

A look at post-adoption services

By Beth Drinnen

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“Adoption begins the healing journey,” Pam Wolfe, founder and executive director of Harmony Adoptions in Maryville, said with a smile. “Adoptive families need a lot of support along the way.”

Whether a child is adopted through a private domestic adoption, internationally, or through the child welfare system, post-adoption services provide instruction, encouragement and, perhaps most importantly, support for not only the child, but the entire family.

“The face of adoption is changing,” Wolfe said. Michael Yates, director of permanency with Harmony, agreed. “The old face was: a family’s identified, our job is done,” he said. “Well, it’s changing to a family’s identified, now we need to prepare them.” Wolfe leaned forward and nodded in agreement. “Now,” she said, “our job begins.”

Harmony Adoptions provides services for domestic, international and child welfare adoptions. They use Adoption Support and Preservation (ASAP), a program funded by the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, as its post-adoption program.

ASAP provides weekly in-home visits from qualified therapists to help families with the issues often associated with the adoption transition. It typically lasts around six months.

“It is a free, state-funded service for families who adopted through the state of Tennessee,” explained Yates. Families who adopted through private domestic or international adoptions can also participate in the program. “There is a sliding scale fee structure if it is an international or private adoption,” he added. “We feel it is very nominal. All those families can benefit from this service, but the families that receive it at no cost are the Department of Children’s Services (DCS) families.”

For the families that have taken advantage of the ASAP program, it's making a huge difference.

"The national disruption rate is from 15 to 25 percent," said Wolfe. Disruption refers to the number of children who, because of incompatibilities, are forced to leave their adoptive families. "The disruption rate of the families we work with is less than 1 percent."

Nichole Young, regional director for child placement agency OmniVisions, works exclusively with children in state custody. OmniVisions refers to Harmony for its post-adoption services.

"A lot of times the kids are dealing with attachment issues. They are dealing with grief and loss. On one hand they are very excited to become a part of this new family ... and there's also that sense of loss that they're having to leave another family behind. (These services) help them through that process."

Bethany Christian Services of East Tennessee is a private agency that handles domestic and international adoptions.

"For domestic adoptions with infants we are required by the state to do supervisory visits for the first six months," said Terri Bowles, director of Bethany Christian Services of East Tennessee. "We go into the home three times during that time, and we do telephone visits, in the beginning, on a weekly basis."

Bowles stressed that the goal with Bethany's post-adoption program is not to overwhelm the new family. It is simply to provide support.

"A lot of families think that we are coming in to see whether they are doing a good job or to decide whether we are going to leave the child there," said Bowles. "Of course, we are looking at how the adjustment is going, and we're asking questions about that ... but we're really there as a presence to say, 'We're here, we care, and we want to make ourselves available.' I just think that it's important, regardless of whether it's a state, another agency, whatever, that we're allowing parents to feel comfortable enough if there are any issues that they feel they can ... get some help."

An agency may see a child for six months post-adoption, and again, months or years later, as adoption-related issues arise. For that reason, post-adoption services are constantly evolving.

Wolfe wants to create the Harmony Family Center, a residential camp where families can come and do some really intense work, play together, and continue to forge that attachment, she said. “We’ve also started an equine therapy program which makes a tremendous difference in these kids.”

Bowles said that Bethany Christian Services hopes to continue to develop their post-adoption services as well.

“We eventually want to have a therapist on staff who specializes in adoption-related issues,” she said. “We’ve talked with Holston Home about partnering with them collaboratively to fund a therapist who specializes in those services. We feel like that would meet a tremendous need.”

Regardless of how it comes about, creating a family is “kind of a gamble,” admitted Young. “Kids are kids. We’re all human. When it comes right down to it — whether you adopt overseas, or have your own biological child, or you adopt domestically, or through DCS — it’s a learning process for everybody involved,” she said with a laugh. “We just try to prepare our folks to commit to that, and to know that it’s going to be a lifelong journey.”

To find out more, contact the agency at <http://www.harmonyadoptions.org/> or 865-982-5225.

Bethany Christian Services of East Tennessee offers a support group for adoptive moms the first Thursday of every month at 7 p.m. It is open to the public. E-mail Kathy Parnell at dnkparnell@comcast.net.

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