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Focus of
this Issue:
Shifting the Paradigm



A New Metric - The Family Success Model:

An Interview with Adam Pertman of NCAP

Jane Samuel, JD

The hotel ballroom in Nashville was full, the lights were up and the crowd listened attentively as the inaugural Adoption and Preservation National Conference began. As the speaker took the stand, I looked around at the sea of professionals, parents and children's advocates. They were all gathered for the same reason. Change was in the air - FINALLY - and their passion called them to be a part of it.

That morning last October I heard Adam Pertman, founder of the National Center on Adoption and Permanency, share what I, as a parent of a child with early-life trauma and attachment issues, had known for the last ten years: that our adoption system in the US is failing families, and change needs to occur to better serve the children waiting for homes here and overseas. This change is overdue and needs to track better with recent research highlighting the profound neurological and emotional impacts of early-life toxic stress, neglect and/or abuse. And this change needs to be systemic.

Pertman, author of the critically acclaimed book *Adoption Nation* and former head of the Donaldson Adoption Institute, sat down and chatted with me this June about his passion for this paradigm shift.

ATN: Personally, Adam, what brought you to this point?

Pertman: Near the end of my time at the Adoption Institute, I started to see that there was a lack in the field. We at the Institute tried to fill it some with research into post-adoption services. But I came to realize that it wasn't just about post-services - though those are vital and we need them.... When I left the Institute I wondered, "What can I do - what can we do - to fill the needs in this field that are not being currently met?"

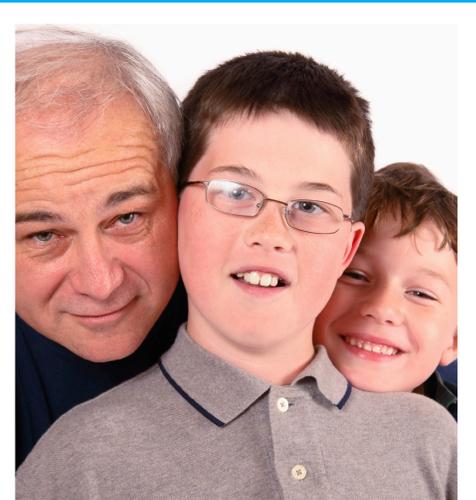
There are a lot of great organizations doing important work, and the field is moving in the right direction, with better focus on post-services and a more holistic approach.

But all those pieces over the years finally formed a picture in my mind that, *bottom line*, we have an adoption/foster care system in place today that was built decades ago to serve a different population than the one we currently have.

It's a system originally built for *white infants* born to *white unwed mothers* who went on to be parented by *white, straight, married adoptive couples*. Back then, there was no adoption from foster care. The permanency plan for children in foster care was foster care. I am speaking, of course, of "formal, legal" adoption. There was adoption in communities of color, but it was mainly informal - with the aunt or grandmother caring for the child, for example - and there was informal adoption within kinship relationships - and some outside of kinship as well.

That original system has been jerry-rigged over the years. It has been adapted and changed to accommodate inter-country adoption, trans-racial adoption, and adoption from foster care. But still that system - which was really only about child placement - is the foundation on which we've built what we have today.

Flashing forward, today the smallest percentage of children and families we serve fit that original profile of white babies being adopted domestically by white married couples. Instead, the system today serves children of all ages, most of them older; children of color; children with special needs; children from foster care; and children from other nations. So we are talking about a population of which roughly 80-90% do not fit the model for which the system - focused almost solely on placement - was built.





Most pointedly, the great majority of children being adopted today from foster care in this country or from institutional settings abroad were abused or neglected to some extent. You can't experience those things without any consequences. So roughly 80-90% of the kids we serve today have some level of "special need" caused by early life trauma. That is not who the system was originally built for.

And today's parents are not the same either. They are married and single; cohabitating and divorced; gay and straight; of every color and ethnicity. We also include birth parents and other biological relatives in the equation – and in extended adoptive families – to an extent we never did before.

Not to stop there, we also have the internet radically changing adoption practice, a reality that is almost completely unaddressed in today's policy, practice and parenting worlds. And 90% of new infant adoptions are open to some degree.

So we have to ask, "Do we have the right system in place to address all of these radically changed realities?" Unfortunately, the answer to that is, "No." Which is why I started NCAP and why I think its mission is so important. ...

We have to move from a system that is still fundamentally about "child placement" – i.e. whether that's reunification with the family of origin or placement with a foster, kin, guardianship or adoptive family – to a new paradigm with a bigger goal. The old metric was "did we find them a home?" Arguably this might have been the right one many years ago, but today if our objective is primarily to find "safe, loving and permanent families," we are not genuinely serving the children we say we are. Why? Because we form tens of thousands of families every year that are "safe, loving and permanent," but for whom life is a struggle every day – at best – because they do not receive the education, resources, supports and services they need to address the needs of their children.

ATN: So what is the answer?

Pertman: The model has to change, beginning with acknowledgement of the reality that what we're doing was designed for a population that simply no longer exists. The explicit goal, rather than child placement – which is still an essential part of the picture – has to be enabling families to *succeed*. So that is NCAP's mission: to move policy and practice, as well as the conversation, to a point where we agree that every child deserves to live in a "safe, loving, permanent and *successful* family." We need to evolve to a "Family Success Model," in which all the things we know are so vital – education, resources, supports, etc. – aren't add-ons that are optional or can be subtracted, but are integral, inseparable parts of the system.

ATN: We at ATN work daily with families who are raising children from the system who have some level of early life trauma. Thus, I have to ask what role does the current significant research regarding the effects of early toxic stress play in this paradigm shift?

Pertman: A big one. We now know there is "little 't' trauma" and "big 'T' trauma" – and many gradations in-between. This illustrates exactly why we need the Family Success Model and why placement in and of itself is not enough. We must as a society and system take this into consideration, especially since the big majority of adoptions today are from foster care. We have a responsibility to these children, having removed them from their homes with the promise that their lives would get better, to fulfill this promise.

But a life isn't just going to get better just by moving a child from one place to a better place, unless we understand the experiences the child has had and their impact. If we are not dealing with that impact, all we are doing is saying, "This child, who was having trouble in one place, might have a little less trouble in another place." If that's all society thinks it's responsibility is, we are really failing.





Instead, the Family Success Model says, “We are going to figure out what the issues are and what the needs are to enable that child and that family to succeed – whatever that may mean in a specific circumstance – and that’s what we’re going to deliver. We know there is not a one size fits all but, if we don’t give kids and families the wherewithal to deal with their issues, then many simply won’t. And that means it’s not going to be better. We must recognize that at some level.

ATN: Is this where post-adoption services and parent training come in?

Pertman: Yes, but not just that. First let me say, there’s real progress in the field on these things. Second, this is not to say that post-adoption services and training for parents aren’t critical, because they are. But the training and services are erratic and spotty around the country, both in availability and quality, and they are too often treated as one-offs rather than a continuum of supports and services from the start and into the future. So, unless we shift at a systemic level in both policy and practice, we’ll simply have a patchwork system that helps far too few people. ...

That won’t be easy; I know that. The first step is eminently possible, though, and it’s the way you start almost any significant social movement. It’s to change the conversation. Everybody – and I mean everybody – literally needs to stop saying just that, “every child deserves to be in a safe, loving and permanent family.” If that’s our goal, we know how to meet it and we have metrics to show that. But it is relegating tens of thousands of kids and families a year to really tough lives.

So we – meaning professionals, parents, policy-makers, everybody – need to say instead that “every child deserves to be in a safe, loving, permanent and *successful* family.” At the same time, at every level, systemically, let’s start looking at how we shape our budgets, conduct our trainings and allot our resources so that they’re in keeping with a Family Success Model. Otherwise, it will take forever

to do it
agency
by
agency,
state by state.

ATN: So what do you mean by *success*?

Pertman: I have two answers to that. First, all of those adjectives – safe, permanent and loving – are aspirational. So let’s aspire to something more. Second, when someone asks me what “success” means, I reply: “Finally, you’re asking the right question!” Once we identify it as the goal, we can start defining it, which will mean something different depending on the institution, the child, the family. But it is a different goal than just patting ourselves on the back because 50,000 kids moved out of foster care last year. That doesn’t really tell us what we need to know, and it doesn’t absolve us of the responsibility to give them a real shot in life. ...

When the objective is primarily or even exclusively child placement, the metrics show we’ve done our job every time a child – for instance – is formally adopted. But too many of those families break apart and many more struggle every day because they didn’t get the in-depth trauma training that they needed, or didn’t get some other education or service. We did place the child in a “safe, permanent and loving family,” right? End of story. We’ve done our job. But I bet that child and that family don’t think so.

We also have to acknowledge that our work doesn’t stop at step one, placement in a “safe, loving and permanent family.” This is just the beginning. And once you have a paradigm shift to include “success,” as I said earlier, you look at your budget differently; you look at your training differently, right? So for example, to ATN’s work, families are going to have to have some training in the effects of trauma if the child and family are going to have an honest chance of success.





Everything from the word “go” should be a step toward that successful family goal. It is not just post-adoption services. It is about everything - the training they receive, the education they receive, the supports and services they receive. This will mean different things for different situations. And by the way, it means we probably have to create some new, different and consistently applied services if success is going to be our goal.

Jane: So how do we accomplish this? Getting the word out, changing the conversation?

Pertman: We do it at every level. This is not an overnight phenomenon. The bottom line answer is that it has to be a movement that builds – your organization, ATN, every organization, every state. NCAP is built to do exactly this: provide the wherewithal for professionals, families and policy-makers to “get it” and then do it. Over time, NCAP’s mission is to help achieve this change every level. ...

Again, I give full credit to everyone making real progress. For example, CASE in Maryland is developing an online program for training mental health professionals to serve our families better. Harmony in Tennessee is holding conferences and doing other work related to this issue. Aspiranet in California is working with a comprehensive model. These and others are all important component parts to moving the conversation forward. But it can’t just remain this way – with some doing and some not doing – because then the success of every child and family will be dependent on where they happen to live or what agency they happen to use.

ATN: Any final thoughts?

Pertman: Just what I have been sharing. We need to reassess the system we are using and ask ourselves if

it’s the right one for today. It might or might not have been the right one up to now, but with all the differences I described earlier – from a changing population of children and families, to issues like trauma, to the role of the internet – it’s clearly not the right one any longer. I think most of us who work in this field really know that. Now, for the sake of the children and families we promise to serve, it’s past time to do something about it. So that they, and we, can be genuinely successful.

Adam Pertman, is one of the most highly regarded experts, authors and keynoters in the field of adoption and foster care. He served as the chief executive of the Donaldson Adoption Institute for over a decade. Pertman also served as Associate Editor of the scholarly journal *Adoption Quarterly* and is a widely published author, including of the new edition of his classic book *Adoption Nation*, which has been reviewed as “the most important book ever written on the subject.” Previously, he distinguished himself for over 20 years as a senior reporter and editor with the *Boston Globe*, where he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his writing about adoption.



Jane Samuel, JD is Communications Director for ATN. She is married and the mother of three daughters. A former litigator, she splits her time between ATN board duties; writing and speaking on adoption and early life trauma; and caring for her family. Her work has appeared in various publications including the *Singapore American Newspaper*, *Adoption Today Magazine*, *The Lexington Herald Leader* and several motherhood and adoption anthologies.



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