

ADOPTION - IN THE CHILD'S BEST INTEREST

The road to adoption starts from different points for the various persons involved in the process and, if the journey is completed successfully, will culminate in a child being integrated into a family which is not his or her birth family. However, the different paths are all illuminated by one common factor, the best interest of the child to be adopted. Unless this is kept in mind continuously, the journey will be undertaken in darkness and the many challenges which can be met along the way will turn into stumbling blocks.

The Child

The first person who to be considered in this process is the child. In recent times, as the world has faced a number of demographic changes, the situation of the adoptable child has also changed. Today, he or she is likely to have already been separated from his or her birth family for reasons other than being orphaned and, in many cases, he or she would have been residing in a residential home for children. It is on rare occasions today that the child to be adopted moves directly from his or her birth family to his or her adoptive family, unless the adoption is being undertaken within the family. The reasons for the child's separation from his or her birth family could be various and could include mental and/or physical health problems and a lack of coping strategies and/or resources within the family. The resulting situation is that the child is placed in residential care and, if his/her parents consent, is given permission to be adopted by somebody else. The child's journey, up to the point where he or she is adopted, is a hazardous one.

The separation from the birth family is one which is likely to leave a negative impact because of the interruption of attachment process. The placement within a residential home also has negative implications mainly because of the lack of individual attention and stimulation and the possibility of institutionalization. At the same time, choosing adoption for the child is a decision which must be made cautiously by all concerned because of its irreversible nature and, consequently, the severance from his or her roots, and because of the shifts in the child's identity which it necessitates. A child's roots remain important to him or her and any adoption placement must take this into consideration and treat it with respect, whether the adoption is being undertaken locally or is an inter-country adoption. The possibility of open adoption, where contact with the birth family is maintained after the adoption, also needs to be given serious consideration. Throughout this process, the child's best interests have to remain paramount.

The Birth Parents

The child's mother's journey starts off with the mother's pregnancy which, more often than not, already presents problems to her. The problems may result from her own situation, which could include such factors as drug and alcohol addiction, mental or physical health difficulties, the pregnancy being unplanned and/or unwanted, a serious

lack of skills to cope with birth and pregnancy and a lack of resources and support; they may result from her relationship, which could be creating an environment which is unable to support the birth of a child; they may result from the child's situation, in which difficulties are being encountered which the mother cannot cope with; and they may result from the social environment, which is unable and/or unwilling to accept the birth of this child. The issue of the father in this situation needs to be mentioned since it might make it even more complicated. Should he not be aware of the pregnancy and/or not be ready to accept the child, this could be contributing to the mother's problems. However, should he have acknowledged the pregnancy and eventual birth of the child, he is part of any decision about the child's future and may be a determining factor in whether the child is going to be given up for adoption or not.

Whatever the reason for the mother or parents contemplating adoption for the child, this is very often a difficult decision for her/them to take and one which is possibly compounded by the negative reactions towards it and by her/their own feelings. It takes courage to arrive at this decision, especially when the persons making it are often viewed as a heartless person who is abdicating her/their responsibility. Allowing the child's best interest to illuminate this situation, this decision could be seen as a mother or parents giving her/their child the opportunity to have a better life than she/they could give him or her. At the same time, this situation is one which is fraught with uncertainty, since separating a child from his/her mother or parents is never a decision to be taken without serious consideration of the implications and without trying to minimize any possible negative impact.

The Prospective Adoptive Parent/s

The journey of the prospective adoptive parent/s, who are usually a couple, but could be a single person, begins with a difficult decision which needs to be taken, that of whether to take the initiative to include a child not related by birth in the family. The reasons for taking this decision could be various but, on more occasions than not, include childlessness and infertility. In fact, even before the decision to adopt is taken, the prospective adopters may have gone through the painful experience of unsuccessfully trying to have their own children. The adopted child's best interests, at this point, may be somewhat blurred as the prospective adopters struggle to balance their own wishes and needs with the resources they can offer to the child. Once the decision is taken, the prospective adopters' journey could start to resemble an obstacle race, as they go through the process of being trained, assessed and matched with a child. Today, many adoptions which take place are inter-country adoptions, which not only involve the processes already mentioned but also coping with foreign bureaucracies and travelling abroad at considerable expense. The limited number of children available for adoption could make the matching process rather complicated and prospective adoptive parents need to possess skills which allow them to persevere with the process even when a successful completion seems remote. At the same time, they have to maintain an atmosphere which will allow the child to thrive once he or she has joined their family.

The Adoption Services

These services locally have recently transferred their starting point from the Department for Social Welfare Standards, where they were previously located, to Agenzija Appogg, which has now assumed responsibility for the provision of adoption services. The personnel involved in providing these services have various tasks which include assessing the prospective adoptive parent/s' suitability; guiding and supporting them through the adoption process and ensuring their preparation; completing the necessary documentation and procedures for them to be approved as adoptive parents; and giving them the necessary support services once the adoption has gone through and a child has joined the family. Support services also need to be provided to those persons, usually mothers, who are contemplating giving their children up for adoption and those who are contemplating adoption but have not yet taken the decision. These services must be provided in the light of what is best for the child, which is not always crystal clear and which entails the use of sensitivity and a number of professional skills, particularly those of assessment.

The Community

Each community, however small or large, into which a child is going to move also has a journey to take: that of integrating the child within it. This is a journey which, at times, is taken reluctantly and with certain misgivings, especially since, often, it is not one which the community members have chosen. At the same time, unless the community around the adoptive family is receptive and supportive, the integration of the child within it is going to be even more difficult. The attitude adopted by the community, ranging from the immediate family to the wider educational and social circles, and, ultimately, to the whole country, may determine the outcome of the journeys undertaken by the adoptive parents and by the adopted child. If our community believes that the best interests of the child are paramount, and that the child is set to gain by being integrated into our country, we all have to make an effort to provide an atmosphere which will allow him or her to do that. Only then can the adopted child, who is the focus of the whole process, arrive at his or her destination safely and find the conditions which will allow him or her to thrive.

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For further information about Agenzija APPOGG and its services one can call on 2295 9000. Agenzija APPOGG (www.appogg.gov.mt) forms part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which also incorporates Agenzija sedqa (www.sedqa.gov.mt) and Agenzija SAPPOR (www.sappor.gov.mt).