

Need for best practice guidelines for counseling women who relinquish their parental rights

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Credit: University of Texas at Arlington

A new study by The University of Texas at Arlington School of Social Work and The Donaldson Adoption Institute provides groundbreaking research on the experiences of first/birth parents and the need for best practices guidelines in options counseling for first/birth parents.

The report, "Understanding Options Counseling Experiences in

Adoption: A Quantitative Analysis of First/Birth Parents and Professionals," was conducted by Scott Ryan, dean and Jenkins Garrett Professor at the UTA School of Social Work; Elissa Madden, assistant professor at the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University; Donna Aguiniga, associate professor at the University of Alaska-Anchorage School of Social Work; and UTA doctoral candidate Marcus Crawford.

The primary objective of this study was to understand the decision-making experiences of women who have relinquished their parental rights to [adoption](#) within the past 25 years, as well as the context in which options surrounding crisis pregnancies are discussed with expectant parents by professionals in the adoption community. The current report represents Phase I of the study and includes findings from an online survey of 223 first/birth parents and an online survey of 141 adoption professionals.

Key Findings

- More than two-thirds of first/birth mothers reported that they seriously considered other options besides adoption, most commonly to parent their child.
- The majority of first/birth mothers who participated in this study also reported limited to no access to information about parenting.
- The lack of emotional and social support that first/birth mothers felt they needed to successfully parent was one of the deciding factors in their decision to relinquish their parental rights to adoption.
- Approximately four of every five first/birth mothers in this study cited financial concerns as one of the reasons they chose to relinquish their parental rights to adoption.

"For far too long, the experiences of first/birth parents have not been

fully understood or taken into consideration as an important part of adoption," said April Dinwoodie, chief executive of The Donaldson Adoption Institute. "This large-scale study represents a deep and detailed look at these experiences and will serve to inform future policies and practices."

She added: "We gave a great deal of thought to launching in November with National Adoption Month and ultimately decided that it was time to share this groundbreaking work as all too often the voices and experiences of first/birth parents are completely left out."

Dean Ryan underlined the importance of the research in the context of UTA's commitment to health and the human condition within the Strategic Plan 2020: Bold Solutions | Global Impact.

"Our research findings will help providers and counselors with establishing and sharing best practices with first/birth parents during the adoption decision-making process," Ryan said. "Partnering with The Donaldson Adoption Institute is part of UTA's commitment to finding ways to improve the health and human condition while supporting community organizations that are making an impact."

Among the recommendations in the 102-page report are:

Develop and adopt national best-practice guidelines for the provision of options counseling

Adoption professionals reported providing information at a greater frequency than first/birth mothers reported receiving it. To counter the discrepancy between the agency professionals' and first/birth mothers' reported experiences surrounding different types of information, national guidelines should be developed and adopted that clearly

delineate the specific information that should be discussed with expectant parents.

Develop and adopt evidence-based written materials about options

First/birth mothers reported varying degrees of access to written information about their options. Therefore, the provision of evidence-based written materials about all options should be established as a best practice. This material should be regulated, and perhaps developed at the national level to foster uniformity and reduce bias in the information provided to expectant parents.

Inform expectant/new parents about available financial and housing resources

Adoption professionals, particularly agency professionals/caseworkers, have a responsibility to ensure that expectant/new parents are aware of public and private assistance programs that can provide financial and housing support. Greater information about social services could help reduce the financial pressures that ultimately lead some parents to relinquish their parental rights to their child for adoption.

Establish Best Practice Guidelines for Education and Therapeutic Work with Expectant Parents' Families

Providing education and family counseling to expectant parents and their family members might provide a neutral forum for families to address miscommunications, needs, and emotional strains resulting from the pregnancy, which might allow family members to be a better support to the expectant parents' during the decision-making process. Additionally,

education about community resources could allay families' fears that expectant parents would not be able to support their child.

More information: [www.adoptioninstitute.org/wp-c ... Phase-One-Report.pdf](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/wp-c...Phase-One-Report.pdf)

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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