



# Adoption STAR/Family STAR

## Theoretical Framework

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***Adoption historically has been the preferred solution for ensuring the well-being of children who cannot grow up in their original/birth families, and research has demonstrated that children fare far better in adoptive homes than in institutions or long-term foster care*** (Hoksbergen, 1999; Triseliotis, 2002; Selwyn & Quinton, 2004; van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2005; and Lee, Seol, Sung, & Miller, 2010).

#### Mission-based Infusion

Adoption STAR (Support, Training, Advocacy, & Resources) is a compassionate and unique agency. The Agency takes a strong stand on adoption education and believes no one can make a decision to adopt or place a child for adoption without fully educating themselves on adoption and its many options.

Adoption STAR is an agency committed to the best interests of children and will offer all birth families regardless of race, health, circumstances, or disability, the option of adoption for their child. Adoption STAR is an agency dedicated to maintaining connections between adoptive families and birth families and offers education and support with an adoption plan.

Adoption STAR believes every expectant parent and adoptive family deserves to have access to adoption services. Unfortunately, quality information and counseling on adoption is still not widely available in the United States for ALL individuals. Our vision builds upon the Agency's strengths of offering ongoing support services to ALL birth and adoptive families. We will, as an Agency of dedicated staff, ensure that all clients receive a consistent and high standard of care and service. We will continue to expand and advance our support programs for all throughout every stage of their adoption journey. The Agency will develop its marketing, public relations and branding to ensure that both the public and expectant and adoptive families receive education and information about adoption. The Agency will continue to act as advocates for equality and fair treatment for all parties involved in adoption. Finally, in its efforts to maintain the highest standards of service and program quality and fidelity, we offer this comprehensive literature review that details the evidence-based foundation that all of our programs and services are built upon.

#### Post-Adoption Services: Family Needs, Program Models, and Evaluation

Post-Adoption Services (PAS) are support services for families who adopt a child, for birth mothers, and for adoptive children who continue to explore the relationship they have to their adoptive parents and in the case of closed adoptions, the one they seek with their birth mothers and fathers (Post Adoption Services Survey, NYSCCC, 2010). The need for PAS is well documented in the research. The Search Institute of Minnesota studied teens adopted as infants and found that, when compared to birth adolescents, adopted teens showed higher levels of delinquent behavior, illicit drug use (alcohol and tobacco), and poorer school adjustment (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998; Sharma, McGue, & Benson,

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1996a; and Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996b). Additionally, many adopted children have emotional, behavioral, medical, and learning problems as a result of prior abuse and/or neglect they have suffered. These problems can be short- and long-term and require specific attention that PAS can provide (Post Adoption Services Survey, NYSCCC, 2010). Various supports include but are not limited to telephone supports, support groups, respite, information & referral, counseling by an “adoption specialist,” and ongoing programming like panels and different types of adoption events. Most telling, the utilization of PAS by adoptive families is about triple the rate reported by birth families (Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). However, after a pique in PAS, the last decade has seen a steady decline in the availability of these types of services (Policy Perspective: Keeping the Promises, 2010). Furthermore, due to the unique needs of the adoption triad (birth mother/father, adopted child, and adoptive family), many mental health and counseling professionals lack the necessary expertise to address the myriad issues facing individuals in the adoption triad (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010; Nelson, 1985; Festinger, 2006; Festinger & Maza, 2009; Sass and Henderson, 2000; Post, 2000, and Henderson, 2000). According to Linville and Lyness, (2007), the negative experiences of some adoptive families in seeking help underscore the reality that therapists lacking adoption competence can do more harm than good like:

- Failing to validate or believe their experiences,
- Conveying blame to parents for their children’s problems,
- Pathologizing adoption and viewing the family as pathological,
- Questioning the parents’ motives for adoption,
- Advising parents not to talk about adoption with the child because it will “stir things up,”
- Seeing children with attachment problems without parental presence or input,
- Telling parents to just give the child back to the state, and
- Failing to gather information on the child’s history or to address the impact of previous maltreatment on the child (Smith & Howard, 1999, NACAC, 2002).

PAS programs have proven to be successful for families who are a part of the adoption process and who are able to access PAS services (Avery, 2004). According to Avery (2004),

“An evaluation of 2000 children in more than 1000 adoptive families served by 13 post adoption services ....80% indicated that they were better off after receiving post-adoption services. Of these families, 73% indicated that the child was able to remain in the home as a result of the help and support they received from the (programs).”

Moreover, the cost savings for the state is equal to \$15,000 annually per child. However, the emotional well-being of the child and family is priceless (Post Adoption Services Survey, NYSCCC, 2010).

In addition to the positive impact of PAS, the opportunity to access PAS is also extremely critical to a family’s decision to even initiate the adoption process in the first place. Therefore, post-adoptive services are critical to ensuring access and initiation of the adoptive process as well as extremely beneficial to the overall well-being of the family (Dore, 2006; Freundlich and Wright, 2003; McRoy (2007).

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Post-Adoption Services must target the adoption “triad” and offer a wide-range of supports, at different times and stages of development for each; the birth mother/father, adopted child, and adoption family (Policy Perspective: Keeping the Promises, 2010). Many experts cite a common framework for the adoption process that include seven core issues of adoption: loss, rejection, guilt and shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and mastery and control (Silverstein and Roszia, 1988; Rosenberg, 1992; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Pavao, 1998; Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998; Schooler & Norris, 2002; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). According to Freundlich and Wright (2003), the following services were identified as critical to the adoptive triad and the lifelong process of adoption and should be incorporated at different times during the growth and development of the adopted child.

- Support services, including support groups for parents, and informal contact with other families who have adopted children with and without special needs and help lines;
- Easily accessible information about services, supports, and resources;
- Parenting education, including practical help with children’s needs;
- Respite care;
- Counseling, including assistance with children’s attachment issues; guidance in responding to their adopted children’s emotional, behavioral, and developmental issues; assistance with dealing with the impact of adoption on their birth children; and help with life planning for children;
- Crisis intervention services, including mediation in open-adoptions;
- Advocacy services, including assistance in negotiating educational and mental health systems; and
- Counseling services for their children, including group services for older adopted children.

Finally, for parents who adopt children with special needs, McRoy (2007) points out that the success of that process and long-term health of the family is greatly improved through the availability of PAS as well as a family’s decision to access those programs.

The 2010 Policy Perspective: Keeping the Promise by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute recommended the following actions take place:

1. Prepare parents to expect challenges and understand the benefits of services,
2. Increase research to develop knowledge and disseminate to practitioners,
3. Educate Professionals to understand adoption and how to support families,
4. Identify high-risk children, then provide services and resources,
5. Stop cutbacks in subsidies and post-adoption services,
6. Develop funding partnerships to support post-adoption services, and
7. Develop a continuum of services and educate mental health professionals.

## Developing an Evidence-Base Post-Adoption Services Program

### Active Learning Model

There are three models of learning that help to explain the value of multi-faceted learning experiences: intuitive, passive, and active learning (Sigette, 2009). The simplest form of learning, intuitive, begins at birth and can be compared to stimulus and response learning or habit forming (Slavin, 2008). This type of learning occurs with little cognitive activity on the part of the individual and is learning in its most basic form. Passive learning is the second phase of learning and largely depends on the motivation and engagement of the learner. Individuals who are being taught information on a topic they are uninterested in tend to be passive learners (Sigette, 2009; Newell, 2009). Active learning is the highest form of learning and occurs when an individual is motivated by the topic or information that is being learned. It is characteristic for active learning to provide participants opportunities to make choices in their learning environment and thereby engaging a high level of cognitive engagement that includes questioning, innovation, problem solving, communication, conceptualization, and other higher order skill sets (Ornstein, 2006; Harvey, 2012; Getch, Sherrod, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009).

When an effective active learning training/program model is engaged, a “community of people” comprises the learning environment and there is a blurred line between teacher/trainer and participant (Van Brummelen, 2008). Essential to this active learning model is how safe a participant feels and the trust he or she has in those providing the active learning experience (Newell, 2009). Adoption STAR/Family STAR provides this type of environment in all of its programs and participants, regardless of who they are in the adoption triad, repeatedly report that they feel safe and trust Adoption STAR/Family STAR staff.

Active learning experiences rely heavily on the mentor/teacher/activity leader/trainer to cultivate a trusting environment; to incorporate a variety of learning tools; and to allow for self-directed learning, experimentation, and a fluid experience from start to finish. Adoption STAR/Family STAR utilizes this approach throughout its programs. Participants benefit greatly from this infused active learning model (Slavin, 2008; Parker and Parker, 2007).

### Evidence-Based Parent Training Characteristics and Practices

There are a variety of evidence-based parent education strategies that are incorporated into Adoption STAR/Family STAR trainings and programs. These practices have proven that, as strategies to effect positive change in parenting practice, they are evidence-based approaches to working with parents looking to improve short- and long-term outcomes for their children (Johnson et al., 2012; Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Blume et al., 2010; Burke and Day, 1986; Hoover et al., 2010). The following characteristics are part of the systemic approach to Adoption STAR/Family STAR programs and services.

- **Strength-based Focus:** Extensive research supports the use of a strength-based strategy when working with parents rather than focusing on weaknesses. This approach supports the use of positive strategies to effect change versus the elimination of behaviors that highlight weaknesses (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2003)

- **Family-centered Approach:** Family-centered practice incorporates activities that the entire family can engage in rather than a one dimensional approach focusing only on the role of parents. This strategy “respects the traditions and values of families” and reflects the parents learning styles, strengths, and cultural influences (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center Workshop, 2008)
- **Qualified Staff:** Qualified staff not only speaks to the educational and experiential backgrounds of staff but their abilities to empathize with the parents that they are working with. This can be accomplished by matching trainers with the characteristics of parents in the training. In Adoption STAR/Family STAR’s case, it’s implementing trainings by parents intimately familiar with the adoption process. This “matching” of parenting roles enhances the ability of the trainer to “connect” with his or her participants (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013)
- **Targeted Service Groups:** In the case of parent education, it benefits the training experience to have groups with similar needs, backgrounds, identifying characteristics, and goals (Colosi & Dunifon, 2003). The targeted service group allows a program to be created with the needs of the participants in mind when creating content, support materials, and formatting the experience (Samuelson, 2010).
- **An Ecological Approach:** An ecological approach takes the “identifying characteristics” of the targeted group into consideration when developing the parent education program. These characteristics include but are not limited to adoption position within the adoption triad, community, school/educational attainment, family structure, finances, socio-economic status, and culture (Samuelson, 2010).
- **Parent Partnership:** Parent partnership pairs parents who have advanced to leadership roles in the field, community, and educational community with parents who are just beginning their own journey (Pion-Berlin et al., 2013). This pairing uses the more advanced parents to educate, model, mentor, and create opportunities for parent participants (CSSP, 2012).
- **Clear Program Goals:** Successful trainings, whether parent education or others, clearly state the goals of the program, providing participants with an endpoint, focus, and target to work toward.
- **Continuous Evaluation:** All programs benefit from continuous evaluation and improvement efforts that not only focus on knowledge acquisition but on changed behaviors of parent participants and positive outcomes for children and families. This can be ensured by focusing on program and process evaluation and documenting and implementing a comprehensive quality improvement system as well as engaging in more rigorous, experimental or quasi-experimental research.

Other elements of evidence-based parent education programs include parent training strategies like promoting positive family interaction, involving fathers (Elder et al., 2011), using interactive training techniques (active learning), providing opportunities to practice, teaching emotional communication skills, and encouraging peer support systems (Ainsworth, et al., 1978; Lord, et al., 2002, Elder, 2002; Sparrow, et al., 1984; & Wetherby and Prizant, 2000). For example, emotional communication skills involve a healthy exchange between trainers and participants in the development of parenting strategies (Epstein et al., 2005). This parent-centered approach, as practiced by Adoption STAR/Family STAR, has been found to correspond positively with likely implementation of learned strategies

(Zolnierek and Dimatteo, 2009) and to be positively associated with positive outcomes (Kaplan et al., 1989; Griffin et al. 2004).

Finally, parent education program effectiveness is greatly influenced by participant motivation and perceived usefulness of the training (Graf et al., 2014). Therefore, the training must be perceived by participants as being “socially valid” or that the strategies being taught are appropriate and will address the needs of the participants (Wolf, 1978). Therefore a pure “customer satisfaction” model falls short of what is needed of an effective continuous improvement model as well as a model seeking to achieve the positive outcomes and goals of the training. This perceptiveness on the part of the participant is critical to the overall impact of the training (Stephan, 2009) and is why the Adoption STAR/Family STAR training model provides the greatest opportunity for change and improvement in the lives of participants, their children and families.

### **Emotional Intelligence & Character Development**

There has been an evolving body of literature that examines the impact of programs on emotional intelligence and its influence over academic achievement. Ashdown and Bernard (2012) examined the impact of a program on elementary grade students that purposefully sought to develop emotional intelligence skills and, as a result, increased academic achievement. The Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) for young children defines “social-emotional development as developing the capacity...to form close and secure adult relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn” (2008). CASEL (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) has outlined five core social and emotional competencies that are “important foundations for young people’s well-being: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (Ashdown and Bernard, pg. 397, 2012). As young people develop these skills they also expand their perspectives, develop confidence, expand their ability to develop healthy adult and peer relationships, resolve conflicts, increase their ability to persevere in the face of adversity, cope well with anger and hurt, and more times than not, successfully manage their emotions (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Parlakian, 2003). These findings coincide with a variety of researchers who have conducted extensive studies on the development of emotional intelligence in adults like Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee (2002) and Collins (2001). The contrast in what the overall impact on emotional intelligence ultimately influences is not as great as one would expect given the age differences of participants. Essentially, those who are capable of recognizing their own feelings and managing those feelings are better positioned to recognize other’s feelings and emotions and develop positive relationships based on those recognitions and abilities. Whether young or old, the context in which one develops positive relationships is essentially the same with similar influences over abilities and achievements.

For young children, evidence suggests that when a child successfully developed his or her emotional intelligence, they are more likely to realize positive outcomes on academic success. Research supports that “in conjunction with cognitive competence (reading, writing, and critical thinking skills), social emotional competence (collaboration skills, motivation, and study skills) is an important predictor of academic achievement” and long-term educational success including college success (Ashdown and Bernard, pg. 398, 2012; DiPerna and Elliot, 2002). Bernard (2004) explained that children who

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demonstrated higher levels of emotional intelligence, particularly those who were at-risk, demonstrated greater levels of academic achievement in comparison to those students with low emotional intelligence. These findings have been similarly demonstrated by Payton et. al. 2008 and Joseph and Strain 2003. In a meta-analysis examining 34 academic sites, Nelson et al. (2003) “found that, overall, social and emotional learning programs had positive effects on both cognitive and academic outcomes in the short term (pre-school), medium term (primary school) and the long term (high school/college) (Ashdown and Bernard, pg. 398, 2012). Therefore, and with a significant amount of research backing up the findings, emotional intelligence (social emotional learning) has a long-term positive influence over academic achievement and future success.

Adoption STAR/Family STAR has always focused on cultivating self-awareness, ownership over one’s choices, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence throughout the adoption triad. In order to “own” one’s actions you must be able to manage your feelings. This ability to understand why you feel the way you do, manage those feelings and respond accordingly assists Adoption STAR/Family STAR participants with understanding how to cultivate similar emotional intelligence in children. This focus is infused throughout all of Adoption STAR/Family STAR programming and is enhanced by the safe and trusting environment that Adoption STAR/Family STAR staff create and maintain in all programming. Finally, by teaching parents to understand their own emotions, control those emotions, recognize other’s emotions, and develop positive relationships, it better positions birth mothers/fathers, adoptive children, and adoptive families for long-term success.

### Summary

The ultimate goal of Adoption STAR/Family STAR is to create a positive opportunity for each member of the adoption triad and in doing so, all members, the birth mother, adoptive child, and adoptive family stand to gain and grow in a positive manner long into the future. This is accomplished by modeling targeted Family STAR programs after the interdisciplinary evidence-based research presented in this theoretical framework, evaluating the programmatic outcomes, and developing a continuous improvement model that enhances programs and improves outcomes for participants. Finally, as one of the only adoption agencies in the region providing adoption-specific programming, Adoption STAR takes its role very seriously and will continue to update and expand programs as needs in the community present themselves.



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