

Integration of systemic family therapy and attachment-focused approach with adoptive families: Impact on attachment in parent-child interactions



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ABSTRACT

Attachment deficits are prevalent among adoptive children especially after their first year in adoption (van den Dries, 2009). While treatment with the focus on the attachment needs of adopted children and adoptive parents' attunement has been increasingly discussed, not much has been researched on the impact of the family systems approach, including the exploration of the parents' emotional experiences around adoption. In addition, more studies that strictly focus on treating adoptive children's attachment issues after their first year of adoption are needed. By incorporating the Taking Care of Adoption (TCA) model, which is based on the integration of a family systems approach and attachment theory, this research will recruit 40 adoptive families for a ten-week treatment and hopes to shine light on the needs to explore the adoptive parents' emotional experiences on the adoption issues to secure an increased attachment in their parent-child relationship.

INTRODUCTION

- Adopted children have a higher prevalence of disorganized attachment compared to the non-adoptees (42 % as compared to 62% in non-adoptees) (Van den Dries et al., 2009), and contact with adoptive children who are recovering from trauma experiences may lead to an increased stress in parent-child interaction (Barbato et al., 2019).
- While various studies on treatment of adoptive families have focused on strengthening secure parent-child relationships by emphasizing positive parental responses to child and adequate understanding of the child's behavior (Barbato et al., 2020; Opiola et al., 2018; Wingfield, 2019), treating with a family systems approach with the exploration of the adoptive parents' emotional challenges in the adoption realm has not received much attention.
- In addition, although referrals of adoptive families who seek therapy due to their concerns about the attachment issues mostly occur in the child's adolescent years (McDaniel, 1997), attachment issues are more prevalent in their first year of adoption (van den Dries, 2009).
- It is believed that exploring unresolved emotional issues of adoptive parents, such as their feeling of guilt, shame, or anger they have encountered in their journey of adoption can lead to an acknowledgement of difference between adoptive and biological families (McDaniel, 1997), which then leads to an open communication and support in the adoptive families (Digiulio, 1987).
- Taking Care of Adoption (TCA) is a model that is based on the integration of a family systems approach strongly rooted in clinical practice and attachment theory (Barbato et al., 2019) and is created specifically for families with adoptees.
- This study examines the impact of the TCA approach on the parents-child relationship.

PRIMARY AIM AND HYPOTHESES

- Research Question:**
Do adoptive families who receive a treatment of TCA, the integration of a systems approach and attachment-focused therapy, report an increase in attachment in their child-parent interactions?
- Hypothesis:**
Adoptive parents will experience a higher level of attachment after receiving the TCA treatment and exploring their emotional experiences around adoption in family systems approach and receiving attachment-focused treatment.

METHODS

Participants

- Families consisting of adoptive parent(s) and adopted adolescents (ages 14-18), in their first year of domestic or international adoption
- 40 participants (parent-adolescent dyads), referred by various adoption agencies, ministries serving adoptive families, and non-governmental organizations, and self-referred adoptive parents contacting the research team
- Participating parents must identify themselves as an adoptive parent or a foster-to-adopt parent of a child between ages of 14 and 18 years who resided in the home less than a year. Parents must express attachment-related concerns in their relationships with their adopted children. Parents and adopted children must mutually consent to the treatment.

Procedures

- 20 participants receive TCA and attachment-focused therapy; 20 participants receive attachment-focused therapy
- Caregiving Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ) (Brannan et al., 2019) will be administered to both the control and TCA groups as part of the pre-test and post-test data collection.
- Both the control and TCA treatment group participate in once per week for ten weeks, with each group receiving a two-hour treatment each week.
- Parents assigned to the TCA treatment group received a treatment that included exploration of their emotional experiences around adoption process, helping them increase their awareness of any issues around the unique aspects of the adoptive family.

MEASURES

Adoptive Parents' Attachment in their parent-child relationships

- Forty-item assessing the caregiving representations from Caregiving Experiences Questionnaire (Brennan et al., 2019); CEQ reflect and organize parents' emotional experiences with their children.
- The mean scores at control group and TCA group are averaged to create a score for the parents' attachment in their relationship with adopted adolescents.

RESULTS

- Multiple linear regression will be used to compare the mean scores of the results of the instrument used (CEQ) in the TCA group and the control group, before the treatment and after the treatment is complete.

Discussion

Social Implications

- If the TCA approach is able to positively impact the parent-child attachment for adoptive families with adopted adolescents, this is likely to result in reducing any insecure attachment and behavioral problems in adopted adolescents who lacked attuned caregiving early on. Adoptive parents are also likely to report a reduction in stress in their parenting.

Clinician Implications

- This study addresses an importance of the need to treat with family therapy interventions. It also highlights the need for therapists to understand the difference between adoptive families and biological families when helping build attachment between the adoptive parents and adopted adolescents. It is vital that therapists are sensitive to the differences in adoptive families and are also able to discuss specific ways to explore the parents' emotional experiences regarding their journey of adoption.

Implications for Future Research

- Although the findings can be promising, a few limitations exist to consider in future studies. The generalizability of the results is limited by the sample size. By conducting the research in multiple sites, this limitation could be addressed to support the generalizability of TCA. Also, the nonlongitudinal design is another shortcoming of this study. In order to control and ensure the quality of the TCA treatment, ample amount of TCA training of therapists would be helpful for future research.