

Adoptive Family Home Studies: What's In A Question?

A Mutual Assessment Process

The home study is frequently viewed as another task to complete along the way to getting a child. Families rarely ask to see the contents of their completed home study. Many agencies see no need for, or no value, in having prospective families review their home study. Families trust that the outcome of their interviews and home tour is a document that adequately reflects them and their lives. Professionals and parents view the home study as a document that meets various legal and agency requirements necessary to move a child into the family. As long as these requirements are met, the document is satisfactory.

It would be beneficial if we eradicated the above beliefs. The family assessment process needs to be looked at as an opportunity for the family and the worker to mutually assess the qualities possessed by each family member. In this reciprocal process, there is an emphasis on exploring the family's experiences—life lessons that contribute to the family's ability to envelope and integrate a child with a traumatic past into their family system.

Traditionally, gathering information for a home study is accomplished in a question and answer format. The family is asked such questions as, "How do you resolve marital discord?" "What is your neighborhood like?" "What were your relationships like with your siblings?" Or, social workers utilize predictive questions. For example, the family is asked, "What will you do if the child lies, steals, wets the bed, etc.?" Predictive questions require that the family determine, often without actual knowledge, what action they will take in the event something occurs.

What should I ask a prospective adoptive family?

Even a question like, "What is your school district like?" is predictive. There may be a significant difference between the standards achieved in a school district's regular education services, and the level of adequacy of that same school district's special education services. If the family is unfamiliar with the special education services, their response is moot. What do we really learn about the family when we ask them to respond to "what if?" Wouldn't it be better to ask them, "What is?" Open-ended questions are designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the individuals own knowledge and/or feelings.

For example, Frank, a prospective adoptive parent was asked, "Tell me about a loss you have experienced?" Frank immediately began talking about his father:

"Frank felt that he had lost his father in childhood emotionally and then he lost his father in adulthood physically. He discussed that grieving has been a lengthy process. In his adolescence, his family had been evicted from their home, Frank and his siblings each went to live with a family friend or a relative. Initially, Frank decided to try to help his family so that the family could all live together again. At 16, he obtained odd jobs, thinking that money would help. He also visited his family thinking that talking to them would help. He thought that they wanted to be a family again as much as he did. As time passed, he realized that his efforts were having no impact. This was devastating to him.

He graduated from high school and began working for Penny's father. Ultimately, he began living with Penny's family. At this time, Penny had yet to resolve matters between herself and

her parents. Joined in their grief over their poor relationships with their parents, the two married and moved to South Carolina. Both now agree that they were really 'running away' and the distance actually only served to make matters worse. Neither could stop thinking about their families and how things seemed to be hanging in mid-air.

When Frank's father, ill with cancer, came to live with Frank and Penny, this brought the father and son's past trauma right back into the present! Frank found himself constantly re-living his childhood. His father's physical presence triggered him to think about his past. He found himself preoccupied, unable to concentrate on simple tasks.

Overwhelmed with emotions and thoughts, he realized that he had tried to reunify his family, he had tried to run away from his past, and now the time had come to move beyond his past. He began talking to Penny and to another close friend about this. Frank was motivated to talk to his father as his father's illness was progressing. Frank's father was not able to provide many answers to explain why he hadn't been able to stop drinking so that he could parent his children. However, having this talk with his father helped Frank to allow himself to be sad about the relationship they had never had and could never have.

Once he allowed this grieving, he reports that he began to feel like a 'different person.' He was able to start to look at the future and the life he and Penny could have. Simultaneously, the couple had selected a faith. Frank reports that this spiritual connection furthered his ability to grieve his past. He realized that there are not always apparent reasons for what happens to a person in life. It is up to the person to move on and determine how to live their life.

Frank stated that his life experiences helped to prepare him to parent a child with special needs in several ways. He acknowledged that it took talking to friends and family members to move beyond his many losses. He realized that he and Penny would need to learn to talk honestly about their children's birthparents, abuse, multiple moving and any other trauma. Frank was also able to discuss how the losses in his family affected each of his siblings differently. Therefore, he has the ability to recognize that individual children may require different approaches to achieve resolution of their past trauma. He also acknowledged that children who are adopted cannot move into a new home and simply 'start over.' Their past is a part of them, and somehow he and Penny must find ways to help their children 'merge' their pasts and their present."

Wow! Frank and Penny's worker gained abundant information about this family. It is clear that Frank has many qualities that will lend to a successful adoptive placement: a wealth of experience with and knowledge of grief, the ability to generate coping skills, communication skills, and empathy and experience in dealing with trauma and adoption.

Best Practice Idea

Questions that discern what is transferable from prospective adoptive family members' life experiences to the parenting of an adopted child glean a wealth of information. "What if" adoption professionals changed their home study interview process to include a rich array of open-ended questions?