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Adopter Training – An Essential Premise for Successful Adoption

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Abstract: The present research aims to argue the need to train adults involved in the adoption process, so that each of the actors involved in this process to achieve optimal success - applicants for adoption to become parents, the child / children to find their permanent family, and specialists to follow the stages the adoption and post-adoption process as efficiently as possible.
Adoption, although it has all the peculiarities of a classical family, is rather a transitional institution that creates a family different from the traditional biological family, serving a dual purpose, that of first offering a home to a child and then offering parents a child. The complexity of this process makes some applicants for adoption either delay the submission of an application for adoption or give up during the process facing a tumult of rules that become contradictory and create difficulties for them.
Between 2018-2021, research was conducted that included 120 candidates for adoption, who were trained according to a new curriculum, and as research methods were used semi-structured interview and psychological training. As result were strengthened the parenting knowledge and skills of least 120 adoptive parents (60 couples) for 18 months and as a consequence was updated the training curriculum for potential national adopters to increase the success of adoption.

Keywords: *adoption, psychological training, adopter, parent, child.*

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1. Introduction

People who want to adopt a child, being adults, are subjected to a much more complex process in becoming a parent - starting with the internal conflict in the decision to adopt, restructuring their image as a future adoptive parent, but also by going through complex evaluations from a social, psychological and legal point of view, ending with internal conflicts regarding one's own parental capacity and with a continuous process of growth and development of the child that brings with it major changes, on the one hand natural for any parent, on the other hand special by the phenomenon of adoption. The complexity of this process makes some applicants for adoption either delay the submission of an application for adoption or give up during the process facing a tumult of rules that become contradictory and create difficulties for them.

Statistical data from the Republic of Moldova show that in January of 1, 2020, 8.3 percent of the total number of children separated from their parents (41,817 children) was represented by those left without parental care. 3483 children left without parental care, only 143 were, in December 2019, between 0 and 2 years, 597 - 3-6 years, the vast majority (2153) - between 7 and 15 years, and 590 - between 16 and 17 years. At the end of 2019, the National Register of Adoptions totaled 346 adopters (308 national and 38 international) registered. However, only 87 children were adopted during the same year (79 - by citizens of the Republic of Moldova living in Moldova, 1 - by citizens of the Republic of Moldova living abroad and 7 children - by foreign nationals). Only 27 adopters (1 national and 26 international) expressed their willingness to adopt children with special needs, including those over 7 years old (Annual reports of MLSP, 2020).

The legal regime of adoption in the Republic of Moldova is regulated by Law 99, adopted on May 28, 2010. In 2013, 2017 and 2018, some articles of the law were amended, and most changes and adjustments were made in 2020, 10 years after the approval of the law, the changes being based on the country's experience in its implementation. In this regard, one of the important changes was the procedure for assessing the moral guarantees and material conditions of applicants for adoption.

According to the Regulation on the procedure for assessing the moral guarantees and material conditions of applicants for adoption, the stages of the evaluation procedure are:

1. completion of the social survey (annex no. 1 of Law 99);

2. preparation of applicants for adoption according to the Training Curriculum and course support (annex no. 2 and no. 3 of Law 99);
3. psycho-social evaluation of the applicants for adoption (according to annex no. 4).

2. Methodology

Thus, the problem statement consists in the fact that people who go for adoption face a lack of information both from a legal and a psychological point of view. This causes them to become confused about what they want in terms of adoption, whether they really want to adopt, what the adoption process entails, and what happens after adoption. This can be confirmed both by the research carried out abroad until now in Romania (Bejenaru A., 2011; Munteanu A., 2012), and by the answers received in the present study, which will be shown in the research results section.

The purpose of the study consists in determining the factors that contribute to the success of the adoption, with specific emphasis on the conditions of the Republic of Moldova.

Objectives:

- Analysis of the theoretical framework of the successful adoption concept;
- Selection of the representative sample for the research;
- Applying the semi-structured interview to assess the psychological and social conflicts of the applicants for adoption;
- Development and implementation of a new psycho-social training program for the applicants for adoption;
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the program of psycho-social training program of the applicants for adoption.

Hypothesis: The implementation of a training program in the preparation of applicants for adoption contributes to the increase of the adoption success rate***.***

As **research methods** we used: a semi-structured interview and psychological training.

Participants: 60 couples, respectively 120 subjects who are in the adoption process.

The study participants were selected through the "Aware and responsible fathers for a non-violent generation" project, which was implemented between 01.01.2020 and 06.30.2021, by the Moldovan Branch of the Amici dei Bambini Association (Ai.Bi. Moldova), in partnership with the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova. The aim of the project was to promote a non-violent environment for raising and educating children by adequately involving fathers in family life and offering support to adoptive families, in which children who have suffered the trauma of abandonment and neglect are integrated, as they have difficulties in developing a secure and lasting attachment and require special attention from both parents.

Thus, in the first phase of the research the applicants were selected based on two main eligibility criteria: to form a couple of at least 3 years and they should not be biological parents.

Then the study participants were selected according to the requests for adoption through the Family and Child Social Assistance Directorates and participants gave their informed consent for participating in the study.

Also, since we intended the study to uniformly cover several localities on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, people from 11 districts (from the north, center and south of the Republic of Moldova) participated in the study, both from rural and urban areas. The participant couples come from the following districts: Briceni - couples, Donduseni - 2 couples, Edinet - 6 couples, Chisinau - 5 couples, Criuleni - 12 couples, Hincesti - 13 couples, Ialoveni - 8 couples, Straseni - 4 couples, Leova– 2 couples, Causeni– 4 couples, Cahul – 2 couples.

Please see the map of R. Moldova bellow for a better visualization of the participants distribution:



Figure 1. Representation of the geographical location of the couples selected for research.
Source: Authors' own conception

3. a. RESULTS after interviews

The *semi-structured interview* referred to the following:

- The couple's history
- Family lifestyle
- Motivation to adopt
- The desired / "dreamed" child
- Adoption expectations / hopes
- The agreement of the two for adoption and the characteristics of the child / children
- The attitude of the relatives and society towards the fact that the couple has chosen to adopt
- Fears about parenting an adopted child.

The psychological training followed the model of the new Curriculum[1] for training applicants for adoption (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2010).

The following results were obtained after the *analysis of the semi-structured interviews* of the participants:

a. General profile of applicants for adoption:

- Average age: Men - 42.2 years; Women - 38.4 years.
- Marriage period: 14.2 years.
- Education: incomplete and specialized backgrounds – Men - 67%, Women - 67%; higher education - Men - 33%; Women - 33%. As a remark, only in 10% of couples, both partners have higher education, otherwise - only one of the spouses.
- Lifestyle: 93% of couples - both spouses were employed; 7% - one of the spouses works, the other being a housewife (mostly women).
- Holidays and free time: 84% of couples have a habit of going on holiday abroad; 16% of couples either cannot afford it or prefer to make other investments and spend time with relatives.

b. Motivation for adoption:

- People in a second marriage (biologically healthy) who want a common child - 18%.
- Diagnosis of infertility in one of the spouses - 16%.
- Early onset menopause - 7%.
- They feel too alone in the relationship and are about to retire (family of military personnel who retire earlier) - 7%.
- Without a clear diagnosis, but with at least 1 in vitro fertilization test - 36%.
- Lost or ectopic pregnancies, resulting in the removal of the organs of the reproductive system - 16%.

[1] The new Curriculum refers to an updated version of the Curriculum for the preparation of applicants for adoption, developed in 2010, with the adoption of Law 99 on the legal regime of adoption. In 2020, several amendments to the law were adopted that can be viewed on https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=123104&lang=ro#, including a newversion of thegiven Curriculum.

c. The desired / "dreamed" child. Most adopters want to adopt only one child, who has no other brothers or sisters. The complete results are presented in table 1.

Table 1. The desired / "dreamed" child for adopters

One child	60%
A couple of siblings	18%
One child or a couple of siblings	22%

Source: Author's own conception

d. The age of the desired child should be under 5 years (Table 2).

Table 2. The age of the desired child for adopters

Child between 0-3 years	20%
Child between 1-4 years	20%
Child between 2-5 years	26%
Child between 3-7 years	16%
Child between 6-10 years	13%
Child older than 10 years	5%

Source: Author's own conception

e. In preferences of the ***sex of the desired child*****,** the adopters prefer girls – 22% compared to boys – 8%.

Table 3. The sex of the desired child for adopters

Boy	8%
Girl	22%
Boy/girl	70%

Source: Author's own conception

We can also mention the fact that 35% of couples started the adoption children already living in their family due to the following reasons:

- Couples were professional parental assistants; they have attached themselves to the child and the child has received adoptability status;
- Couples were taken care of the children of relatives who have either died or been deprived of parental rights;
- Children were met „by chance" (during charity visits at foster homes, or couple became tutors of children in need), so that later the family could take them into custody and reach adoption.

f. As *adoption expectations / hopes* applicants mentioned:

"Life will have more meaning, more color",

"We need to know that we live for someone and not just ourselves",

"We want to invest in a child who could grow up, get an education and become a good person in life".

g. The agreement of adopting couple members regarding for adoption and the characteristics (age, sex) of the child / children - 100%.

h. The attitude of relatives and society towards the fact that the couple is moving towards adoption- positive and supportive.

***i. Fears about parenting an adopted child*:**

- Children could repeat patterns of drug or alcohol addiction of their biological parents;
- Children might have severe diseases;
- Children might, at some point, start searching their biological family and leave the adoptive one.

3.b. RESULTS after psychological training

The implementation of the New Adoption Applicant Curriculum took place between 2018-2020, when all 120 study participants received training according to the new version of the adoption applicant training curriculum. The reformulated curriculum is based on the recommendations brought to the Policy Directorate for the Protection of Children's Rights and Families with Children within the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection by the Amici dei Bambini Moldova organization after 10 years of experience in preparing applicants for adoption.

Thus, one of the changes made was the number of hours, which almost doubled from 8 to 15 hours of training. The second important update consisted in adjusting the content of the training by considering the needs of the applicants.

Refer to Table 4 for the content of the Curriculum.

Table 4. Items of the Curriculum for the preparation of applicants for adoption

Nr.	Units	Nr. of hours
1	Adoption in the view of applicants. Adoption principles and concepts set out in international conventions.	1h 30 min
2	National legal framework governing adoption in the Republic of Moldova. National adoption procedure.	3 h
3	Awareness of the role of adoptive parent. Questions for children about adoption and their approach by adopters.	3
4	Support of the adoptive parent.	1 h
	The quality of the child-adoptive parent relationship. Daily challenges in building and maintaining the parent-adoptive child relationship.	3 h
5	Aspects of matching of adopters with the child and availability for adoption.	3 h 30 min
	Total	15 h

Source: Author's own conception

Table 5. Example of a session conducted according to the Curriculum

III. Awareness of the role of adoptive parent.
Children's questions about adoption and how they are addressed by adopters.

Children find in the family the most favorable environment for their formation and development, as a family provides them both physical and mental safety in any period of life.

The session proposes a broad description of what we call the awareness of adoptive parent role. The fact that adoption carries a certain specificity and although the adopted child is no different from a biological child, makes necessary to take into account some particularities that leave their mark on the development of the relationship adoptive parent-child.

Thus, the given session is based on role play, which is intended to prepare the future parent for some delicate questions of the adopted child. The participant is trained regarding the correct attitude towards adoption and towards the child with whom he/she was matched.

The session puts a special emphasis on creating trust relationship with the newly arrived child in the family and on empathizing with his/her psychological states. The trainer is offering guidance on how to best answer to a child's questions.

Objectives	Content
After reading the content, potential adopters will be able to: • *to determine their own vision on adoption;* • *to express opinions on the appropriate age of disclosure of adoption information to the child;* • *to determine the inappropriate periods for disclosing the child information about adoption* • *to recognize the stages of the adoptive family;* • *to explain the child's level of understanding at different age stages;* • *to argue the specifics of hereditary transmission and the child's behavior;* • *to adopt correct attitudes towards the child's past;* • *to evaluate the legislative framework regarding adoption confidentiality;* • *to analyze attitudes towards the child's unknown past. .*	1. Adoption in the view of the applicant. - Perception of the adoption by the applicant. - The right attitude towards oneself as an adoptive parent. - Society's attitude towards adoption. - "The Secret of Adoption". - Appropriate time/age of disclosure of adoption information to the child. 2. Creation of the parent-adoptive child relationship - Stages of the adoptive family. - The development of the child and his/her degree of understanding of his/her own needs. - Hereditary transmission and the behavior of the adopted child. - The existence of "two mothers". - The past of the child and the biological parents. - The legislative framework regarding the confidentiality of adoption (art. 46, p. 2). - Attitudes towards the unknown past of the adopted child.

Source: Author's own conception

Following the applicant preparation training, data was collected from the applicants through a questionnaire tracking the psychological state of the participants.

The analysis of the questionnaire answers provided the following results:

a. Attitude towards adoption:

- The participants changed their attitude towards adoption from an altruistic one "we want to do good to a child left without parental care", to a realistic one "I understood that adoption is a noble act, but rather it means

responsibility for a life of child than the fact that we want to "do good"/"Adoption does not mean good".

- Also, following the training, an assumption of one's own trauma can be observed "it is not the child's fault that we cannot have biological children", "just as we have the tragedies of our lives, so the adopted child comes with his tragedy and he/ she is the one who needs help more than us".

a. Attitude towards the desired/"dreamed" child:

In table 6, the responses of the training participants regarding the age of the child they would like to adopt were calculated. Thus, we noticed after the training the age of the desired child was above 3 years old. The largest category of participants wanted to adopt children between 3-5 years old. It was noticed that in the case the adopters matched a couple of siblings, they preferred that at least one of the children to be younger than 5 and the second (or third) of the siblings could have practically any age. We also noticed that the degree of acceptance of adopting children over 5 also increased – more than 20%.

Table 6. The age of the desired child for adopters after training

Child between 0-3 years	5%
Child between 3-5 years	66%
Child between 5-7 years	20%
Child older than 7 years	9%

Source: Author's own conception

Table 7 reveals the fact that after receiving training the participants were more prone to adopt in a broader category comprising either one child or a couple of siblings. It turned out that couples with the idea of adopting more than one child, are ready to adopt 3 children as well.

Table 7. The desired / "dreamed" child for adopters

One child	20%
A couple of siblings **or more**	20%
One child or a couple of siblings	60%

Source: Author's own conception

With regard to the gender of the children, the situation does not change radically following the training, girls still being preferred over boys being rather a personal motivation of the couple "in our family only girls are

raised and we know how to we're raising girls" / "I've always wanted a girl and I keep dreaming about this" / "We have a lost child who was a boy and we don't want to overlap with the loss" etc.

It should be mentioned that the application for adoption does not imply that the preference for a certain sex of the child is seen as discriminatory, on the contrary, the desire of an applicant to offer the most suitable resource is supported.

Table 8. The sex of the desired child for adopters

Boy	6%
Girl	16%
Boy/girl	78%

Source: Author's own conception

a. Expectations regarding adoption have changed from romantic "it's nice to adopt a baby and have a complete family" to realistic ones adapted to the objective features of the children. On the other hand, by overcoming difficulties and fears, adopting a child became a more optimistic process. Thus, the participants mentioned the following:

- "No one can change the child's past and we must accept it as it is";
- "If we set out on this path, we are sure we will manage";
- "Now we know that we can call on specialists in case of need and we would like to work with the psychologist in case the child has a behavior problem and I think we will also need a psychologist to understand him better";
- „Although we used to think that if we love a child that solves all problems, now we understand that love is not enough and the child will need continuous support, security and a lot of emotional investment that we must be ready to provide in time".

To be mentioned that the training the training used real data on the situation of adoptable children from the Republic of Moldova, the number of existing applicants and the procedure specific to Moldova offered through the official website of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection (n.d.).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research confirmed our assumptions and the results were in line with the accepted literature trends. What we could observe following the implementation of the formative training of potential adopters is the great need to inform parents about the implications of the children age, of the

time they spent in the protection system and the type and quality of social protection that the children have benefited from, in order to create correct expectations (Groza & Ileana, 2007). By receiving structured information, the parents do not become discouraged to adopt certain categories of children (Bejenaru, 2011). On the contrary, through the training parents understand the way the children adapt to new social conditions, given that they encounter a favorable environment for development, prepared to meet their needs (Munteanu, 2013; Bosco-Ruggiero et al., 2014).

Thus, as conclusions we can issue the following:

- Psychological training and legal assistance contributed to the success of adoption by clarifying the stages of adoption and the detailed steps to be followed. The myths and misconceptions about the adoption process were clarified by offering structured information about the number and characteristics of the adoptable children in the country and about their adopter statute. By understanding the process, the adopters started to be more confident in the decision of adopting a child and in their role as parents.
- Following the training, adopters got a clarification of their own needs and higher awareness of their own capacities for adoption;
- Following training, applicants' internal conflicts in adoption decreased and confidence in parenting skills increased;
- There was a more effective relationship between applicants for adoption and authorities, this coming as feed-back from the territorial authorities.

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