

Unknowns of adoption

Lack of disclosure about children's problems and lack of help often lead to trouble.

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Published October 25, 2007

Many parents think that when they adopt, a stable home and love is all a child needs.

But in reality, that's not always enough.

On the surface, Pinellas School Board member Nancy Bostock's decision to give up custody of her troubled son seemed like an extreme case. However, child advocates say it happens more than you might think.

Adoptive parents faced with challenging children and limited support services often reach the heart-wrenching conclusion to give up custody of their kids.

The state doesn't track the number of adoptions that fail, but experts say as many as 15 percent involving special needs children in foster care don't work out.

"A lot of parents don't necessarily want to dissolve their rights," said Loryn Smith, a social worker with Camelot Community Care, a nonprofit child welfare organization. "But they realize they can't have the child in their home and be safe."

Social workers and child advocates cite three common factors for failed adoptions: overly optimistic parents, incomplete disclosure about the child's history by foster care workers and a lack of support services for parents. Bostock, who went public Monday with the problems she faced with her 11-year-old son, said she relinquished custody of him because she feared for her family's safety but also so he could receive the mental health care she could not afford.

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Jason and Kelly Delph couldn't have children of their own but wanted to open their home to needy kids.

Six years ago, they adopted three siblings. They attended a 30-hour training course on what to expect, but nothing could prepare them for the disabilities that their children would eventually display.

"It was one of those things where we thought, 'We're going to raise them, so how could there possibly be anything wrong?'" she said. "We figured we could fix any problem they had. We were sadly mistaken."

Their oldest, a 9-year-old girl, has autism. Her 7-year-old sister and 6-year-old brother are both mentally retarded.

The Delphs eventually conceived and now have a 4-year-old biological daughter.

Inside the kitchen of the couple's Tarpon Springs home, charts hang on the kitchen cabinets outlining the youngsters' daily routines: 1. Wake up. 2. Eat breakfast/take medication 3. Get dressed.

"Our house is virtually a therapy center," said Kelly, 35, a trained certified nursing assistant who has opted to stay home to care for the children. "We don't have a dining room."

Kelly Delph and her husband, a technician for Verizon, said they have spent tens of thousands of dollars on treatment, which they say the children's Medicaid benefits won't cover. Social Security benefits were denied, and they are on a waiting list behind thousands of parents for services to help the children.

"I have a child hitting me, biting me, pulling my hair," said Kelly, sporting a visible bite mark on her arm from her son.

Asking more questions and entering the adoption process with open eyes could cut down on adoption reversals, said Debbie Swearingen, a counselor for the Adoption Preservation Program at Manatee Glens, a not-for-profit health care provider.

"Parents need to not be afraid to ask the questions," Swearingen said. "When they adopt, they need to know this adoption is like having a birth baby, and we don't give up our birth babies."

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But there are times when even the most thorough list of questions won't help.

This week, a judge awarded a Palm Beach couple \$10-million because the state didn't disclose information about the abuse their three boys suffered before they were adopted out of the foster care system.

During their early years the boys had been raped and beaten repeatedly by abusive foster parents. The couple had requested that the children they adopted not be at risk for molesting other children because they had a younger son. Over the years the adopted boys molested classmates, attempted suicide and attacked their family. The family knew little of their past.

The Delphs said they, too, got little information on their children's background before adopting. They knew the kids were neglected, but the severity of their disabilities wasn't evident.

Last year, Andrea Moore, executive director for Florida's Children First, unsuccessfully pushed legislation that would have required the state to provide full backgrounds on children.

"The adoptive family is given very little info," Moore said. "And by the time they figure things out, the typical family has begun loving the child."

It's important for parents to have the full picture. Kids who have been raped may be more likely to sexually abuse younger children. Kids who are beaten could become violent.

Officials with the Department of Children and Families said the agency works to be as transparent as possible, but the information they have doesn't always provide clues to the child's final outcome, said Al Zimmerman, the department press secretary.

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The state's foster care system was revamped more than 20 years ago to make adoptions a higher priority. But support services have yet to catch up.

"Along with the push to get adoptions, there wasn't the safety net to make sure these adoptions stay intact," said Renee Walker, a social worker for the Sylvia Thomas Center for Foster and Adoptive Families in Brandon.

When Walker meets a family in need, it's often hard to find a therapist equipped to serve them.

"These children have a lot of attachment issues or suffer from post traumatic issues," said Walker, whose center's staff of two serves 200 clients a year.

When problems get beyond outpatient therapy help, Walker works to find longer term residential treatment. To get long-term care a parent must often relinquish rights.

To do so, a parent must legally abandon a child. If the court accepts the request, the parent may be criminally investigated. A biological parent also can relinquish parental rights. If the child is placed in foster care, a parent could be forced to pay child support.

"It's a really, really bad option, but it's the best option I have," Bostock said Wednesday. "We need to change Florida laws, so that other families in this situation can access help without having to consent to abandonment when they're just trying to support their child."

Kelly Delph said she hopes it's a choice she never has to make.

"I want to get the help for my children now."

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FAST FACTS: Where to get help

* Sylvia Thomas Center for Foster and Adoptive Families, 716 S Oakwood Ave., Brandon. (813) 651-3150. Adoption dissolution information session at 6:30 p.m. Nov. 15. Call to register.

* Attachment & Trauma Network, www.radzebra.org (<http://www.radzebra.org/>) or (785) 624-6364.

* Florida's Children First, a nonprofit legal service group that advocates for at-risk children: floridaschildrenfirst.org (<http://floridaschildrenfirst.org/>) or (954) 796-0860.

* Safe Children's Coalition, which oversees foster care in Pinellas and Pasco counties, provides support to adoptive families as well. Visit www.sarasota-ymca.org/socialServices/safeChildrenCoalition.cfm (<http://www.sarasota-ymca.org/socialServices/safeChildrenCoalition.cfm>) or call 1-866-661-5656.