



## BUILDING ATTACHMENT IN ADOPTIVE FAMILIES: A RESEARCH ON ITALIAN ADOPTIVE PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

di

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### *Psychological and Social Implications of Adoption: The Italian Context*

#### *Introduction*

Adoption is a legal institution that allows the creation of a parental bond between a minor declared abandoned and an adult or couple with no biological ties to the child. It is a voluntary and complex choice, an “adoption pact” that aims to satisfy the child’s need for a stable educational, socio-economic and emotional environment, as well as the couple’s desire to become parents. Over time, adoption evolved from a means of ensuring family lineage to an act of mutual love and care. Today, adoption is seen as a choice driven by the desire to welcome and care for a child and provide a stable and loving family environment<sup>1</sup>.

Italian Law No. 184/83, amended by Laws 476/98 and 149/2001, established the following criteria for adoption.

1. *State of abandonment of the minor*: The child must be declared abandoned, which means deprived of moral and material support from parents or relatives. This condition is verified by the Juvenile Court, which evaluates a minor’s situation to determine whether he or she is adoptable<sup>2</sup>.

2. *Suitability of spouses*: The spouses must have been married for at least three years (or have lived together for three years prior to marriage). This requirement ensures the stability of the couple, and increases the likelihood of successful adoption<sup>3</sup>.

3. *Additional requirements*: There are age requirements (a minimum of 18 years and a maximum of 45/55 years between adopters and adoptees, with exceptions for sibling adoptions or when the couple already has children).

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<sup>1</sup> Brodzinsky et al., 1998.

<sup>2</sup> L. 184/83, Art. 8.

<sup>3</sup> L. 184/83, Art. 6.

These requirements ensure an appropriate age difference between parents and adopted children, which promotes balanced growth<sup>4</sup>.

4. *Evaluation of suitability*: Juvenile courts and social services evaluate a couple's ability to raise and educate a child. This evaluation includes interviews, family history, and psychological testing in some cases. The goal is to ensure that the child is placed in an appropriate family environment and that parents can meet their child's material, emotional, and psychological needs<sup>5</sup>.

Law No. 149/2001 emphasizes the right of the child to adoption and guarantees his or her right to be heard and to give his or her consent<sup>6</sup>. Adopted children often experience abandonment, which can be "primary" (from birth) or "secondary" (removal due to unfit parents). This trauma can affect their adjustment to the new family and lead to emotional challenges, such as trust issues, behavioral problems, and developmental delays<sup>7</sup>. Adoptive parents need to be aware of these potential difficulties and be prepared to provide the necessary support, possibly with the help of professionals such as psychologists and psychotherapists<sup>8</sup>.

Foster care differs from adoption, in that a family temporarily takes on a child in need. The goal is to support the child and provide appropriate care with the hope of eventually returning the child to his or her birth family. If this is not possible, the child may be declared adoptable, and the foster family may prioritize the adoption process<sup>9</sup>. Foster care allows a child to experience a stable and loving family environment, while efforts are made to resolve issues in the birth family. It can be a positive experience for both the child and the foster family, but it requires significant commitment and awareness that the child may return to his or her birth family<sup>10</sup>.

Couples can choose between domestic and international adoption. National adoption involves Italian or foreign children declared adoptable in Italy, whereas international adoption involves foreign children adopted in their country of origin. Both paths present specific advantages and challenges. National adoption offers more information about a child's history and easier cultural integration but waiting times can be long due to the limited number of adoptable children<sup>11</sup>. In contrast, international adoption can be

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<sup>4</sup> L. 149/2001, Art. 6.

<sup>5</sup> L. 149/2001, Art. 4.

<sup>6</sup> L. 149/2001, Art. 5.

<sup>7</sup> McSherry & McAnee, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Dozier et al., 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Berrick, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Schofield & Beek, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Lovelock, 2000.

faster, but requires careful consideration of cultural and linguistic differences and a greater commitment to helping the child integrate into his or her new reality<sup>12</sup>.

The pre-adoption process begins with filing an adoption petition with a juvenile court. This step is followed by a thorough investigation of the couple's history, including interviews with social workers and psychologists, home visits, and document collection. This phase is critical in assessing the couple's suitability and preparing them for adoption by providing information about the challenges and responsibilities of adoption as well as the resources available to address potential difficulties<sup>13</sup>. In the case of international adoption, the couple selects an Authorized Agency to guide them through the process, including matching with a child, preparing for the meeting, traveling to the child's country of origin, and post-adoption support. Authorized Agencies play a fundamental role in facilitating the adoption process and ensuring the well-being of the child and adoptive family<sup>14</sup>.

### *Psychological Dimensions of Adoption*

Adoptive parents often carry the emotional burden of their child's abandonment, neglect, or trauma, which can lead to attachment problems, trust issues, behavioral difficulties, and challenges in identity development. John Bowlby's attachment theory<sup>15</sup> emphasizes the importance of early bonding experiences in shaping a child's emotional development. Therefore, adoptive parents must have the knowledge and skills necessary to provide a safe and nurturing environment that promotes healing and resilience. Seeking therapeutic support may also be beneficial in addressing their child's unique needs and fostering positive parent-child interactions.

In addition, it is important to recognize that adoptive parents also experience a wide range of emotions throughout the adoption process. Adoptive parents are characterized by their desire to become parents, and their motivations may be various, including infertility, a desire to help a child in need, or a desire to expand their family<sup>16</sup>. It is important to fully understand these motivations before beginning the adoption journey so that adoption is not seen as a solution to personal problems or as a second choice to biological parenthood. Adoptive parenting, like biological parenting, focuses on caring for a

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<sup>12</sup> Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> L. 184/83, Art. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Bartholet, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Bowlby, 1969.

<sup>16</sup> Brodzinsky et al., 1990.

child and supporting the child's development. However, adoption presents unique challenges, such as building an emotional bond with a child who has his or her own history and may have experienced traumatic events<sup>17</sup>. In particular, managing parental expectations is a major difficulty. Couples often idealize an imagined child, which may differ from the real child. Factors such as age, ethnicity, language, and personal history can influence parental perceptions and create unrealistic expectations. It is essential for the couple to be willing to accept the child's reality, including his or her hurts and diversity, in order to build a strong family bond<sup>18</sup>. This requires flexibility, open-mindedness, and the ability to adapt to the child's specific needs<sup>19</sup>.

Open communication, self-reflection, and seeking support from adoption professionals or support groups can be invaluable in navigating these emotional complexities. In this regard, Grotevant and McRoy highlight the importance of open communication and shared family narratives in fostering healthy adoptive family relationships<sup>20</sup>.

### *Social Implications*

Adoption has significant social implications beyond the individual child and family. It provokes debates about family formation and questions the nature of genetic versus social parenthood<sup>21</sup>. The decision to adopt is often met with varying degrees of acceptance and understanding, with some individuals and communities embracing adoption while others hold misconceptions or prejudices<sup>22</sup>. Families who adopt may face stereotypes or intrusive questions about their child's background, which can lead to additional stressors<sup>23</sup>.

In addition, the adoption process can be viewed through the lens of social justice. Children in need of families often come from marginalized backgrounds, and adoption can serve as a means to provide a stable and nurturing environment for them<sup>24</sup>. However, ethical concerns related to international adoption, such as fears of child trafficking and exploitation, require close scrutiny and adherence to ethical guidelines<sup>25</sup>. Organizations such as UNICEF advocate for prioritizing family preservation and domestic adoption whenever

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<sup>17</sup> Grotevant & McDermott, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Wrobel & Dillon, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Grotevant & McRoy, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Miall, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Wegar, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Bartholet, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Selman, 2009.

er possible, while ensuring that international adoptions are conducted ethically and transparently<sup>26</sup>.

### ***The Birth of the Adoptive Family: Attachment, Parenting, and the Post-Adoption Journey***

Bowlby's attachment theory significantly changed our understanding of emotional attachment by emphasizing a child's fundamental need for proximity to caregivers for survival and psychological growth<sup>27</sup>. Mary Ainsworth's "Strange Situation Procedure"<sup>28</sup> and subsequent refinements of attachment theory by Main and Solomon<sup>29</sup> furthered our understanding by identifying different attachment styles, including *secure attachment*, in which children feel safe and protected by their caregivers, confidently explore their environment, and seek comfort when needed; *insecure-avoidant attachment*, in which children appear overly independent and suppress emotions to avoid rejection; *insecure-resistant/ambivalent attachment*, characterized by clinginess and anger, reflecting a lack of confidence in the caregiver's reliability; and *disorganized attachment*, the most troubling style, often associated with trauma, which exhibits inconsistent and contradictory behaviors<sup>30</sup>.

These attachment styles are shaped by early experiences and form Internal Working Models (IWMs), which are mental representations of self, others, and relationships that guide future interactions and expectations<sup>31</sup>. In the context of adoption, IWMs can be modified by new positive experiences, providing an opportunity for the child to overcome past trauma and develop a secure attachment to the adoptive parents.

Adoption presents a new model of attachment that is particularly challenging for late adoptees (children adopted after the age of 12 months). These children may have experienced attachment disruptions that affect their emotional and relational development.

Howe classified adoption histories into three categories: *good start* (positive early experiences followed by negative ones), *bad start* (neglect, abuse, and abandonment from birth), and *institutional care* (lack of stable emotional attachments)<sup>32</sup>. Recognizing these different histories is critical for adoptive

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<sup>26</sup> UNICEF, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Bowlby, 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Ainsworth, 1970, 1979.

<sup>29</sup> Main & Solomon, 1986, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Commodari, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Bretherton & Munholland, 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Howe, 2001.

parents to understand their child's unique needs and tailor their parenting approach accordingly.

Effective adoptive parenting requires the cultivation of specific skills, as outlined by Dozier and colleagues<sup>33</sup>: Promoting *confidence in availability* involves being consistently present and responsive to the child's needs, both physically and emotionally, fostering a sense of security and trust. Demonstrating *reflective functioning* refers to the parent's ability to understand and respond to the child's internal emotional states, thoughts, and intentions, thereby helping the child make sense of his or her experiences<sup>34</sup>. Promoting *self-esteem and autonomy* involves providing encouragement, support, and opportunities for the child to develop a positive self-image and a sense of independence and competence. Fostering a *sense of family membership* involves creating a sense of belonging, shared identity, and connection within the family where the child feels valued and loved unconditionally<sup>35</sup>.

The decision to adopt is often motivated by a variety of factors, including infertility in one or both partners. Infertility can be a traumatic experience for couples, causing significant emotional distress. It is important to recognize that adoption should not be viewed solely as a solution to infertility, but rather as a conscious choice driven by the desire for parenthood<sup>36</sup>. Psychological counseling may be beneficial for couples to process the grief of infertility and to adequately prepare for the complexities of adoption.

Finally, the post-adoption period is a critical time for establishing attachment and facilitating the child's adjustment to the new family. Post-adoption support services, such as training programs, support groups, and individual or couples counseling, play an important role in helping parents meet challenges such as managing challenging behaviors, building trust, and addressing the child's unique history<sup>37</sup>. These services provide parents with the tools and knowledge to foster a healthy and resilient family environment that ensures the well-being and success of both the adopted child and the adoptive parents.

### ***An Empirical Exploration of Adoptive Parent Experiences in Italy***

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of adoptive parents in Italy. Using an online questionnaire developed by our

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<sup>33</sup> Dozier et al., 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Fonagy et al., 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Dozier et al., 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Brodzinsky et al., 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Barth & Berry, 1988.

research team, we explored the various aspects of the adoption process, ranging from pre-adoption concerns to post-adoption adjustments, with a particular focus on the social implications of adoption. Our intention was to address a gap in the adoption literature, which often focuses on the child, by emphasizing the perspective of the parents and their experiences.

### *Methodology*

The *Adoptive Parent Experience Questionnaire* was administered online to a sample of 22 adoptive parents recruited through dedicated Facebook groups and personal referrals. The survey consisted of 28 questions that explored various aspects of adoption experience.

- Parent and child demographics (gender, age, type of adoption, etc.)
- Emotions experienced during the waiting period (hope, happiness, anxiety, fear, etc.)
- Expectations for parenthood and the child (desire for an emotional bond, concerns about the child's health and well-being, etc.)
- Motivations behind the decision to adopt (desire for parenthood, altruism, infertility, etc.)
- Handling of the child's history (age and manner of telling the child about the adoption, child's reactions)
- Support received from family and social network (birth family, friends, work colleagues)
- Difficulties in achieving family balance and rethinking adoption decisions.

### *Key Findings*

Our research has shown that domestic adoption in Italy is particularly appealing to women, with 86.4% of respondents being women between the ages of 40 and 50. International adoptions (59.1%) outnumbered domestic adoptions (40.9%). A significant number of parents adopted a single child (77.3%), mostly infants (0-2 years) or pre-adolescents (7-12 years).

During the adoption process, the most commonly reported emotions were hope (77.3%), anxiety (45.5%), happiness (40.9%), and fear (22.7%), reflecting the mixed feelings and uncertainties inherent in this journey. Parents' primary goals were to establish a strong emotional bond with their child and provide a nurturing environment, while also addressing concerns about the child's health and potential adjustment difficulties.

The motivations for adoption proved to be multifaceted and complex, including a desire for parenthood, altruistic intentions, and personal experi-

ences of infertility or miscarriage. Notably, a near-unanimous majority of parents (95.5%) openly disclosed their child's adoption story, often at a tender age, eliciting responses characterized by curiosity about origins and a strong sense of belonging within the adoptive family.

Social support played a central role in overcoming the challenges of adoption. Approximately 54.5% received support from family and 68.2% found comfort in friends. However, some individuals (9.1%) experienced a lack of support from birth families, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to better engage and educate extended families in the adoption process.

Initial difficulties were reported, mainly related to the child's adjustment and emotional management. Nevertheless, adoption was widely seen as a positive experience that most parents would repeat (90.9%). This finding underscores the resilience of adoptive families and their ability to overcome challenges with the help of social networks and professional resources.

### *Discussion*

The study's findings shed light on the multifaceted experiences of adoptive parents in Italy and offer nuanced insights that can inform policy, practice, and future research. For example, the prevalence of international adoption underscores the need for specialized support services that address the unique challenges faced by families navigating intercountry adoption processes, such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, and potential trauma-related issues. In addition, the wide range of motivations for adoption underscores the importance of individualized pre-adoption counseling and preparation programs that address the specific needs and expectations of future parents.

The emphasis on open communication about adoption history further underscores the need for resources and guidance to help families navigate conversations about adoption in a developmentally appropriate and supportive manner, including fostering a sense of openness and acceptance within the family, as well as providing children with the tools and information they need to understand and integrate their adoption history into their identity.

Identifying the challenges faced by adoptive parents, such as difficulties in achieving family balance and meeting the emotional and behavioral needs of children, requires the development and implementation of targeted post-adoption support services. These services may include counseling, parent education programs, support groups, and access to mental health resources. By providing this tailored support, we can empower adoptive families to overcome challenges and build strong, resilient relationships.



In addition, the positive outcomes reported by adoptive parents, including the overwhelming majority who would repeat the adoption experience, underscore the potential of adoption to create loving and fulfilling families. However, the study also highlights areas where support services could be improved, such as addressing the lack of support from birth families. This finding suggests the need for interventions that promote understanding and acceptance within extended family networks, possibly through education, mediation, or counseling services.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on adoption by highlighting the unique experiences and needs of adoptive parents in Italy. By shedding light on their joys, challenges, and resilience, we can inform the development of more effective and comprehensive support systems, ultimately benefiting children and families alike.

### *Future Research Directions*

This research provides a framework for future research on adoption in Italy. Subsequent studies could examine the long-term effects of adoptive families, the influence of adoption on children's development, and the effectiveness of post-adoption support services. In addition, it would be beneficial to explore the social implications of adoption, such as the experiences of adoptive families in different sociocultural settings and the role of societal attitudes in shaping adoption outcomes.

Further research with more large samples into the different experiences of adoptive families can help to develop a more comprehensive understanding of adoption and its impact on individuals, families and society. This knowledge can guide policy decisions, improve support services, and ultimately contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for all members of the adoptive family.

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## ABSTRACT

Questo studio ha analizzato le esperienze dei genitori adottivi in Italia, concentrandosi sulle dimensioni legali, psicologiche e sociali dell’adozione. È stato utilizzato un questionario online per esplorare i diversi aspetti del processo di adozione, comprese le preoccupazioni pre-adozione e il processo di adattamento post-adozione. I risultati

principali evidenziano la prevalenza dell'adozione internazionale, il percorso emotivo dei genitori adottivi e il ruolo critico del sostegno sociale. Lo studio sottolinea l'importanza di una comunicazione aperta sull'adozione, la necessità di servizi di supporto specializzati e la capacità di recupero delle famiglie adottive. I risultati di questa ricerca mirano a informare la politica, la pratica e la ricerca futura, evidenziando l'unicità delle sfide affrontate dai genitori adottivi in Italia.

This study investigated the experiences of adoptive parents in Italy, focusing on the legal, psychological and social dimensions of adoption. An online questionnaire was used to explore different facets of the adoption process, including pre-adoption concerns and post-adoption adjustment process. Key findings highlight the prevalence of international adoption, the emotional journey of adoptive parents and the critical role of social support. The study highlights the importance of open communication about adoption, the need for specialist support services and the resilience of adoptive families. The findings of this research aim to inform policy, practice and future research by highlighting the unique challenges faced by adoptive parents in Italy.