



Strengthening Families & Communities

MULTICULTURAL ADOPTION: DREW AND LISA'S FAMILY

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Lisa C. was halfway through her 18-month stay in Madagascar to conduct research for her dissertation in anthropology when she initiated steps to adopt. "Given my profession as an anthropologist and because I was spending so much time in this country, I felt that if we were going to adopt, I would prefer to adopt from this country because I could give this child so much in terms of their cultural and racial heritage," says Lisa.

Lisa had run into a number of roadblocks because most of the orphanages in Madagascar had arrangements with France and she was not French. However, in the village where she was conducting her research, she met a French family who had recently adopted a little girl and they suggested she speak with Sister Noreena, an Italian nun living in a local convent. It was Sister Noreena who introduced Lisa to Soa.

Soa's father recently had his leg amputated after a rock crushed it while he and his wife were trying to earn extra money by chipping granite to be sold as gravel. A devout Catholic family with eight children, they were unable to continue providing for all of their children and with assistance from Sister Noreena they sought to have their two youngest daughters, Soa, age three and a half, and Selane, age two, adopted.

During the same time that Lisa was trying to identify a child to adopt, Drew had been organizing the stateside legalities of an adoption. He educated himself on how to adopt a child from another country and what the legal requirements were. After trying a few adoption agencies, Drew found an adoption agency that was able to help them. And, during one of Lisa's visits back to Rhode Island, the agency conducted the homestudy--a process all adoptive parents must have completed prior to adoption that involves a series of visits to the home and interviews with the prospective parents. Thus, the preliminary U.S. requirements for adoption, like the homestudy, had been completed by the time Lisa found Soa. To finalize the process, they hired a lawyer in Madagascar and, after completing all of the necessary paperwork, Soa officially became Lisa and Drew's adopted daughter.

Last summer, Lisa and Soa returned to Madagascar to visit Soa's birth family. Drew and Lisa had always supported and encouraged contact with Soa's birth family and planned that Soa would visit someday. For a year or more prior to their trip, Soa often expressed a desire to visit her birth family. As adopted children often do around the ages of 7-11, Soa wanted to know more about her adoption and about her birth family. "At that time, she began to develop a fantasy world around Madagascar and her birth family, what it would feel like to be there and be with her family," says Lisa. "So it seemed appropriate to go, so that she could get a handle on that."

Soa adapted very quickly back to village life and enjoyed being with her sisters who have the same smile. The visit was a good experience for Soa because she now has a clear picture of her birth family and birth country to help her as she develops her self-identity. "Though she came back a little confused about where she wanted to be, the longer she was here the more she felt comfortable being here again, that she was home," says Lisa.

In 1996, Lisa and Drew adopted their son Aidan, who was eight months old and in foster care at the time. Because Soa is a child of color, Lisa and Drew wanted to adopt another child of color. They attended a Rhode Island adoption information meeting where they met a woman from the Urban League. "We asked her, if we wanted to adopt a child of color, would the fact that we were already a biracial family help us," says Drew. "When she heard our story, she said she was aware of a child who sounded like he would be perfect for us. It turned out to be through the same agency that did our first homestudy. In a few days, they placed Aidan in our family, and many months later the adoption was finalized."

Throughout their first two adoptions and for a number of years, Lisa and Drew did not receive any post placement adoption services. "We just simply weren't aware that there was even a name for such a thing," says Drew. "It is more like a sense that social service stops once there is this formal sign-off and after that you are sort of on your own."

It was last fall when Lisa and Drew heard about Casey's Post-Adoption Services. They heard about Casey at a time when they were looking for some help in handling their son's high activity behaviors, which included impulsiveness, almost constant movement, and a short attention span. "Our son was presenting a challenge to us and we tried everything we could, we read as many books as we could, and we felt like we needed some professional guidance on how to cope with his personality," says Lisa. "One of the key reasons that we began to go to Casey was to get some ideas on more effective parenting strategies for dealing with a child who has a level of opposition behavior and high activity that is sometimes hard to deal with. Particularly when our other child is at the opposite end of that continuum. And we began to feel that there was a reasonable imbalance of the attention that one got and the attention that the other one tried to get all the time."

The family's first involvement with the Post Adoption Services program at Casey's Rhode Island division was about a year ago when Drew and Lisa started attending a 12- week, "Therapist-Facilitated Educational/Support Group." The purposes of the group were to provide a forum for adoptive parents to talk about their experiences parenting behaviorally challenging adopted children and to give them an opportunity to discuss developmental issues and behavior management strategies with a trained clinical therapist. For example, one session might focus on specific behavior management strategies for overactive behavior. Specific techniques include the 10-10 rule, which means punishment is delivered within 10 seconds and in 10 words or less, and No Talk/No Emotion, which seeks to remove the emotion

from an action and provide an immediate consequence for a behavior (i.e., "Hitting is not allowed, go to your room.")"Casey helped us as a group to define what it is we wanted out of the group, and then they set up the professional resources, the people that came in and shared some of their expertise and ideas about certain aspects of parenting children with adoption issues," says Lisa.

Toward the end of the parent educational/support group, Lisa and Drew received a phone call from a social worker at the agency that had arranged Aidan's adoption. She said that Aidan's infant brother was available for adoption, and the birth mother and the agency wanted to place him with a sibling. "So while we were in the tender care of Post- Adoption Services, we actually went through another adoption and are in the midst of that now," says Drew.

Given the circumstances, they asked Casey to provide some family counseling to help prepare Soa and Aidan for the introduction of another child into the family. Betsy Abrams, post adoption services social worker in Rhode Island, provided brief counseling for the family around adjusting to the new infant. Betsy helped the parents figure out how to tell their adopted children that another child--in fact a baby who was going to require a lot of attention--was going to be joining their home. She facilitated the family session when the parents told the children about the adoption. She helped to start the conversation by introducing the concept of the adoption and then let Lisa and Drew explain it to Soa and Aidan. "We consulted with Betsy because we were concerned about the impact of the fact that this child would be related by blood to Aidan, and we didn't want it to turn into something divisive between the two boys and our daughter," says Lisa.

"Apart from being in the workshop this was the first thing that motivated us to start working with Betsy," says Drew. "We really felt that this had happened so quickly to us without us really discussing it with the children prior to that. We were uncertain about how to introduce them and allow them to be a part of the process. We talked it through in the office with her, and then we brought the children in to talk in her office."

"She helped us to come up with strategies to deal with a little bit of jealousy on Aidan's part," says Lisa. "He had been the one who could really get the attention of his parents and now there's a child that cries louder and harder than him, so that was a bit of a challenge for him. But he has really risen to the occasion and loves his little brother. He comes in every morning to cuddle with him, and is a quite pleased and proud brother."

In addition to the parent support group and counseling services, Soa participated in a girls' social skills group facilitated by Casey. This group, for adopted girls ages 8-12, teaches basic social skills and provides them with an opportunity to meet and get to know other adopted girls in their age group. During the social skills group sessions, the girls learn specific skills like how to maintain eye contact or appropriately introduce themselves to others. These skills would be practiced during

the sessions to demonstrate when the skills were not being used correctly and when they were used properly.

Also, during snack time and craft activities the group facilitators would monitor whether or not the girls were using their new skills. "Our daughter found that the social skills group has given her a very different setting than from say Girl Scouts where she goes with all her friends from school," says Drew. "Here she can come to a group and make friends, and perhaps be more open about things that concern her because it is a different setting and she knows they all share the experience of being adopted." "We have just been thrilled with the atmosphere," says Drew. "Our kids are enthusiastic about coming to Casey, and the nights when we took a break and came here to meet with other families were very warm and supportive. For us it has been quite a dramatic support."