

The Impact of Adoption on Adoptive Parents: A Review

¹Nichitha Kumari, ²Dr.Suphala Kotian

¹Research Scholar, College of Social Sciences & Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangalore

²Professor, College of Social Sciences & Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangalore

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.110200014>

Received: 05 February 2026; Accepted: 10 February 2026; Published: 26 February 2026

ABSTRACT

Adoption is a complex process that influences not only the lives of adopted children but also the psychological, emotional, and social functioning of adoptive parents. This review critically examines empirical and theoretical literature on the impact of adoption on adoptive parents, with a focus on emotional well-being, parental identity, stress and coping, marital and social relationships, and long-term personal growth. The literature indicates that although adoptive parents often experience profound satisfaction and meaning in parenthood, they also encounter distinctive challenges such as pre-adoption uncertainty, attachment concerns, parenting stress, and societal stigma. The availability of pre-adoption preparation, social support, and post-adoption services significantly moderates parental outcomes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for practitioners, policymakers, and adoption agencies to develop holistic interventions that support adoptive parents throughout the adoption lifecycle.

Keywords: adoption, adoptive parents, parental adjustment, parenting stress, family functioning

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is a legally and socially recognized means of family formation that provides permanent homes for children who cannot be raised by their biological parents. Over recent decades, adoption practices have diversified to include domestic, intercountry, transracial, and special-needs adoptions. While a substantial body of research has focused on the developmental and psychosocial outcomes of adopted children, comparatively less attention has been given to the experiences of adoptive parents. However, parental well-being is a critical determinant of family stability and child adjustment (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002).

Adoptive parenthood differs from biological parenthood in several important ways, including the absence of biological continuity, involvement of legal systems, and, in many cases, children's prior experiences of loss or trauma. These factors may shape parental expectations, emotional adjustment, and family relationships. This review elaborates on the impact of adoption on adoptive parents by synthesizing findings related to emotional and psychological adjustment, parenting stress, social and marital relationships, and long-term personal growth.

METHODOLOGY

This review adopted a narrative literature review approach to examine the psychosocial impact of adoption on adoptive parents. Relevant literature was identified through systematic searches of major academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. Keywords used in the search process included adoption, adoptive parents, parental adjustment, parenting stress, coping strategies, and family functioning. Boolean operators were applied to refine the search results.

Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and doctoral theses published primarily in English were considered for inclusion. Priority was given to studies published within the last five years, while seminal and theoretically significant earlier works were also included to provide conceptual grounding. Studies focusing on child outcomes without reference to adoptive parents, opinion pieces, and non-scholarly sources were excluded.

The selected literature was reviewed and analyzed thematically, with attention to recurring patterns related to emotional and psychological adjustment, parenting stress and coping, social and marital relationships, and long-term personal growth among adoptive parents.

Emotional and Psychological Adjustment

Adoptive parents commonly report high levels of emotional fulfillment, life satisfaction, and a strong sense of purpose following adoption (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). For many individuals and couples who have experienced infertility, adoption represents a resolution to prolonged emotional distress and offers an opportunity to reconstruct parental identity (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003). The successful placement of a child often evokes feelings of joy, gratitude, and accomplishment.

Nevertheless, the adoption process itself is frequently characterized by psychological stress. Pre-adoption stages may involve lengthy waiting periods, invasive assessments, and legal uncertainties, all of which can contribute to anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Tasker & Wood, 2016). Following placement, some adoptive parents experience fears related to attachment security, child rejection, or adoption disruption, particularly when children exhibit emotional or behavioral difficulties (Brodzinsky, 2011). These emotional challenges highlight the need for psychological preparedness and ongoing mental health support for adoptive parents.

Parenting Stress and Coping Mechanisms

Parenting stress among adoptive parents has been widely documented, particularly in cases involving children with histories of abuse, neglect, or institutional care (Levy-Shiff et al., 1997). Such children may display attachment difficulties, emotional dysregulation, or behavioral problems, which can intensify parental stress and challenge conventional parenting strategies.

Despite these challenges, research suggests that adoptive parents often demonstrate significant resilience. Over time, many parents develop adaptive coping strategies, including increased patience, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Access to post-adoption services such as counseling, parent training programs, and peer support groups has been shown to significantly reduce stress and enhance parental competence (Jones & McDermott, 2012).

Personal Growth and Long-Term Developmental Outcomes for Adoptive Parents

Despite the complexities of adoption, the majority of adoptive parents report high levels of long-term satisfaction and emotional reward. Adoption has been associated with enhanced empathy, emotional maturity, and broader conceptualizations of family and kinship (Palacios et al., 2019). Many adoptive parents describe the experience as transformative, contributing to personal growth, increased social awareness, and a deeper appreciation of diversity and resilience.

Longitudinal studies suggest that as families stabilize and children adjust, parental stress often decreases and confidence in the parenting role increases. These findings underscore the importance of viewing adoption as a dynamic, developmental process rather than a single life event.

Beyond the initial adjustment phase, adoption has enduring implications for the long-term psychological and social development of adoptive parents. Longitudinal research suggests that as adoptive families stabilize, parents often experience a gradual reduction in stress levels, increased parenting competence, and greater emotional security in their parental roles. Over time, adoptive parents tend to develop stronger confidence in managing adoption-related challenges, including identity-related questions and developmental transitions in their children.

Adoption has also been associated with positive long-term personal growth among parents. Many adoptive parents report enhanced empathy, emotional maturity, patience, and a broader understanding of diversity, resilience, and social justice. These developmental gains often extend beyond the family context, influencing parents' social awareness, community engagement, and advocacy for child welfare and adoption-related issues.

Importantly, long-term outcomes are strongly influenced by the availability of sustained post-adoption support services. Parents who have access to ongoing counseling, peer networks, and educational resources demonstrate better psychological well-being and relational stability over time. Conversely, inadequate long-term support may leave adoptive parents vulnerable during later developmental stages, such as adolescence, when children may revisit issues related to identity, belonging, and loss. These findings emphasize the necessity of viewing adoption as a lifelong process that requires continuous support rather than a single transitional event.

Social Relationships and Marital Adjustment

Adoption has a significant influence on adoptive parents' social relationships and interpersonal functioning. Adoptive parents often navigate complex social interactions shaped by societal attitudes toward adoption, infertility, and non-biological parenthood. Experiences of social stigma, intrusive questioning, and misconceptions regarding adoptive family legitimacy can contribute to emotional strain and social withdrawal. Consequently, adoptive parents frequently develop selective disclosure strategies and advocacy skills to manage social interactions and protect family boundaries.

Extended family relationships also play a critical role in shaping adoptive parents' experiences. Acceptance and support from grandparents and relatives can enhance parental confidence and family cohesion, whereas lack of understanding or subtle discrimination may intensify stress and feelings of isolation. Peer support from other adoptive families has been identified as a crucial protective factor, offering shared understanding, normalization of challenges, and emotional reassurance.

Adoption additionally affects marital and partner relationships. While the shared commitment to adoption may strengthen emotional bonds and mutual resilience, disparities in coping styles, expectations, and emotional adjustment can generate marital strain, particularly during the early post-adoption period. Effective communication, shared parenting responsibilities, and access to couple-focused counseling services have been shown to promote marital stability and relational satisfaction among adoptive parents. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating family- and couple-centered support services within adoption systems.

Comparative Analysis of Parental Outcomes by Adoption Type

Parental outcomes in adoption vary significantly depending on the type of adoption, particularly when comparing domestic and international adoption. Domestic adoption often allows adoptive parents to maintain greater cultural continuity and access local support networks, which may facilitate smoother parental adjustment and reduce stress related to cultural integration and identity development. Parents in domestic adoptions frequently report earlier establishment of parent-child attachment and fewer challenges related to language and cultural socialization.

In contrast, international adoption may present additional psychosocial demands for adoptive parents. These include navigating cross-cultural parenting, managing language barriers, addressing racial and ethnic identity issues, and responding to the effects of institutionalization or early adversity commonly experienced by internationally adopted children. Such factors may intensify parenting stress and require adoptive parents to develop advanced coping strategies and advocacy skills. However, international adoptive parents often demonstrate high levels of commitment, resilience, and cultural sensitivity over time, which can contribute to positive long-term family functioning.

Comparative findings across adoption types suggest that while both domestic and international adoptive parents experience emotional fulfillment and parental satisfaction, the nature and intensity of psychosocial challenges differ. Domestic adoptive parents may benefit more from region-specific post-adoption services, whereas international adoptive parents often require specialized support focusing on trauma-informed care, cultural competence, and identity development. Recognizing these differences is essential for adoption agencies and social work practitioners to design targeted pre-adoption preparation programs and post-adoption interventions tailored to the specific needs of adoptive families.

DISCUSSION

In alignment with the objectives outlined in the abstract, the reviewed literature demonstrates that adoption affects adoptive parents across emotional, relational, and developmental domains. Social relationships, marital adjustment, and long-term personal growth emerge as central components of adoptive parents' experiences, interacting dynamically with parenting stress and coping processes. Parental outcomes are shaped not only by child-related factors but also by social support networks, societal attitudes, and the availability of long-term post-adoption services. Addressing these dimensions holistically is essential for developing effective adoption policies and practice frameworks that support adoptive parents throughout the adoption lifecycle.

CONCLUSION

Adoption is a deeply transformative experience that significantly shapes the emotional, psychological, and social lives of adoptive parents. Although adoptive parents may face unique challenges related to attachment, parenting stress, and societal perceptions, adoption is predominantly associated with positive personal growth and enduring satisfaction. Comprehensive pre-adoption preparation and sustained post-adoption support are essential to enhance adoptive parents' well-being and ensure the long-term stability of adoptive families.

REFERENCES

1. Alves, S., Ribeiro, C. G., Pastor, I., & Henriques, M. R. (2023). Integrating a child into an adoptive family in times of COVID-19: Lessons learned from adopters' and professionals' views. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 155, Article 107208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107208>
2. Chorão, A. L., Canavarro, M. C., & Pires, R. (2022). Explaining parenting stress among adoptive parents: The contribution of mindfulness, psychological flexibility, and self-compassion. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(21), Article 14534. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114534>
3. Ferrari, L., Canzi, E., Barni, D., Ranieri, S., Danioni, F. V., La Fico, G., & Rosnati, R. (2023). COVID-19-related stress and resilience resources: A comparison between adoptive and non-adoptive mothers. *The Family Journal*, 31(3), 454–463. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221124251>
4. Fiore, S., Luyten, P., Vliegen, N., & Soenens, B. (2024). Understanding parenting stress in adoptive parents: A longitudinal multilevel study of parents' self-criticism, child negative emotionality, and child age at placement. *Journal of Personality*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12993>
5. Gorla, L., Fusco, C., & Santona, A. (2023). A retrospective study on adoptive parenthood in the first year after adoption: The role of parents' attachment and empathy on communicative openness. *Healthcare*, 11(24), Article 3128. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11243128>
6. Pace, C. S., Muzi, S., Moretti, M., & Barone, L. (2024). Supporting adoptive and foster parents of adolescents through the trauma-informed e-Connect parent group: A preliminary descriptive study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, Article 1266930. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1266930>
7. Brodzinsky, D. M. (2011). Children's understanding of adoption: Developmental and clinical implications. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 42(2), 200–207. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022415>
8. Brodzinsky, D. M., & Pinderhughes, E. E. (2002). Parenting and child development in adoptive families. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting* (2nd ed., Vol. 1, pp. 279–311). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
9. Daniluk, J. C., & Hurtig-Mitchell, J. (2003). Themes of hope and healing: Infertile couples' experiences of adoption. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 81(4), 389–399. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00264.x>
10. Levy-Shiff, R., Bar, O., & Har-Even, D. (1997). Psychological adjustment of adoptive parents-to-be. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 67(2), 255–267. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080233>
11. Palacios, J., Román, M., & Camacho, C. (2019). Growth and resilience in adoptive parents. *Adoption Quarterly*, 22(4), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2019.1580887>
12. Moretti, M., & Obsuth, I. (2009). *The Connect Parent Group (CPG®) program manual*. Unpublished program manual.



13. Steinberg, S. B. (2022). Adopting social media in family and adoption law. University of Florida Law Review.