also need to bear in mind what conditions are like in the child's state of origin. In a country with limited resources, the report might have been assembled several months before being sent to the Swedish adoption organisation, which means that some details are no longer correct. The child's current height and weight, for example, can be difficult to gauge from the report. Which tests have been taken and what inoculations have been given also vary a great deal. Cultural variations also affect views on medical diagnoses. The Swedish adoption organisations have consultant doctors who can help you understand the medical reports.

It is impossible to get a complete picture of the child's medical status from the reports sent to you. Therefore it is crucial that you contact the children's clinic or a paediatrician with specialist experience of adopted children for a general medical check-up. This should be arranged within two weeks of your returning to Sweden with your adopted child.⁶¹ You can get in touch with

⁶¹ Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, General Directives, No 89, 20

your children's clinic before setting off to meet your child – to inform them that you are expecting a child and ask about medical matters.

A large number of adopted children do have medical problems when they arrive, even though the health of adopted children in general has improved gradually since intercountry adoptions started. The most common ailments are respiratory infections and diarrhoea, i.e. conditions which are easily treated within the framework of the ordinary Swedish medical services. The vast majority of adopted children recover quickly from any infections or malnutrition from which they may have been suffering and their subsequent health and development is perfectly satisfactory.⁶² If the medical check-up shows that a child's age is not what had previously been stated, there are methods for ascertaining the correct age.⁶³

In some countries, the authorities representing children often show a preference for Swedish families when they are considering a child who is suffering from some sort of illness or disability. They know that Swedish parents are entitled to substantial paid parental leave and from an international point of view stand a good chance of obtaining all necessary support in looking after this particular child.

Health risks

There are certain health risks which are sometimes relevant for adopted children and which adoptive parents therefore need to be aware of. Below, we have included a short description of some health risks. For further information, you need to contact a specialist clinic for infectious diseases or a paediatric clinic.

Undernourishment

When some of the adopted children arrive in Sweden, they are shorter and weigh less than their Swedish-born counterparts. Adopted children generally catch up quickly after arriving in their new family. The drawback is that older children, after such a growth spurt, run the risk of being affected by precocious puberty (early puberty). Early puberty leads to children like this not

⁶² Proos, 2001, 4

⁶³ Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, General Directives, No 93, 11

reaching their full genetic height potential.⁶⁴

If an adopted child shows signs of precocious puberty, your doctor can make sure that hormone tests are carried out. Early puberty can be postponed by hormone treatment.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B causes an inflammation of the liver. The virus is present in all body fluids, especially in blood.⁶⁵ Children who have been infected early in life run the risk of becoming chronically contagious. Many children and mothers in other countries are given vaccinations against hepatitis B.

Children who carry the hepatitis B virus can lead a full life without showing any symptoms, but there are special rules for people who are contagious, and parents have a special responsibility for making sure they are followed.⁶⁶ Nursery-school children under the age of six should be provided with a place in as small a group as possible. In nursery-school groups with children who are infected with hepatitis B, the staff and the other children are offered vaccination against the disease. After the age of six, the risk of infection is appreciably less, and infected children can usually be placed in ordinary preschool classes. Staff who work with the elder children should be informed, so that they can act wisely in the event of bloodshed. Any information given to staff concerning children is naturally subject to the parents' consent.

HIV/AIDS

HIV is a virus which attacks parts of the human immune system. At its onset, there are usually no symptoms. After a period, most untreated patients develop the syndrome AIDS.⁶⁷ HIV is transferred through sexual contact, via blood or blood products, and via mother-to-child transmission during pregnancy, childbirth and breast-feeding.

Children born to HIV-infected mothers always show positive results when first tested for HIV, because the mothers' own antibodies are transferred to their babies via the placenta during pregnancy. To be certain whether or not a child has been infected, at least three months need to have elapsed after the latest possible

⁶⁴ Proos, 2001, 20

⁶⁵ www.fass.se

⁶⁶ www.smi.se

⁶⁷ www.sos.se

date for infection. In some countries, two different tests are carried out in the child's state of origin, if a child in the process of adoption has been born to a mother who is HIV-positive. One test is for antibodies, and the other, a genetic test, shows whether or not the child is carrying the actual virus. In all the adoptees' states of origin you can ask for a HIV test to be carried out if it is not included in the original medical report.

Children with disabilities

Children can suffer from various sorts of disabilities such as Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), cleft lip, jaw or palate, heart disease, impaired hearing, club-foot, fused fingers, etc..

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

It is estimated that between three and six percent of all school-age children in Sweden have ADHD. It occurs somewhere between two and three times more often with boys than with girls. The main symptoms of ADHD are attention deficit, impulsiveness and hyperactivity. Children with ADHD find difficulties in waiting, in controlling their feelings and moods. The behaviour of many of them is unpredictable. The majority have difficulties planning and organising their daily life. A significant majority of children with ADHD have difficulties interacting with others. They can find it difficult to find meaningful recreational activities. Children and young people with ADHD are very often anxious, uncertain and lacking in self-confidence. Repeated failures are likely to pave the way for resignation, unease and depression.

ADHD can have far-reaching results in everyday life, and children and young people with ADHD depend heavily on the understanding and support of the adults closest to them. In the public sector, there is a pressing need for more understanding and support for people with ADHD. They have the right to receive the best care and support according to present-day knowledge. Just as in the case of most mental disorders, the exact origins or causes of ADHD are not fully understood. Heredity (the individual's genetic set-up) and environment both play a part in why it occurs and how the specific problems are expressed.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2004

Alcohol-related problems – foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)

For mothers whose abuse of alcohol has been substantiated during their pregnancy it is known that roughly half will give birth to children with pronounced symptoms of FAS, and the majority of the remaining children will probably show symptoms of varying degrees.⁶⁹ Alcohol is one of the drugs which is most harmful for the foetus. There is a clear connection between the amount of alcohol and the degree and range of the defects which ensue.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can harm the foetus in a variety of ways, causing defects in external and inner organs, but most serious of all, brain damage. Many of the symptoms resemble those of DAMP/MBD and ADHD. About 80 percent of children with alcohol-related problems have impaired vision.⁷⁰

Life with a foetal alcohol child is extremely demanding for parents. The child's condition leads to nursery-schools, schools, medical services and social services all needing to be actively involved.

Choosing a child?

When you apply to adopt, you need to choose a country and sometimes specify an adoption agency or orphanage in that country. In some countries you are allowed to express preferences as to the child's age. Your application might include your availability to adopt a child with a disability or special needs. This might create an illusion that you can choose a child. That is not true, of course. The deciding factor is which children need a family, and it is the children's representatives in their states of origin who choose a parent/parents for each child, based on the best interests of that child.

At the same time, prospective adopters' wishes and choices do influence which children are adopted. A majority of the abandoned children of the world are over three years old, ill or disabled. Finding adoptive parents for these children can prove very difficult, and this often leads to them being left behind in the orphanages.

The decisions you make as you compile your application can be put to the test repeatedly during the process of adopting, if something unforeseen happens which affects either your family

⁶⁹ Nordén, 1995–1996

⁷⁰ Information included in a lecture held on 30th Oct 2003 by Professor Kerstin Strömmland, Children's Eye Department, the Queen Silvia Children's Hospital, Gothenburg.

or the foreign state your application has been sent to. Your future adopted child might want to know your thoughts when you were in the process of adopting. Just as you need to be able to stand up for your decision to adopt, you need to be comfortable with the decisions and choices detailed in your application – both in your own mind and in future discussions with your child.

Choosing a country

Adoptive parents can choose from the states of origin whose conditions they comply with. By choosing a particular country, you also choose a probable scenario for the actual adoption and for some of the things your child has experienced previous to the adoption. The way abandoned children are taken care of – i.e. whether they have been in an orphanage or with a foster family, and the whole process of leading to a child being declared available for adoption – will have been based on the rules and traditions of that specific state. By choosing a country, you also indirectly choose roughly how your application will be handled, how your child will be delivered into your care, what sort of post-placement reports are required and how detailed the initial referral will be.

Think it over:-

- *What countries can I imagine adopting from?*
- *What conceptions do I actually have of these countries?* _

Adopting siblings

Siblings are sometimes adopted together. One advantage is that they are able to support each other and keep their memories of their birth family and life history alive.

At the same time the demands made on adoptive parents are much greater. When two or more siblings are adopted together, the children are usually at different ages; parents have to be able to cope with the needs of the older and younger child simultaneously. Each child needs individual attention and forms his or her own relationship with his or her parents. Above all, it is crucial that parents pay attention to their children's individual situation and understand just what each child wants and needs.⁷¹

⁷¹ VIA, 2002

Siblings are not necessarily used to being together. Quite often they have been in different departments of the orphanage, or at different orphanages. If siblings have been allowed to be together, the eldest sibling has generally taken a great deal of responsibility for the younger one/-s. In such cases, adoptive parents need to demonstrate a lot of respect and patience in winning the confidence of the eldest sibling; only then can he or she relinquish parental responsibility to their new adoptive parents and allow him- or herself to become a child again.⁷²

Think it over:-

- ***What are my views on adopting siblings?***

What age?

Adopted children are never newborn when they arrive in their adopted family. Part of your child's life you have not been able to share. All that happened prior to the adoption will have had a profound influence on your child and will still be an influence in the future, too.

Slightly older children, over the age of three, are often prepared for adoption in a different way from younger children. They might have been given photographs of their presumptive parents or toys they have sent for them. An older child might need to be treated as if it was at several different age-levels at one and the same time. On one hand an older child might need to be alone with his or her new family for an extended period and allowed to feel like a "little" child. On the other hand an older child needs the stimulation of a peer-group and to be included in different activities suitable for that age-group.⁷³

A child's age when he or she is adopted is not the primary factor when it comes to future coping and development. A child's experience prior to adoption is what is all-important. On the other hand, age is a telling factor: the older a child is at the time of adoption, the greater the risk of him or her having had negative experiences.⁷⁴

⁷² NIA's Handbook for Social Welfare Boards, 1997, 54

⁷³ Lindblad, 2004, 30

⁷⁴ Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar & Mercke, 1999

Think it over:-

- ***What implications will the child's age have, if I adopt?***

Children with disabilities or special needs

For a variety of reasons, there are children in orphanages in many countries for whom it has proved difficult to find adoptive parents, eg. children who are slightly older, children with some sort of illness or disability. In a large number of cases, these conditions are treatable, with the medical resources available in Sweden. Presumptive adopters who are available to adopt a child with a disability or special needs can mention this in their application.

Think it over:-

- ***Could I imagine adopting a child with a disability or special needs?***

Adopting children related by family or marriage

Some of the children adopted from abroad each year are children who are related by family or marriage to people who have previously immigrated to Sweden. The majority of these adoptions are so-called private adoptions, which means that none of the authorised Swedish adoption organisations are involved. On average, children related by family or marriage are much older when they are adopted than in the case of other intercountry adoptions. Common reasons for adopting a child related by family or marriage might be that this child's parents have both died, that the family consensus is that the child's present situation gives cause for alarm, or that this child should be entrusted to a childless relative.⁷⁵

Anyone intending to adopt a child related by family or marriage needs to bear in mind how adoption is viewed in the child's state of origin and in Sweden – the differences and similarities. Any adoption in Sweden will fall under Swedish law, which treats

⁷⁵ Fagrell, 2000, abstract

this child in the same way as in any other Swedish adoption: the adopted child will have the same legal position as a child born into the family and all legal ties between the child and his or her birth family will be severed. The Swedish view of adoption and of families will be crucial when the child comes to consider his or her personal situation.

Adoption entails tremendous changes, even if adopters and adoptee belonged to the same extended family prior to adoption. All the legal ties between the child and his or her birth parents are severed. What might a child feel after living with birth parents or relations for a long time and then being required to leave them and everything they have ever known, to travel to a new family in a new country? This child might never have met the proposed adopters before and never previously been to Sweden. If adopters and adoptee are to manage to attach securely, adopters need to stress the fact that they are related and connected, while at the same time making it possible for their adopted child to stay in contact with his or her origins. Adopters need to view continuing contact between adoptee and his or her extended family in a positive light and be supportive and encouraging on the subject.

If a child is adopted by people he or she already knows, the whole process of assimilation and adapting can be easier than in other cases of intercountry adoptions. This child might be used to belonging to an extended family. He or she can stay in touch with the whole social network, both within the family and with the state of origin, which can be an advantage as regards identity but might be problematical if he or she longs to go back again. If this adoption is the unwanted result of responsibility being forced on the adopters by their family it can lead to negative consequences for the adoptee. If the people who have taken care of the adoptee prior to the adoption are living in poverty it can lead to adopters and adoptee feeling bound to support them financially, which can give rise to complications. Adoptions must never be paid for. Children sometimes feel as though they have deserted their first family; adopters need to understand this and help them to cope with such feelings. Adopters sometimes feel a sense of loyalty towards their family and feel bound to raise their adopted child according to ideas and traditions which stem from the child's state of origin. This can lead to difficulties with friends here in Sweden.

Taking age and maturity into account, each child must be given the opportunity to express his or her own views on the pro-

posed change of families. Even if the child and adopters know each other well prior to the adoption, he or she needs to be prepared for the changes involved in moving to another country with a different culture and a different language. If neither of the adopters speaks Swedish it will be important for the child's linguistic development that there are people nearby who do speak Swedish.

An independent adoption can take a long time, since you have to manage all the issues and all the contacts with the relevant authorities without the help of an authorised adoption organisation. It can mean a long wait for the child you hope to adopt.

Think it over:-

- ***If I am considering adopting a child related by family or marriage, how can I make sure I stay positive towards my child staying in touch with the rest of our family in our state of origin?***

Adopting children sent to Sweden for a recuperative holiday

Children from other countries are sometimes sent to stay with Swedish families for a period of their summer holidays. These children usually come from orphanages, and they all have legal guardians in their state of origin. The guardians have given their permission for each child to leave the country for a recuperative holiday. It is essential to keep to the terms agreed regarding the child's return home.

Sometimes 'summer families' would like to take care of a specific child permanently, and they start thinking of adoption. The family in Sweden has to apply to their local municipality for formal permission to adopt. The authorities in the child's state of origin have to establish whether this specific child is available for adoption. Such an adoption might be organised with the help of an authorised Swedish adoption organisation or as an independent adoption, if the MIA (the Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority) can approve the method the family proposes. Eventually, the adoption needs to be finalised by a Swedish court of law.

Domestic adoptions in Sweden

Domestic adoptions used to be common in Sweden, but since the 1970s only 15–25 children a year have been put up for adoption. Social workers employed by the local municipality confer with the child's birth parents and try to find a suitable family – usually from amongst the families who have already been approved for intercountry adoption. Sometimes the child is placed in a temporary foster home or with a relative while the search for adoptive parents continues.

In Sweden, it is customary for a minimum period of six weeks to elapse before the legal guardians of a child sign the form releasing the child for adoption by a specific family. After that, it usually takes another few months for the adoption to be finalised at the local court of law. The child's birth parents are at liberty to change their minds and withdraw their consent to the adoption up until the date when the court decision is no longer appealable.

In the case of domestic adoptions in Sweden, the adopters and birth parents usually know quite a lot about each other. The social workers generally try to arrange a meeting between the people giving up their child and those adopting. Adopters sometimes write post-adoption reports, too, just as in the majority of intercountry adoptions.

Further reading:

Frank Lindblad, *Adoption (Adoption)*, chapter 4.1 Physical health.

Lotta Bjurell, *Att bli familj med en 6-åring. Om adoption av äldre barn. (A 6-year-old in the family. About adopting older children)*. One of the series of booklets jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Eva-Britt Fagrell, *Att behålla sina rötter – om släktingadopterade barns levnadsförhållanden (Staying in touch – how life turned out for children adopted by relatives)*.

Kim Skoglund (editor), *Efterlängtat. Adoptivföräldrar berättar. (Longed-for. Tales of adopters)*.

Travelling to meet your child



Waiting and preparing

Adoption involves periods of waiting. Waiting to start the home study and assessment, waiting for formal permission to adopt, waiting to submit your application to a particular state, waiting for a referral and for a date to travel abroad to meet and take charge of your child. Many adopters have already been through lengthy periods of waiting when going through IVF-treatment before they set out on the road to adoption.

It is possible to guess how long some parts of the adoption process will take. Others are impossible to predict. Having no definite details or dates for any particular event can be frustrating and make prospective adopters feel helpless. Sometimes changes are made in laws abroad, which lead to a stop for all adoptions from a particular state. In other cases local authorities decide to impose a limit on adoptions. Such changes often occur with little or no notice and are quite impossible to predict. The reasons might be political instability, epidemics or natural catastrophes in the states of origin.

As a prospective adopter, you can use this period of waiting to prepare in different ways. You could read as much as possible about adoption and the child's state of origin. You could learn some common phrases in the child's language. You could spend time in the child's state of origin as a tourist and get acquainted with the country before you make the journey to actually meet your child. Lots of people get in touch with other families who have already been there and adopted a child. You could get in touch with other people who are waiting to adopt – via the Internet, for example.

Preparing siblings

Any children already with you need preparing so that they can feel involved in the arrival of a new member of the family. Preparation could consist of talking to your child/ children about their new sibling and where he or she comes from.

It is natural for children to feel mixed emotions about having a brother or sister. A sibling will be someone to share things with – someone in the same position in this often puzzling world steered by adults. But at the same time, a sibling will be a rival for your love as parents. The fact that this new brother or sister's birth parents have deserted their child can prompt a host of different thoughts and questions.

Avoiding pregnancy

Couples who have been trying for a baby for a long time before they decided to adopt sometimes suddenly discover that they are expecting a baby, right in the middle of adopting. But giving birth to a baby while adopting another child entails an enormous amount of pressure and would be a disadvantage for both children. It will be essential to avoid pregnancy once you have made the decision to adopt. Pregnancy would be an important change to one of the basic details on which the formal decision of the Social Welfare Board was based, and you are obliged to inform the Social Welfare Board of any such changes.

Think it over:-

- *How can I personally prepare for adopting a child?*
- *How can I involve the people closest to me?*
- *What are the questions our other child/children might want or need to ask about having an adopted brother or sister?*

What is happening in the child's state of origin?

At the same time as the prospective parents are undergoing their home study and assessment in Sweden, putting all their papers together to be sent abroad, their child-to-be might be being abandoned by his or her birth parents in another country.

Here are some examples of what might be happening in a child's state of origin. (The three different states are purposely not named.)

Example 1

When a child is found abandoned, the police make enquiries in the neighbourhood. The same day, the child is taken to an orphanage and given a medical examination. The authorities try to find relatives by putting advertisements in the local newspapers. When 60 days have elapsed, the child is declared abandoned. The orphanage staff put all the child's papers together and send them to the state adoption authority.

All intercountry adoptions are mediated by the state adoption authority and it is to them that the authorised Swedish adoption organisations send Swedish applications. The first step is for each application to be officially registered and translated. In the next department the staff ensure that applicants are suitable and eligible, according to the requirements of this particular state. The next step is to choose parents for a specific child.

The referral is sent to the authorised Swedish adoption organisation, who send it on to the family. It comprises a medical report, photographs of the child and a social report describing the child's life at the orphanage or with a foster family. There is usually no information at all about the child's background or life before he or she was found abandoned. The adopters sign a paper accepting the proposed child and confirming that they wish to proceed with the adoption.

The orphanage prepares everything with the local authorities in the child's home province for finalising the adoption process. When this is done, the state authority sends an invitation to the adopters, who are then able to set off in another six to eight weeks. The journey is arranged so that a group of families adopting from the same orphanage or province travel together. They usually stay for about two weeks. The families have English-speaking guides during the whole of their stay. After spending a few days in the capital city, the families travel to the province where the children await them. Sometimes their first meeting with their child takes place the same day, sometimes the following day. The orphanage director decides where the families are to meet their children. It might take

place in a conference room at the offices of the local provincial authorities, in a conference room at the hotel, or in the family's own hotel room.

Sometimes the families are allowed to visit the orphanage. After the adopters have looked after their child for one or two days, the adoption order is registered at the provincial office of the Ministry of Social Affairs. After that, the notary public has to certify the adoption order. The remaining three to four days are spent waiting for the children's passports. When they are ready, the group can travel back to the capital and have Swedish residence permits stamped into the children's passports. And finally the families fly back to Sweden with their children.

Example 2

Before a child is declared abandoned, a social worker and a psychologist are involved in assembling a report on the child. Since the birth parents are often known in this state, there is quite a lot of information about the child's background and why he or she has been put up for adoption.

The authorised Swedish adoption organisation sends the application of the adopter(s) in Sweden to the central state authority. There the application is examined, and the authorised Swedish adoption organisation is informed when it has been approved. The application is put on a waiting list to await its turn to be processed. After a while, each application is assigned to a certain region, and it is the regional office which chooses a parent/parents for a particular child.

The referral consists of several different reports on the child, which have been written by a social worker, a psychologist, a doctor and the court of law. The prospective adopter(s) are given quite a lot of information about the child's background. Two to three weeks after sending in their formal acceptance papers the adopter(s) can travel to take charge of their child.

After a couple of days in the capital, the adopter(s) travel on to the region in question to meet their child for the first time, quite often together with a representative of the authorised Swedish adoption organisation. The actual meeting takes place at the office of the local authority and the adopter(s) can

sometimes meet the foster parents. The adopter(s) are in charge of their child for the four to five days preceding the finalisation of the adoption order in a local court of law. The whole process takes from three to eight weeks. When the court has finalised the adoption order, a convention certificate is issued, under the Hague Convention. The child is given a provisional Swedish passport, and then the family can go home. When an adoption is finalised in a convention country it is automatically valid in Sweden.

Example 3

Abandoned children often come to the orphanages via hospitals or the police. The orphanages try to contact birth parents by putting advertisements in the press. If they fail to find the birth parents, they make every effort to find adoptive parents from among their own countrymen. To have the central adoption authority's permission to work on intercountry adoptions, each orphanage is obliged to make sure that at least 50 per cent of the adoptions are domestic ones. A child can only be declared available for intercountry adoption after a certain amount of time has been spent trying to bring about a suitable domestic adoption.

The application of the adopter(s) in Sweden is sent to a specific orphanage in this particular state by the authorised Swedish adoption organisation. The orphanage staff go over the application and read the home study and assessment. After that, the adopter(s) are approved and chosen for a specific child. Apart from the requirements stipulated by the central adoption authority, each orphanage has its own requirements, which can be stricter. The orphanage can have views as to how long the adopters should have been married, what age of child is appropriate for them, or the maximum number of children it would be appropriate for them to have already. In some cases an orphanage can have requirements as to the adopters' level of education.

The orphanage sends the referral to the authorised Swedish adoption organisation to be forwarded to the adopter(s). The referral consists of a medical report, a social report and a photograph. The prospective adopter(s) sign the papers accepting the referred child and send them back to the orphan-

age, which in turn sends them on to the central adoption authority there. The prospective adopters have to have the formal approval of the central authority before the adoption can proceed.

When a local court of law has finalised the adoption order, the orphanage applies for a passport for the child. This means that there is quite a long interval between receiving the referral and being able to travel – somewhere in the region of four to six months.

The adopter(s) travel abroad to meet and take charge of their child when the whole process has been finalised. The adopter(s) decide how long they want to stay in the country. They often stay somewhere between a week and a fortnight. You can normally discuss how to organise your first meeting and the actual handing over of your child with the staff of the orphanage.

Loosely adapted from material jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Taking charge of your child

How the children are placed in their adopters' care – or arms – varies between different states. Sometimes it varies within the same country. In some cases you travel in groups of about ten families, in others you travel individually. Some states' adoption procedures require you to make two trips or to stay in the state for a longer period. In other cases a week is sufficient.

How this first meeting is organised depends mostly on the requirements of the adoption authority or adoption organisation in the child's state of origin. This is why it is essential to know as much as possible about the procedure there. That way you are prepared and can give all your attention to what you see and feel. Sometimes you can actually influence how things are organised.

The first meeting

I'd been expecting tears, but all my concentration gets in my way. Don't get it wrong now, don't make a mess of it, don't forget the camera. We move aside and fall to our knees. What the other parents are up to I have no idea. We're automatically in a world of our own, a bubble to protect the most delicate moment of our lives. The room is full: sixteen Swedes, eleven children, two interpreters, ten or so of the orphanage staff and a host of officials. But there's a bubble round Sigge, me and Her. I weave my way between people's backs and carrycots, edging bags and video cameras out of the way with my feet. I kneel down to look into her little face. And she's smiling! She's got the loveliest eyes – you can see her through them, behind them, it's her, the one in the picture, and she's smiling, safely ensconced in the nurse's lap.

from *Children of Longing (Långtansbarnen)* by Kerstin Weigl

Some parents immediately feel a special bonding with their child, but others have mixed emotions. Your first thought might be "Help, how will we manage?" Some adopters say that they really felt nothing in particular.⁷⁶

You might have one or all of a whole range of feelings and reactions. You have just met an unknown child, in a strange country, knowing at the same time that you are going to be connected for the rest of your life. It is such a special meeting that there are no right or wrong feelings.

Neither the children nor you as adopter(s) feel at home. The children have had to leave the place and things they knew and all the people they were last with. This might be the latest in a whole series of separations. If your child can speak, it will be in another language; he or she will be unable to understand you or express things so you understand. You, the adopter(s), are far from home, usually tired from taking in so many impressions and sometimes suffering from changing time-zones. You may have met your child's birth mother – or maybe both birth parents. You might have seen the poverty and all the children who have to be left behind.

You, as adopter-/s, have been anticipating this meeting for a long time, longing to take charge of your child. For your child,

⁷⁶ Andersson, 1998

this first meeting might be more or less a surprise. The staff may have told your child about being given new parents. Sometimes you can send photographs of yourself and your home in advance, and looking at them can help your child prepare for your arrival. But even with the best sort of preparation it is impossible for a child to take in or really understand what is happening. Children simply lack the intellectual maturity which would enable them to fully grasp what an intercountry adoption involves. We cannot know what each individual child feels. What we can be sure of is that whatever your child feels on meeting you is enormously important now and for the future.

During this first meeting with their adopter(s) children react in different ways, depending on their age, background and previous experience of parents or staff. Some children are active and alert; others are apathetic and withdrawn. Some adoptive children run up to their new parents and hug them, usually because they have been told to do so. Other children keep their distance at first and seem quite calm. But children can react with tears and shrieks.⁷⁷

For children, adoptive parents are complete strangers at first. Your child will have to get used to these pale-skinned people who talk strangely, smell different and behave oddly. You will need to get used to your child and his or her personality, too, and the way he or she looks, smells and behaves.

Here are some different examples of how things might be arranged:

Example 1

You meet and take charge of your adoptive child at the same time as several other families. The actual presentation and handing over is a formal ceremony which sometimes takes place at a hotel, sometimes in an office. You are in charge of your child for a few days first, before the legal guardianship of the child is transferred to you as adopters.

Example 2

The adoption is already registered when the adopter(s) arrive in the country. The first meeting takes place in the foster-parents' home. A social worker from the local adoption organisa-

⁷⁷ VIA, 2003–2004

tion will be present, plus a member of staff of the Swedish adoption organisation. The day before they leave the country, the adopter(s) go to the offices of the local organisation to take charge of their child. This time the foster-mother and social-worker are generally present.

Example 3

Someone from the local adoption organisation runs through each step of the proceedings with you as adopter(s). You are told how the actual presentation and handing over is done, and how the legal side of things carries on from there.

A day or so later, you have an appointment at the offices of the local organisation and meet your contact again to go over what is due to happen. The actual presentation and handing over vary, partly according to the child's age and partly depending on how well they have managed to prepare him or her. The person who actually hands over your child to you will be the foster-mother, the orphanage director or a nurse from the orphanage who knows your child well. Everyone sits in easy chairs or on couches in an office – the atmosphere is calm and peaceful. Your contact will help take photographs and record the proceedings on video.

Shortly after your child has been placed in your care – or your arms – you will be left alone with each other for a while (5–10 minutes). Then your contact and whoever brought your child return, and you have the chance to ask all about your child. (There are other opportunities too, when you visit the foster-family or orphanage during the second week of your stay.) Then you and your child are driven back to your hotel.

A few days later, you and your child attend proceedings at the local court of law. The child welfare judge talks to you, the adopter(s), and asks some questions. In all, the proceedings take 30 minutes at the most. The social worker from the local organisation in charge of your child's case will be present.

If the birth parents have asked to meet the adopters, this will take place after the adoption has been finalised, i.e. usually just before you leave for Sweden. The birth mother (and father) have 'their' social worker there to support them – sometimes several people – and you will be accompanied by your local contact. The meeting usually takes about 30 minutes and

takes place either at the offices of the local organisation or else at the maternity home where your child's birth mother lived for the last part of her pregnancy.

Example 4

A social worker is present when you first meet your child. Very often they have only had a few days to prepare your child for meeting you, when it became certain that the adoption was going to take place. Older children will have only seen photographs of their new parents a day or so beforehand.

In the case of most orphanages, adopters are expected to spend a lot of time with their child at the orphanage before they actually take charge of him or her. When adopters come to fetch a child, the orphanage organises a leaving party for the other children and the staff.

Loosely adapted from material jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Helping your child to fit the pieces together

The adoption involves a tremendous change for your child. To help your child fit the different pieces together – life before and after adoption – you will need to have an idea of what life has been like so far. What were the living, eating, sleeping or playtime arrangements? What sort of view of children did the other adults have, the people who have been in charge of your child up to now?

If your child is handed over to you by a foster-mother, or by staff who have looked after him or her at the orphanage, you might be able to find out about habits and routines. You might be able to ask about favourite food, preferences for bedtime, likes and dislikes. With information like this you can organise things so that life at first is roughly the same as what your child is used to. It will make the transition easier if your child can get used to things gradually. Information about everyday life prior to the adoption makes it easier for you to understand your child, too.

This meeting with your child's carers can be an important opportunity for gathering more information about your child's background. The written reports about the children and their

background are often meagre and sometimes not altogether correct. In some states the general opinion is that it is best for everyone concerned not to know too much. In the future, however, this information will be important and enable your child to find out more about his or her origins.

Suggestions: how to help your child

- Send a photo album to him or her in advance. Try and wear the same clothes and have the same hair-style as in the photos when you meet your child for the first time.
- Send a cuddly animal or other toy in advance, so that your child can bring it along later, when you are finally entrusted with him or her. Ask if you can have some clothes or toys that your child has had. It can be comforting to have something familiar in the midst of everything else that is new and strange. Later on, the things that your child brings back to Sweden are vital evidence that life prior to the adoption was real and not imagined.
- It is crucial that your child is awake when he or she is handed over to you.
- It can be frightening for your child, and feel like a violation to be undressed and washed by strangers. Many children have had bad experiences of being washed roughly in cold water at the orphanage.
- Make sure your child's bed and bedding smell familiar.
- Use a baby-carrier or baby-sling instead of a pram.
- Most children have heard children's songs or other music. Buying some records of music played in your child's state of origin can be another way to help your child establish a sense of coherency. Or you could make a recording of sounds from the orphanage.
- Learning a few phrases in your child's language is a good idea. It can make your first days together much easier.

Changing languages

Intercountry adoptions entail a change of language for the children. Their first mother tongue is exchanged for Swedish, which will be their second mother tongue. Even if it occurs very early in life, it is still an interruption of their linguistic development. Adoptive children cannot become bilingual unless there are two languages in their adoptive family. If one of the languages you speak in your family is the same as your child's native language, that language can be a second language. If your child comes from a linguistic minority in his or her state of origin and has already been exposed to two languages, Swedish will be your child's third language.

The children who come to us in Sweden all have a language which is more or less developed – or at least the preliminary stages of language. Generally speaking, the more developed a child's language is, the more advanced the preliminary stages are, the easier it is for a child to change languages.

Children need a close relationship with at least one adult to develop a language to the best of their ability (see page 47). This is why adopted children need above all to form a firm, secure attachment in order to be able to develop their second mother tongue. If your child has not been given enough response earlier, maybe he or she will have lost the will to communicate. In this case you will need to awaken your child's will to communicate.

Changing language is a huge challenge. The language your child has developed has been formed to fit in with the environment and the culture he or she has previously lived in. When a child is adopted, all this changes completely. People round about talk to him or her in a different language, and the language your child uses gets unfamiliar responses. Lots of children go through a silent period before they start talking their new mother tongue.

One common linguistic problem among adopted children is what is known as "superficial fluency". We use the term here to describe when they can talk fluently in correct Swedish although they lack the ability to truly understand what they say. Children with superficial fluency generally have problems understanding words and contexts. They often have an inadequate grasp of time. They might have difficulty using subtle distinctions to express themselves concisely. This is usually because they have not had enough stimulation. If they are to gain a deeper understanding

of their new mother tongue, they need to explore everything round about them, using all their senses, together with adults.

Among children adopted from abroad, there are some whose language skills are delayed, and some who have language disabilities. Some cases could be explained by the child's change of language, but there might be some sort of hereditary factors, too. Children whose linguistic skills are poor and who have suffered from lack of stimulation can develop serious language problems. This is much more serious than superficial fluency and needs therapy and support.

Adopters can get in touch with a speech therapist if they have any questions about their children's change of language and linguistic development. A telephone call might be enough to answer all your questions.⁷⁸

Suggestions for helping adopted children to get used to their new mother tongue.

- Encourage their will to communicate. Children need responses which help communication to continue. Communication should not consist of just questions and answers. It should be a flow of replies, comments on those replies, explanations of contexts etc..
- Spend a lot of time being together and attaching.
- Use everyday situations and experience them together. Do things together and talk about everything you do: shopping, cooking, eating together. Rinse the ingredients; peel things, mix them up, taste them and talk about what you are doing together.
- Eye contact is an important part of a dialogue.
- All sorts of games can help children practise taking things in turns.

⁷⁸ Lagergren, 2000

Think it over:-

- ***What could I do to make my child's linguistic development easier and better?***
- ***Imagine that you woke up one morning and discovered that everyone else spoke some unknown language and seemed not to understand a word you said.***

5.6 A child's name

Giving a child a name is one way of giving him or her an identity. At the same time, a name is wishing the child all the best; sometimes it conveys a purpose or a mission in life. A name gives a child a sense of being an individual.

It is natural for adopters to want to give their child a name. Giving a child a name is a way of welcoming him or her into the family. It might be easier for a child to have a Swedish first name, rather than his or her original one, which might be difficult to pronounce. The question calls for thought and consideration, however. Changing children's names might be encroaching on their integrity and stripping them of part of their identity.

Think it over:-

- ***What are my views on giving a child a new name?***

Further reading:

Eva Brenckert, *Äntligen adoptivförälder (Adopters at last)*. Mothers' and fathers' tales of that very first meeting with their child, the process which made them start to feel like parents, everyone else's reactions and what influence being three in the family had on their relationship

Britta Kignell, *Nyfött barn – en bok om barnlöshet och adoption (Just arrived – a book about infertility and adoption)*. The author writes about the crisis that involuntary childlessness leads to, and the tremendous joy of becoming parents through adoption.

Christina Lagergren, *Hur får man ett språk? Adoptivbarn och språk (A Language from Scratch – Adoptees and Language)*. One of the series of booklets jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Gunilla Andersson, *Bli adoptivfamilj (Becoming an adoptive family)*. One of the series of booklets jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Marianne Peltomaa, *Resan (The journey)*. This book takes the story of Anna, a single woman journeying to a little girl called Nora in Colombia. Nora's experiences and her attempts to understand the whole situation, where all the decisions are taken by the adults, are woven into Anna's. A description of what happens in the course of adoption: the progression of events and the psychological processes involved.

Becoming an adoptive family



A whole world turned upside down

Meeting an adopted child can inspire you with respect for the human ability to survive and will to live. The whole concept of parenting – the joint creation of a deeply human relationship together with your child – acquires a new dimension when you become the parent of a frightened child. You have been entrusted with an immense responsibility.

Adopted children are not newborn, but as an adopted family you are new to each other and need peace and quiet to establish your own patterns of interaction and relating. It might take some time and patience to find the right practical routines, rhythm and pace so that things fall into place in everyday life. If it is at all feasible, try giving your child's wishes and needs a lot of scope, so that he or she is not forced to just passively accept and adapt to everything new.

Intercountry adoptions entail a total separation for the children. The adults who looked after them, who they maybe thought were reliable, all disappear. You will be travelling home with your children; they will be leaving everything that they ever knew. This one journey alters their whole environment, including the light, the sounds, smells and climate.

As parents, you will have made an active decision to adopt your child. But in most cases, your child will not have made any similar decision. The give and take of affirmation and responsiveness on which attachment is founded, when everything works well, might take some time to develop. As adoptive parents, you might have to wait a while for any real affirmation from your child. Children rarely have any way of really preparing for what it might feel like when someone wants to be their parents. Even when children are old enough to have been given some sort of advance information it is practically impossible for them to imagine what it feels like.

Newly-fledged parents

All parents need support if they are to be good parents. It could take the form of everyday support like just being able to talk about things with another adult, or some adult affirmation of you in your new role as parent. When a family has a baby in Sweden, they all have regular contact with the children's clinic during the baby's first few months. In the case of intercountry adoptions, the children are not new-born and you will not automati-

cally have the same sort of professional support when you are newly-fledged parents. This is why adoptive parents are generally the ones who need to ask the right questions and find out what support is available e.g. from the social worker who was in charge of your home-study and assessment, or from the children's clinic.

Abandoned but not alone

As new parents with a child you have been longing for, maybe you would prefer to avoid thinking about the fact that this child was abandoned by his or her birth parents. This fact is one of the prerequisites for your child having been declared available for adoption, however, and is an experience that he or she carries inside. It is vital that you do not shut your eyes and ears to the fact. Your child should never need to be alone in coping with the feelings and, later on in life, with the thoughts it gives rise to.

Irrespective of the actual reasons for the adoption, your child will generally be too young to understand the adults' intentions. As far as your child is concerned, all the people he or she knows disappear, and this can feel like abandonment. Some children lose people who have come to be really important to them and this can give rise to a conflict of loyalties.⁷⁹

Since small children often believe that they are responsible for what happens to them, experiencing abandonment can lead children to believe they are not worth loving. Being little and dependent can be unbearable when a child has not been given the necessary care and love. Children sometimes compensate for being vulnerable by imagining they can take care of themselves and by denying they have the same needs as other small children. This might easily be mistaken for competence.

It can take time for adopted children to learn to trust their new parents and realise they can rely on this new state of affairs being permanent. Even when children start to rely on their new parents, they can still carry with them a deep-rooted fear of being abandoned.⁸⁰ Every separation can trigger this fear of being abandoned.

⁷⁹ Gray, 2002, 35

⁸⁰ Hodges et al, 2005, 109

Different sorts of behaviour

Her mother had died when Pippi was a tiny little baby, lying in her cot and crying so terribly that no one could stand to come near. Pippi thought that her mother was now up in heaven, peering down at her daughter through a hole. Pippi would often wave to her and say, "Don't worry! I can always look after myself!"

from *Pippi Longstocking (Pippi Långstrump)* by Astrid Lindgren © Saltkråkan AB.

Published in English by Oxford University Press, translated by Tiina Nunnally

The human ability to survive by adapting to new circumstances is one which is vital. Adopted children have sometimes been obliged to adapt to extreme conditions. When they come to their new families, their behaviour is an expression of their earlier experiences as well as of the changes involved in the adoption. When adopted children have been in the family for a while and feel more secure, these patterns of behaviour can fade or change character.

Here are some examples of how children's experiences before and during adoption can influence them, giving symptomatic behaviour which parents sometimes have difficulty in interpreting.

Fearful or anxious children

Children sometimes believe that their stay in their new family is only temporary. Having a trusted caregiver changed and replaced is something they might have been through over and over again. Adoptive parents want to build up a good, solid relationship as soon as possible; they might want to play and hug their child. But it is vital for adopters to let their children decide the pace.

The change from their earlier environment and earlier carers to being with their adopters can make children feel insecure. Children can show this in different ways. Some children refuse to be comforted, don't cry, turn away from hugs and refuse to meet your eyes when you talk to them. Fear and suspicion might be their most apparent emotions.

When they gradually start to get used to their new parents they can cling to them literally and refuse to let them out of their sight. Alternatively there are children who feel so alone and have so little trust in other people that they do the oppo-

site and try to show that they need no-one at all. They can manage everything by themselves, decide everything themselves, but they always make sure that one of the parents is nearby, since they need parents to survive.

Children who are anxious to please

Some children do all they can to please their parents at the beginning. It is tempting to think that children like this are simply easy to parent. But that would be disregarding the fact that anxiety would be a more natural reaction to all the changes prior to and during adoption. Maybe these children have been told at the orphanage that they must be very good, do as they are told and not get dirty, because otherwise they might be sent away again. Some of these children might have learnt that the only way to get attention is by trying to follow all the rules so as to fit in as much as humanly possible.

Sadness, despair and confusion

Children who have had a secure relationship to the people who took care of them prior to the adoption will miss them. It can take some time before they realise that their previous carers are not coming back. They can react with despair and confusion.

As these children and their adopters gradually manage to create a new, reliable relationship to each other, the children can learn to accept their new circumstances in their adoptive family as well as everything that has been lost. This can take children some time – sometimes a very long time, and subsequent changes can reactivate their anxiety and sadness. Certain things indicate when these children are feeling secure: they can ask to be left alone, knowing that their parents' attention will be theirs again, later; and they can ask for comfort and physical closeness. Secure in their primary relationship, they have the courage to start exploring the world outside their new family.

Sleeping problems

When children feel insecure, they sometimes try to avoid falling asleep. Falling asleep is like being cut off from the daytime, and can easily give rise to separation anxiety in adopted

children. They might be afraid that their parents could disappear while they are asleep. Maybe they have been deserted in that way by significant people on previous occasions. Sometimes traumatic events are re-enacted in dreams and make these children wake up. The fear this invokes might make them extremely reluctant to go back to sleep.

Eating and mealtimes

During their first years of life, children learn how to eat and drink and what it feels like to be full. Undernourishment or neglect might mean that they have had no chance to learn this. Adopted children might want to eat all the food they can find. Children who have always had scant portions might be worried that they will not be given enough, or that food might not be available tomorrow. One possible result could be apparently unrestrained eating: gorging. These children can eat rubbish from the bin, go begging for food from neighbours or hoard food.

The food we eat and table manners in Sweden will be different from what most children are used to. Some children are used to everyone eating from the same bowl. They might have used chopsticks or their fingers and never eaten with cutlery before.

Everyone sitting down to eat together at the table might be difficult for children who have come from orphanages. Mealtimes there are primarily for survival, not social gatherings. Infants might need to get used to being held in their parents' arms while they are bottle-fed, having being accustomed to drinking alone in their cots in the orphanage.

Indiscriminate behaviour

Children who are indiscriminately friendly have the same approach to everyone. They seem to like everyone equally, which could easily be misconstrued as evidence that they are sociable and open. They have had no previous experience of parents and parenting and cannot understand that their relationship to their adoptive parents is special. Since their carers have been changed and replaced so many times, they have learnt to try and get care and attention from everyone.

Challenging and provocation

One way for children to feel secure again is to try to create a situation they recognise. Adopted children sometimes do this by provoking or enticing the sort of treatment they were used to previously. This might be problematical if what they are used to is rejection, or physical or sexual abuse. Children can try to provoke parents into the well-known pattern of negative responses by using different sorts of undesirable behaviour themselves. These children are frightened and hurt by their parents' harmful behaviour (eg. smacking) but still find a certain security in that it is something well-known. Children who have been neglected or badly cared for can have learnt to treat others the same way and can deliberately spoil their toys or clothes.

Reverting to earlier levels of development

Children can sometimes temporarily revert to an earlier phase in their development. Children who are nappy-trained might start wetting themselves again. Children who are used to eating solid food might want to be bottle-fed – or even breast-fed. Children who can walk might want to be carried or use a push-chair again, etc.. Adopters need not worry if their children periodically seem to revert to younger, more immature levels. A constructive way for adopters to interpret this sort of behaviour is that these children are re-experiencing their original helplessness and re-learning how to be dependent, this time with their new parents. In other words, this is a way for children to show trust and find security. All parenting involves finding a balance between children's wishes and what parents themselves regard as normal and acceptable. If you find this sort of balancing difficult it is always a good idea to get help and support from someone else. In effect, this is what the children are doing when they revert to earlier levels of development. Parents – adoptive or otherwise – can periodically feel the need for guidance and support, too.

Concentration and remembering

Children who are uneasy have problems concentrating and remembering things. If children regard their circumstances as unstable, most of their energy will be directed towards notic-

ing and interpreting every little change and checking what is happening round about them.

Lying and stealing

Children who have lived with very strict rules – in a foster-home or in an orphanage - have often learnt to lie. The lying might be because the children are afraid of being punished. But the lying might have been prompted by their fear of losing the love of their parents: "If I tell the truth, they'll be so angry that I might be sent away again."

Some children might have been forced to steal in order to survive. Others might not have learnt the difference between "yours" and "mine", simply because no-one has explained what these terms actually mean. Stealing might be due to the fact that some children have never had anything at all which they could call their own. In some cases, children might steal in order to challenge their parents: they need their help to learn how to give and take within a stable, loving relationship. And they need their help to understand that a "No" does not mean they will be sent away.

Sexualised behaviour

Adopted children can sometimes behave flirtatiously or seductively. This might be due to their believing that it is normal – it is something they are familiar with. They might have been subjected to sexual abuse or seen sexual acts. Again, this sort of behaviour is the only sort these children are used to, and they need help to learn new patterns of behaviour for physical contact and boundaries.

Freely adapted from the pre-adoption course book used in the Netherlands.

Behaviour changes when children feel secure

One or more of the above ways of behaving might be perfectly appropriate reactions to the things adopted children have previously experienced. When children show signs of fear and insecurity they are offering their parents a chance to treat the issues and feelings causing them.

It is difficult to hand out general advice on how to make children feel secure. Children are individuals, with their own needs and

preferences. How you as a parent prove that you are to be trusted depends on what sort of relationship you have with your child. It could be communicated in a variety of ways: by sleeping in your child's room, by sitting close, by carrying your child. Other methods might be bottle-feeding a child who finds being rocked and held threatening, or letting a four-year-old wear nappies again.

The fundamental thing is that parents can never give their children too much love and security. It is impossible to spoil a child in that respect. When children have become secure in themselves and begun to realise that their parents are there to stay, most of their deviant behaviour generally disappears by itself.

A small group of children continue to behave abnormally, however. This might be a sign that there is something wrong with the attachment process, but there might be other explanations. If a child's behaviour shows little or no improvement, or if you yourself need professional guidance on parenting, it is vital that you get in touch with the people and organisations who have had experience of children and adoptions.

Think it over:-

- *In what circumstances would I seek help for me and my child?*

Parenting children who have to deal with losses in the past

Our own childhood is one of the most important frames of reference we have as parents. Being parents brings back memories of the good and bad things our own parents did. Many people feel that becoming parents themselves gives them the chance to work through issues from their childhood which have been left unprocessed. Sometimes, however, parents feel unable to cope with the experiences reactivated by parenthood.⁸¹

Parenting adopted children involves caring for children who have suffered several earlier losses. For them to be able to live with that, they need a secure, stable environment and adults who will allow their children to express any feelings and give them the support they need to cope with them. Some children might need

⁸¹ Gray, 2002, 95 ff

repeated confirmation from their adoptive parents that they will never abandon them, all the way into adulthood. This makes extra demands on adoptive parents having the inner strength to handle their own childhood experiences and the issues which are re-opened when caring for their children.

Some adoptive parents have to attempt to envisage a helplessness and a vulnerability they themselves have never personally experienced.

Children whose feelings are affirmed realise that what they are feeling is real and important. Parents affirm their children by being able to enter into their children's feelings, being able to endure those feelings themselves while still being able to feel hopeful that "It'll be alright". When parents can do all this, they convey to their children firstly the sense that they are whole and valuable individuals and secondly the sense that they can survive even the worst sort of feelings.

If adoptive parents have had negative experiences involving separation and loss this can be an obstacle to understanding and closeness. Sometimes it proves difficult for parents to distinguish between their own feelings and their children's. Instead of being given support, the children have to cope with parents who are even more upset than they are. Another risk is that parents who have difficulties facing the feelings that have been evoked can react by denying or ridiculing their children's feelings. On the other hand, parents who have first-hand experience of separation or other losses can find it easier to understand and help an adopted child.⁸²

Parents who have experienced childlessness and fertility problems often tell how their child's loss triggers feelings of loss in them, too. While loving their adopted children, they find themselves reflecting again on the biological children they never had. Nearly all parents have a mental picture of the child they have been dreaming of. The children they adopt in real life are not the same as the imaginary children they had dreamed of. It is a form of grieving process for these parents, adapting to reality so that they can fully appreciate parenting the children life has given them.⁸³

Meeting a child who has suffered losses, and being given the opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with such a child can be an extraordinarily rewarding experience, a gift for both parents and children.

⁸² Landerholm, 2002/4, 338 ff

⁸³ Gray, 2002, 97 ff

Think it over:-

- ***How do I usually handle disappointments and losses?***
- ***How do I usually handle joy?***

Visible differences

Something very profound seems to happen to you as a human being when you adopt a child from another country. From always having been Swedish through and through, you are now registered in your own country as an immigrant family; it adds new dimensions and subtly changes your ideas of yourself and of the way others see you. Your image of yourself is transformed: from being just an ordinary Swedish couple to being an extraordinary family – maybe in the eyes of the world, just as much as in your own.

*from Parents and intercountry adoptions
(Föräldrar till internationellt adopterade barn), by Katarina von Greiff*

When there is no family resemblance between parents and children, it is obvious to everyone that this is an adoptive family. People can say things to members of the family with the best of intentions, but their comments can actually feel clumsy, hurtful or insulting. Some people are delighted and want to guess which country your child comes from, especially if they have had first-hand experience of the country in question. Other people are curious and inquisitive and want to know why your child was put up for adoption.

Adoptive families may have to cope with ignorance, thoughtlessness, prejudice and, if the worst comes to the worst, racism. Children can be teased or bullied by both peers and adults. Very often, they choose not to tell their parents about it, however – partly because they feel ashamed, and partly so as not to upset them.

Adoptive parents need to be observant and aware of the implications of colour and appearance. That way they can be prepared to deal with the various situations that might arise. Their parents'

attitude to these issues is the most important model that children have. The strategies you choose are a personal matter. Protecting your child's integrity – and your own – needs to be your foremost concern in any situation, however. Other people have no right to delve into your child's previous history just as a matter of course. It is a private matter, and your child should be the one to decide how much information to divulge, and to whom.

Think it over:-

- ***Do I have a ready answer when people ask insinuating questions and make oblique comments?***
- ***How do I usually react if someone treats me with disdain?***

Invisible adoptions

Adoptive families with children who "look Swedish" have other situations to contend with. If other people have no way of seeing that your family has adopted, and have not been informed of it either, you must be prepared for the eventuality that someone might say something biased and insulting – about adoptions or about your child's own state of origin – in your child's presence.

Minimal differences in appearance might tempt adoptive parents to consider keeping their child's origins a secret.⁸⁴ From the reports of adult adoptees and researchers, however, we know that openness in adoption is crucial. Children need to build trust in their parents and other adults, and they need to know about the adoption to develop their true identity.

Think it over:-

- ***What are my feelings on parenting a child who doesn't resemble me or my family?***

⁸⁴ Lindblad, 2004, 13

Roots and origins

I have never felt rootless. Restless, maybe. Maybe that's due to poor root-growth. If I underwent therapy, I'm sure we'd find that impatience, an excessive drive for socialising, fear of the dark, and an ever-present need to be affirmed and popular are all definitely linked to those first two blank years of my life. And I have absolutely no conscious memory of them whatsoever. But who has?

from *Finding my way home (Hitta Hem)* by Sonja Björk

Every adoptee has his or her own individual way of relating to origins. Some adoptees feel wholly Swedish. Others identify predominantly with their culture of origin. Most adoptees would probably place their own attitude somewhere in between the two. Sometimes an adoptee's attitude can vary from one phase of life to another. Parents need to be able to affirm their children's origins as well as their Swedishness, so that they feel that pride in their foreign roots is just as permissible as pride in being Swedish. It is important for parents to help their adopted children to collect as much information as possible, without pressing them to listen to things they are not mature enough – or interested enough – to take in. The decision whether to look for roots and origins, and when, must be left to the individual adoptee.

Many children adopted by Swedish families grow up in areas which are ethnically segregated, where their non-Swedish looks make them noticeably different. Their looks not only differ from all the people around them; their appearance might even differ from their internalised idea of what is normal. It might be difficult being satisfied with your Asian looks, for example, if your internalised view of beauty is of light-skinned, blond people with long legs and noses. Some adoptees report that the differences make them feel like outsiders; others regard standing out in a crowd as a positive part of their identity.

When adoptees have grown up they are sometimes taken for immigrants or tourists. People from the adoptees' states of origin who have emigrated to Sweden usually live in quite different areas and in very different circumstances. Adoptees are faced with the dilemma of seeming, appearance-wise, to be part of an ethnic minority to which they have never belonged.

When adoptees travel abroad, they are rarely taken for Swedish citizens. What they feel in such situations varies from one individual to another. Some adoptees shrug it off, while others feel they need to stand up for their Swedishness.

Immigrants who have come to Sweden as adults from adoptees' states of origin or neighbouring states can prove to be real assets to adoptive families. By forming bonds with people who have ties with their children's culture of origin, families here in Sweden can gain access to it, too. Their children also gain access to models in the form of adults and peers whose appearance is similar to their own.

The Swedish associations for adoptees and for adopters are another sort of asset. It can be worthwhile talking to other people who really understand, because they are in a similar situation. The associations can provide you with advice, suggestions, support and help on various topics, and you can share your own experiences, too. Having access to others who know all about all the positive sides of being an adoptive family is another rewarding aspect.

Think it over:-

- ***If I was an adoptive parent with a transracially adopted child, how could I help my child handle feeling like an outsider?***
- ***If I was an adoptive parent with a transracially adopted child, how could I help my child find strategies for dealing with discrimination and racism?***

Further reading:

Elisabeth Cleve, *En stor och en liten är borta* (*A big one and a little one have gone away*). A description of crisis therapy with a 2½ year-old boy who has lost his mother and little brother in a car accident.

Kristina Lindstrand, *Barnbarn genom adoption. Att bli far/mor-föräldrar på Arlanda* (*Adopted Grandchildren. Becoming Grandparents at Arlanda Airport*). One of the series of booklets jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Margret Henningsson, *Vem är jag, vem vill jag vara* (*Who am I, who do I want to be?*). One of the series of booklets jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Lene Kamm, *Vitt som norm* (*White as the norm*). One of the series of booklets jointly produced by the authorised Swedish adoption organisations.

Frank Lindblad, *Adoption* (*Adoption*). Chapter 2.3: Reactions to traumatic events; Chapter 2.4: Attachment; Chapter 4.2: Psychological problems and symptoms during the first few years.

Christina Åsbäck och Anna Rosenqvist, *Mariamamma*. An autobiographical tale about Mariamma, an Indian girl adopted from an orphanage in Mumbai at the age of four.

Life as a family



So when an adoptive family has been together for some time, got used to each other and settled down to everyday life together – are they then an ordinary family?

Adoptive families, just like other families, have the challenge of being a source of joy and support for each other in everyday life. Adoptive families go through the same life cycle, meeting the same joys and sorrows as other families. They form their own special habits, their own ways of living, relaxing, quarrelling, etc.. In everyday life, family members do not walk around continually thinking of how they met and what it was like. They just live with each other, and their relationship changes and shifts according to the cycle of life and in keeping with this specific family's pattern for developing.

At the same time, there is an added dimension to an adoptive family's experiences, simply because of the adoption, and additional tasks can sometimes crop up in their lives. What family members think and feel here and now is influenced by what happened at the time of the adoption.

Researchers into adoption have noticed that adopters' attitude towards adoption varies. One fundamental difference is the one between adopters who maintain that adoption makes the family no different from others, and adopters who accept that adoption does make a difference in some respects.⁸⁵ It is a matter of being able to treat the whole question in a relaxed manner so that adoption settles into place in the story of the family.

Behaving as if nothing has happened might make matters even worse, however: things that happen to you – especially when you are little – only seem to turn dangerous if everyone denies that they are important.

from the Swedish pre-school periodical "Förskolan", Volume 2/2005,
by Lotta Landerholm

A lifetime approach

It is common for any periods of change to reactivate thoughts of the adoption. The changes might be ordinary ones which are part of the cycle of life: starting nursery school and primary school, adolescence, becoming an adult, parenthood, mid-life crises etc.. Adult adoptees report that their adoption becomes more multi-

⁸⁵ Lindblad, 2004, 75

faceted with each new phase of life. Whether they regard this as enriching or yet another hurdle depends mainly on whether or not the individual adoptee has had the opportunity of accepting the adoption as an intrinsic part of his or her personal history.

Changes might be brought about by active choices or by unforeseeable factors such as the arrival of siblings, divorce, moving house, illness or death.

On adoptees' birthdays, many adopters think of the birth mother, and some families celebrate the day when the adoptee arrived in the family.

In new situations, the reactions of other people can remind adopted children of the fact that they are adopted. It might be a matter of changes at school, meeting new people on holiday, a job interview, a new place of work etc.. Even in everyday life, adoptees can be reminded in moments of closeness or in arguments, by a TV program or something someone said.

The thoughts and feelings evoked in each situation can reflect both the sorrow and the joy of adoption. Changes in general can be regarded as separations, in that they involve leaving one state and moving into another. This can easily lead to change evoking feelings of fear, vulnerability, anger and sadness. If these feelings are allowed time and space and can be shared with the rest of the family, the whole family's sense of belonging may well deepen.

Examples of when adoption feelings can resurface

Starting at nursery school

Children who have been abandoned by their birth parents generally need time to learn to trust adoptive parents to return if they disappear from sight. Their primary need is for peace and quiet while attaching to their new parents. Nursery school staff are often the first people to take care of adopted children outside of the family. This can make things difficult for adoptees starting at nursery school. It can take adoptees much longer to settle in at nursery school; this settling-in period should be tailored to each individual child's reactions to the change it involves. Some adopted children need a prolonged initial period at home to truly attach to their new parents, and this will entail deferring nursery school until later.

It is important that one member of nursery school staff is responsible for the whole initial settling-in period and subsequently carries on working with an adopted child.⁸⁶ If adopters have informed staff about the important factors in their adopted children's background it will be easier for the staff to understand why these children react the way they do and enable them to be observant. There might be a whole range of different reactions. Some children are inconsolable and refuse to let their parent(s) leave. When children behave in quite the opposite way and seem not to care when their parent(s) leave, it can be just as worrying. Some children react violently to touch or to saying goodbye. If adopted children are slow to develop linguistic, social or motor skills, this will show up when they start spending a large part of the day together with other children in the same age group.

Some adopted children – specially the ones with attachment problems – do better with childminders or in smaller nursery-school groups. They have fewer adults to deal with and usually a less stressful environment.

Starting school

Starting school is a tremendous change for any child. The number of children in the class increases, and the number of adults decreases. School age children have to be able to work as a group. They are expected to be able to wait for their turn. Some adopted children have a lot of things to catch up on and postponing school is sometimes the best policy.

At the age when children start school, their way of thinking changes. Children begin to see things as part of a greater whole, comparing and noticing differences. They come to realise that some differences cannot be changed. This throws a new light on everything to do with their adoption. They notice that they look different and realise that there is nothing to be done about it.

There is a saying that 7 to 10-year-olds start to understand what they have always known. Where adopted children are concerned, it means that they can reach a deeper understanding of what abandonment, adoption, appearances and being

⁸⁶ Höijer, 2005, 34

different really involve.⁸⁷ Adopters need to talk to their children and meet them on a new level of understanding, without being alarmed by the aggression and grief children might feel.

Teenage years

Teenagers are in a period where they are striving for emancipation and independence – the feeling that they are an individual and can achieve things which are meaningful. Freedom without security can be just an empty shell, however. Adopted children go through the same development as any other children in their teens, but they have a special vulnerability because of their uncertainties about the first part of their lives.

Young people in Sweden today are in the process of finding their own identity and they may have many ideals concerning appearance, clothes, popularity in their peer groups etc.. It is during this period that young people need to concentrate on laying the foundations for their future relationships, education and employment. If adopted youngsters need to spend too much energy processing early memories and experiences, they may neglect other issues which are all-important for their peers. The issues which cause difficulties for adopted teenagers are often the dilemmas they have previously kept to themselves.

Emancipating themselves from their parents can reactivate memories of feelings from when they were abandoned by their birth parents or from other separations before they arrived in their adoptive families. Since all these people disappeared and never returned, emancipation from their parents can feel threatening. Just as when they started at nursery school, there might be a whole range of different reactions. Some teenagers test their parents' love to the limit, while others find even the first steps towards emancipation deeply alarming.

Teenagers' bodies change during this period, and with this comes the beginning of an adult sexuality. Their first crushes, romances and disappointments can stir up unconscious memories latent in their bodies. A romantic relationship can turn out to be a tremendously emotional and ambivalent experi-

⁸⁷ Kats, 1990, 70 ff

ence which re-activates those first separations in life. For some adoptees the risk of being abandoned or rejected is so great that they never dare to fall deeply in love.⁸⁸

An adopted teenager can say "*You're not my real mother/father anyway!*" Adoptive parents can easily feel offended and get tied up in futile arguments that usually make matters worse. Instead, the best thing is to stay with your teenager. One good idea is to try to grasp what your teenagers mean and ask them to describe what it is that has made them think or feel this way. The essential part is for adoptive parents always to insist that they *are* their real parents! "*We didn't give birth to you, but we are your real parents and we always will be!*" Then the children sense that they really are someone special. "I've got a family – they won't desert me!"

The fact that there are no actual blood ties might signify to both adopters and adoptees that they will need more courage to let go of each other. It is important to point out that teenagers' emancipation is not a question of their shrugging off their parents as people. It is a question of growing up and out of the dependence and security their parents have always given and represented.

Becoming an adult

When adoptees grow up, the fact that they are adopted becomes less apparent. They can be taken for immigrants or tourists instead. Abroad, adoptees might have difficulty persuading people that they come from Sweden. It can be very confusing being treated like a foreigner when you have grown up in Sweden and the Swedish way of doing things is the only way you know.

Having a job to go to and work to do is important for a young adult's identity. If adoptees feel the impact of discrimination in the workplace or have trouble finding a job at all, it can have far-reaching consequences for their identity as adults. Discrimination can be oblique and difficult to put your finger on.

⁸⁸ Landerholm, 2003, 181ff

Parenthood

Many adoptees begin to show an interest in their roots when they become parents themselves. Birth parents suddenly become very real people when the midwife asks expectant parents about genetic disorders in their different families. Adoptees can start wondering whether their baby might have some of the same features as their own birth parents.

Being pregnant or being at home with a baby can awaken memories which might have been unconscious previously. Sitting holding a baby can prompt questions about the adoptees' own infancy before they were adopted, and the reasons why they were abandoned.

He gave me all the joy in the world at the same time as he pulled out the sorrow still inside me. He knew nothing about my origins, but he forced me to think about it and made me mourn everything I had lost.

...

I had been abandoned – could I be there for my children? I might never have been given that first love; so would I be able to give it to my children? If I had been rejected as a child, was I right to feel chosen as a mother?

from *At sea inside*. (Resan på mitt inre hav) article in U&Y no. 5, 1997
by Ulrika Berggren

Return journeys

Many adoptees undertake 'return journeys' back to their states of origin. Some make the journey to search for their birth family – or to actually meet them. Others want to get to know their culture of origin – or perhaps just want to see the country where they were born.

For adoptees who are used to looking different from everyone else, the experience of blending into one's surroundings can be a tremendous experience. It can throw a completely new light on their sense of belonging – and evoke a whole range of different feelings. Some adoptees feel as though they are at home at last; others feel more Swedish than ever when they visit their state of origin. Many adoptees describe a feeling of duality.

Undertaking a 'return journey' can be one way of forging links between the past and the present: one way of grasping what that original childhood journey meant and what an influence it has been.

Many adoptees travel by themselves, but it is possible to travel as part of a group via one of the authorised Swedish adoption organisations. Some states of origin arrange their own programs for adoptees making 'return journeys'.

Being a support for your adopted child

When does a little child need therapy? It is not that easy to decide. Every child's grief is individual, and the ways of expressing it are just as numerous as the children. But we must never regard normal expressions of grief as signs of ill-health. Grief is not an illness, and we must never disregard children's innate ability to recover. But we do need to be observant if a child seems to 'get stuck', or if expressions of grief begin to stray from what is normal.

from A big one and a little one have gone away (*En stor och en liten är borta*)

by Elisabeth Cleve

Knowing what difficulties adopted children may have and what special challenges might face them gives adopters the foreknowledge which makes understanding easier. We still need to bear in mind that everything we know from research and experience is bound to be based on generalisation. In this course material, we have covered various themes of importance to adoptees and adoptive families. How individual children and families react in each phase will depend on who they are as persons. Noticing and listening to your child is absolutely crucial. Sometimes adults think that they have to provide answers or solutions every time a child has a problem. Often, the best support you can give as a parent is by just listening. Experiences, feelings and thoughts which we keep to ourselves can grow into serious problems; but as the Swedish saying goes: "A joy shared is a joy doubled; a trouble shared is a trouble halved."

Talking to a child demands time and patience. For younger children who live in the present it is crucial for you to be there to talk to just when your child feels like talking. But even for older

children and teenagers this can sometimes be a prerequisite. If the topic you are discussing is emotionally charged, it will be important to follow your child's lead and allow for pauses or breaks in the conversation.

Adoptees do not need to grow up with perfect parents but it is essential that parents stay there to support them in all the ups and downs of life. Another important aspect is that parents need to be generally self-reliant but prepared to get help when they feel unsure.

When problems arise in adoptive families, they often have something to do with the attachment process not having worked out ideally. Children who are insecurely attached to their parents do not develop as well as children who are securely attached. If the different members of the family are not secure and comfortable with each other, conflicts and misunderstandings can easily arise.

Where to get help

The longer children have to grapple with difficulties without help, the greater the risk that they will be unable to cope with their other developmental tasks. This is why it is essential to try to remedy matters as soon as possible.⁸⁹

Counselling is available from various sources: from the Swedish municipality where you live, from family or marital guidance clinics, from the children's and young people's psychiatric units, from the social workers and psychologists employed by the children's clinics and schools. There are also private clinics.

Further reading:

Lotta och Dan Höijer, *Adopterade barn (Adopted children)*. The authors – themselves adoptive parents – interview education staff, psychologists, parents and adoption workers and describe different ways of working with the conflicts which sometimes arise when adoptees come into contact with nursery schools, and when adopters come into contact with staff.

⁸⁹ Broberg et al, 2003

Frank Lindblad, *Adoption (Adoption)*, Chapter 3.1, The way into society, Chapter 3.4 School, Chapter 3.5, Pals and friends, Chapter 4, Physical and mental health.

Sofia Lindström & Astrid Trotzig (editors), *Hitta hem, vuxna adopterade från Korea berättar (Finding home – the tales of adult adoptees from Korea)*. This book is an anthology of tales told by twenty adult adoptees from Korea. Each with his or her own individual past and personal experiences. The book covers a whole spectrum of feelings, from alienation to a sense of wholeness.

Sofia French, *På jakt efter Mr Kim i Seoul (In search of Mr Kim in Seoul)*. When Sofia French had children and her bonds with the future became clear, she began to ponder over her ties with the past. She visited Korea three times in the course of a year, and this book is about those trips. About growing up, becoming an adult, and identity.

Kim Skoglund (editor), *Efterlängtat. Adoptivföräldrar berättar (Longed-for. Tales of adopters)*. The contributors are adopters themselves who tell moving, but not sentimental, tales of life's ups and downs.

Complete list of books suggested for further reading

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Internet websites

www.mia.eu – the Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority. Here you will find links to the authorised Swedish adoption organisations, adoptees' associations, etc..(Mostly in Swedish, some English and Spanish).

<http://hem.passagen.se/eafse/?noframe> – Swedish Association for single adopters (In Swedish)

<http://www.svensk-adoption.net> – Adoptivföräldrars förening. The Swedish Adoptive Parents' Association (In Swedish)

<http://www.villhabarn.com> – For people with fertility problems, raising adoption as one alternative. Has a discussion forum and FAQ page. (In Swedish)

<http://www.ffob.se> IRIS – Swedish Association for the Involuntarily Childless (Föreningen för ofrivilligt barnlösa, FFOB) (In Swedish)

<http://www.adoptera.nu> – Informative and lively discussion site for anyone interested in adoption. (In Swedish)

<http://www.kanalen.org/foraldrar/forum> – Parents' channel: information and different discussion groups, covering adoption among other things. (In Swedish)

<http://www.juniper.se/adp/> – Website on adoptions, among other things. (In Swedish)

<http://www.blom.just.nu> – Children's Speech Therapy Clinic in Borås, Sweden (Barnlogopedmottagningen i Borås). On children's linguistic development, with reading suggestions etc.. (In Swedish)

<http://www.fasforeningen.nu> – Swedish FAS-association – on children who have been affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol (FAS = Foetal Alcohol Syndrome) (In Swedish)

<http://www27.brinkster.com/rfhb/> – Swedish national association for families with children infected with Hepatitis B. (Riksföreningen för familjer med hepatit B-bärande barn) (Some information in Arabic, German, English, Spanish, Finnish, French, Italian, Russian, Somali, Turkish.)

<http://www.tryggabarn.nu/> – website for Trygg Hansa, the Swedish insurance company, with adoption information among other things (In Swedish)

<http://adoptionsradgivningen.hopto.org/> – website of Adoption Counsellors (AdoptionsRådgivarna) (In Swedish)

<http://www.teckna.se/> – on signing and sign language to help solve problems with linguistic development. (In Swedish)

<http://www.teckenhatten.com> – on signing/sign language to help solve problems with linguistic development. (In Swedish)

<http://resare.com/ap/> – on attachment parenting, mostly in Swedish, some English

<http://www.ap.skorpan.se> – on attachment parenting, (In Swedish)

<http://www.appelklyftig.com/samspel> – on communication training. (In Swedish)

Reference group

- Marit Arnbom, Swedish Organisation for adult adoptees and foster-children. (Organisationen för vuxna adopterade och fosterbarn, AFO)
- Sven Bremberg, Swedish National Institute of Public Health (Folkhälsoinstitutet)
- Anna Elmund, psychologist
- Johan Högberg, Adoptees' Voice (Adopterades röst)
- Peter Högman, Adoptees' Forum (Forum för adopterade)
- Karsten Inde, Fröslunda Solidarity Trust – Intercountry Adoptions (Stiftelsen Frösunda solidaritet – Internationella adoptioner)
- Mikael Jarnlo, Swedish Association for Adopted Eritreans and Ethiopians (Adopterade eritreaner och etiopiers förening, AEF)
- Margret Josefsson, Adoption Centre (Adoptionscentrum, AC)
- Caroline Karlsson, Chicola, Swedish Association for Adoptees from Latin America
- Magnus Kihlbom, child psychiatrist
- Jonas Kjellin, Swedish Association for Adoptees from Thailand (Föreningen för adopterade thailändare, FFAT)
- Christina Lagergren, speech therapist
- Lotta Landerholm, psychotherapist
- Frank Lindblad, child psychiatrist, National Swedish Institute for Psychosocial Medicine, (Institutet för psykosocial medicin, IPM)
- Ulla Moberg Hovmark, Adoption Counselling in the Swedish county of Skaraborg. (Adoptionsrådgivningen Skaraborg)
- Heléne Mohlin, Swedish Family Association for Intercountry Adoption (Familjeföreningen för internationell adoption, FFIA)
- Monica Norrman, Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)
- Elsa Nyberg, social worker, specialist in family law
- Mona Nyman, Swedish La Casa Adoption Association (Adoptionsföreningen La Casa, ALC)
- Ingabritt Sigurd, Swedish Friends of Children Adoption Society (Barnens vänner, BV)
- Ingrid Stjerna, social worker, specialist in family law

- Gerd Stjärnfäldt, Children above all-adoptions (Barnen framför allt – adoptioner, BFA-A)
- Anita Sundin, The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges kommuner och landsting)
- Lena Kim Svenungsson Arctaadius, Swedish Adopted Koreans Association (Adopterade koreaners förening, AKF)
- Hanna Wallensten, Swedish Association for Adopted Eritreans and Ethiopians (Adopterade eritreaner och etiopiers förening, AEF)
- Patrik Wallner, Adoption Centre (Adoptionscentrum, AC)
- Maud Zakrisson, Swedish Family Association for Intercountry Adoption (Familjeföreningen för internationell adoption, FFIA)

