

# “As parents, how on earth are we going to handle this issue”

## Provider and Parent Views on Sexuality-related Challenges During Adolescence among International HIV-Infected Adoptees in the U.S.

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### BACKGROUND

- The number of U.S. parents pursuing the international adoption of children with HIV infection has grown from a few to several hundred over the past several years, many of whom work with faith-based adoption agencies.<sup>1</sup>
- In 2010, immigration restrictions of HIV-infected individuals to the U.S. were eased, decreasing barriers of adopting children with HIV born outside the U.S.
- Little is known about the needs of this emerging population, their adoptive families, or the adoption agencies.<sup>2</sup>
- Internationally adopted children with HIV (IACH) may have additional educational needs as they mature into adolescence, particularly related to sexuality.

### OBJECTIVES

Identify anticipated sexuality-related challenges associated with IACH as this population matures into adolescence by exploring parent and provider perspectives on:

- Adoption motivations and experiences
- Role of faith and religion
- Family and societal influences

### METHODS

- Semi-structured recorded interviews were conducted with:
  - 37 parents of IACH on adoption motivations, medical and psychosocial needs, and potential challenges that may occur as child matures.
  - 11 healthcare/social service providers who work with IACH on current or anticipated experiences providing care to IACH.
- Open coding was used to create the codebook. All transcripts were coded using Dedoose Version 8.0.35. Data were coded for emergent themes using standard qualitative methods.



#### Parents Demographics (n=37) All parents were white.

Marital Status-Married	35
Sex-Female	36
Religion-Christian	34
Biological Children-Yes	27
# of adopted children/family	2.75 (range 1-8)
Number of IACH/family	
1 child	26
2 children	7

#### Provider Demographics (n=11) All providers were white and female.

Medical (MD, PA, RN)	5
Psychosocial (MSW, PhD)	6
Mean years in HIV	14.9 (range 5-28)
Mean # of IACH in clinic	18 (range 1-40)



#### IACH Demographics

Sex-Female	23
Current age	8.1 (range 3-19)
Age at adoption	4.75 (range 6mo-15)

### ADOPTION MOTIVATIONS

Faith and the desire to help children who are in the most need were guiding factors in parents' decisions to adopt a child with HIV.

*“We had felt a God-calling into adoption in the first place, so we felt like every decision would need to be guided by Him.” (Parent)*

*“When families found out that she has HIV they turned her down...It's stated in her court decree, 76 Russian families turned her down.” (Parent)*

### RESULTS

#### HIV & ADOPTION RELATED ISSUES

Adoption-related issues such as pre-adoption trauma and loss, and child behavioral and developmental issues took priority over HIV-related medical concerns.

*“Her HIV is not a big deal. She responded to treatment really well and very quickly, so I have a friend who always used to say, ‘I spend more time on my daughter's hair than her HIV.’” (Parent)*

*“Adoption comes with a whole bunch of things because of great loss and a lot of emotional pain and hurt. HIV is just part of that package for us.” (Parent)*

*“And also with international adoptees, you never know exactly their birthday. She has since age of 12, looked like a 15-year-old girl.” (Provider)*

#### ADOLESCENCE

**DATING AND DISCLOSURE.** Many parents expressed concerns around dating and HIV disclosure.

*“We have a rule here at home, they can't date until way later. But, she's really pretty. I'm sure there's going to be boys trying to court her. We have no idea, and it scares us to death, as parents, how on earth are we going to handle this issue.” (Parent)*

*“We still have the difficult teen years ahead. Years when they will face difficult decisions about when and how to disclose to close friends or partners.” (Parent)*

*“But really what it boils down to is my oldest says, ‘If I'm going to have a sexual relationship, I'm just wearing a condom. It's not a big deal.’ I can't get him past that. I'm like, ‘Honey. It doesn't matter what protective measures you're taking. You need to let the girl know exactly [about your status].’” (Parent)*

**INDEPENDENCE.** Many parents were concerned with how children will handle HIV care as they mature and become independent.

*“That's probably one of the bigger concerns I have for the girls growing up, is just how they maintain healthcare coverage. In those years when you don't really have career jobs right?” (Parent)*

*“The vast majority of the issues that we deal with are going to be psycho-social, adjusting to their diagnosis and their new environment and trying to figure out how to get them basically as much schooling and support as possible so that they can be functional adults in society.” (Provider)*

#### SEXUALITY RELATED CONCERNS

Parents expressed anxiety related concerns around their child's future sexual activity.

*“Certainly that will be an aspect of the conversation that we have to have with him that we wouldn't have to have with a child that wasn't living with HIV. This is absolutely important that he understands the responsibility that he had and the importance of taking his meds, and if disclosing to his partner or future wife or whatever.” (Parent)*

*“We're getting into adolescence now and sex becomes a topic and things that with our own Christian points of view don't necessarily work with the world.” (Parent)*

Providers acknowledged difficulty offering evidence-based sex education due to parental religious beliefs.

*“With some of the families, it has been a challenge to educate children about HIV precautions because of families' religious beliefs about sexuality and that people aren't supposed to have sex until they're married.” (Provider)*

*“I've had to be respectfully slower with some families about sex education.” (Provider)*

### CONCLUSIONS

Findings confirm previous research that:

- Faith plays a pivotal role in the decision to adopt with HIV from another country<sup>2</sup>
- Medical issues experienced by IACH were mild<sup>3</sup>
- Children's future romantic relationships and sex education were major concerns<sup>4</sup>

All adolescents with HIV, regardless of adoption status, should be informed on ways to prevent HIV transmission and unintended pregnancy.

Parents of IACH could benefit from the support of healthcare and social service providers to better understand the importance of sexual and reproductive health education during adolescence.

More longitudinal research is needed on IACH in order to address the physical, social, educational, and emotional needs of this growing population.

#### REFERENCES

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