

"My Spouse or Partner Wants to Adopt": The "Draggee" vs. "Dragger" Syndrome

By Arleta James, PCC

No matter the route, parents arrive at adoption with a set of expectations about what adding a child to their family will mean. Often, these expectations are quite optimistic. A significant goal throughout the adoption process is to help adoptive parents alter their idealistic beliefs and move toward more realistic expectations.



There are many predominant expectations. This article reviews one such expectation referred to as the "draggee vs. dragger syndrome."

It is quite typical that one partner is far more the driving force behind the family adopting than the other. The *dragger* in the pre-adoptive phase is the one who contacts the adoption agencies, determines when training will be attended, makes the follow-up phone calls and obtains information on prospective children. Post-adoption, the dragger surfs the Internet to obtain resources, has the child evaluated, locates the relevant service providers, transports the child to all of her appointments, works hard to implement the treatment recommendations and continues to carry out the same amount of household responsibilities as before the adoptee moved in. The end result of this situation is the emotional and physical exhaustion of one partner, while the other partner—the *draggee*—seems to disengage even further from family matters.

Early studies comparing couples at different stages of family life suggest that marital satisfaction declines over the first 15 years of marriage, only to rise again when children start leaving the nest. Below are several of the common contributors to marital dissatisfaction:

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

- Limits on parents' time and energy make it less possible for the couple to engage in the companionate activities that maintain and build marital intimacy.
- The perceptions of how household responsibilities will be divided are important. Frequently, the male partner becomes the principal earner. Often, when a child is added to the family, men increase their work hours while women reduce their employment outside of the home. The husband's view is that being a good provider contributes directly to the welfare of the wife and children. The woman's view is that the husband is pulling away from the family at a time when they are vitally needed at home. When chores and responsibilities are not divided in a mutually satisfactory way the wife does not receive adequate physical and emotional support. In turn, the husband does not receive adequate companionship, and his patience and tolerance are continually tested. Then the marriage is likely to be in trouble. Such issues were addressed in my article, *Strengthening the Role of Adoptive Dads*.
- Often, the child with special needs creates conflict between his parents. He is kind and respectful to one parent, usually the father. The mother experiences a child who is callous and uncooperative. The father begins to blame the mother for the problems the family is having with the child. The mother is devastated by this lack of support on behalf of her spouse. This pattern of family dynamics is a result of the child's ability to "split" adults. The adopted child feels very let down and hurt by his birthmother. She was supposed to protect him and keep him safe, and she did neither. These emotions are vented onto the mother who is present—the adoptive mother.
- Changes in the family's support system also occur. It is not uncommon that the negative behaviors of a child with special needs are far more apparent in the home than at school, at church or at family gatherings. This "invisible" component of parenting an adopted child causes great stress for all immediate family members. Additionally, this situation can lead to conflict with extended family and friends. Friends and family offer advice and suggestions that are not useful or that send a message that there is something wrong with the type of parenting being utilized by the adoptive family. Lacking a desire to continue to be assuaged in this manner, already stressed partners isolate themselves from friends and family. They minimize their interactions with others so as to offset receiving additional comments. Isolation is a critical issue in the adoption of children with special needs. Kim and Joan, both adoptive mothers, made the following statements at an adoptive parent support group,

"In the beginning, I was telling my best friend of twenty years the types of behavioral problems Neil had. She looked at me and said, 'You know Joan, I've known you a long time and I don't know what's wrong with you anymore.'"

"After a while, the craziness in your home takes away from your friendships with other adults. You have no time to go out or your child is having a temper tantrum so you can't really leave the house. Your friends and family can't relate to what's happening or they don't want to relate to what's happening."

The draggee vs. dragger syndrome carries the expectation that one parent can carry the majority of responsibilities. Actually, due to the factors presented above, this phenomenon may serve to heighten marital discord.

Marital quality, in turn, affects the quality of parent-child relationships. In particular, marital conflict has been associated with the quality of parenting practices and parent-child attachment. This applies to all of the parent-child

relationships in the family—birth and adoptive, whether having arrived at birth or at an older age! Marital relations can be a source of support for or can undermine the parenting role.

Pre-placements the couple caught up in the draggee vs. draggor syndrome may want to,

- Examine their difference in ideas about becoming a parent. What is underlying one couple's strong parenting drive and the other's lack of motivation to become a parent?
- Consider marital therapy
- Provide respite services — gain first-hand experience of parenting children with a history of [complex trauma](#).
- Attend a [support group](#) comprised of veteran adoptive parents.

In a two-parent family, the child should have two parents equally invested in the well-being of the child. He has already experiences abandonment by his birth parents. He does not need the further rejection of a parent who spends little time with him or a parent who makes minimal effort on his behalf.