



СОЦИАЛНА ПЕДАГОГИКА

SOCIAL EDUCATION

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN THE CHILD ADOPTION
PROCESS: CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES

Yana Dimitrova¹

Abstract: *The article explores the role of the social worker in the process of child adoption, describing the difficulties and challenges that professionals face in carrying out their work. The various stages (phases) of the adoption process are examined here, with an emphasis on the need for ongoing training and support for social workers, as well as for the development of more effective methodologies and procedures to assist children who often go through emotional difficulties during this process.*

Keywords: *social worker; child adoption; biological parents; adoptive parents; challenges.*

Introduction

All over the world, there are people who want to be parents, who would be good parents, but who cannot have children. All over the world, there are children who do not have parents, or whose parents cannot take care of them. When these two groups come together, it is not a drama. It is not a risk either. There is a word for it and it is *family*.

Adoption is known as an institution of family law since ancient times. In our society, adoption is a humane institution, the main social and legal purpose of which is the provision of parental care for the child, of a family environment for his/her upbringing and education, and of that multifaceted positive influence which the family has on the individual. Adoption also satisfies the natural aspiration to motherhood and/or fatherhood, as well as the adoptive parent's moral interest in feeling parenthood, in caring for his/her children, and in acquiring the authority of a parent in society.

Adoption and the mystery of adoption are increasingly talked about in society, but the role of the social worker as one of the key figures in the journey that adoptive parents and adoptees embark on is rarely addressed.

¹ **Yana Dimitrova** – PhD, Senior Lecturer at St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Faculty of Education, Department of Pedagogy; email: y_dimitrova@abv.bg

Adoption is the formal transfer of parental rights from parents to adoptive parents over a child through the social and judicial systems. For a number of specific reasons, biological parents declare their refusal to raise their child and adoptive parents agree to raise and parent the child. As a naturally occurring, compensatory mechanism, adoption provides children deprived of parental care with the family they need, while satisfying families' natural desire for motherhood and fatherhood (Todorova-Lipcheva, 2008, 10–15).

Suitability for adoption is determined on the basis of a psychological and medico-social examination of the child and of the biological family with a view to the child's future life (Практическо пособие, 2007, 73; UNICEF, 2019, 15).

Determining a child's suitability for adoption concerns both the child and his/her biological family: father, mother, extended family, and sometimes even the community in which he/she lives.

The screening of prospective adoptive parents should be as thorough as possible, because the future of the child, the biological family and the adoptive family depends on it. This screening allows to diagnose the situation of the child and his/her family (Практическо пособие, 2007, 73).

Those who wish to adopt a child often complain that biological parents do not have to "pass an exam," while prospective adoptive parents are subjected to a thorough background check. However, adoption cannot be compared to ordinary family planning. Adoptive parents have to put in much more effort than other parents: an adopted child needs parents to support and accompany him/her in his/her specific destiny. People do not have a default right to adopt a child. Filing an application (to social services) does not mean that the wish will be granted. The best interests of the child are at the heart of adoption. Despite the understanding and respect which institutions treat prospective adoptive families with, the priority in the former's work is to provide a family environment for the child deprived of parental care through the resources that adoptive families provide for this (Todorova-Lipcheva, 2013, 114). Therefore, all adoption procedures are child-centred and only then directed towards the adoptive parents. Adoption is always a consequence of the difficult situation of a mother who, for mental, social, economic or health reasons, cannot care for her child alone day after day. It is often the case that women do not receive support from the fathers of their children. The child has already suffered a great loss. Therefore, as many risks as possible must be prevented. In this regard, professionals (social workers) need a variety of information and a basis of trust in prospective adoptive parents.

Methodology

The adoption process goes through several stages: preliminary preparation; actual preparation of the child for adoption by specific adoptive parents; subsequent preparation; and preparation after an unsuccessful adoption procedure (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 4).

The first stage begins with the conditions for entering the child in the register of children who can be adopted under the conditions of full adoption (see Family Code of the Republic of Bulgaria and Ordinance No. РД-07-7 of 5 October 2010 on the conditions and procedure for keeping and maintaining the full adoption registers). Then, the social worker from the Child Protection Department in charge of the case arranges a review of the assessment and the implementation of the action plan. The assessment of the case is updated, focusing on the child's needs and on the specifics of his/her story, development, personal traits, emotional world – separations, rejection and other traumatic events, as well as behavioural issues that are relevant to adoption and for which active psychosocial work should be carried out in order to prepare the child for adoption. A new action plan is drawn up for the case, with the long-term goal of adopting the child (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 5).

The adoption work with the child is aimed at: making him/her ready for adoption; helping him/her overcome separation, rejection and other traumatic events; building and maintaining positive attitudes towards adoption and realistic expectations of the adoption process (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 6).

A key point in this phase is to ensure the child's right to be informed and consulted and to express his/her views on all matters affecting him/her. The child must be informed of the conditions under which he/she will be given the opportunity to express his/her views. Preparatory actions must be aimed at ensuring the child's right to an opinion (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 7).

The work on the second phase begins with the identification of suitable adoptive parents and continues until they submit an application to the relevant court for the adoption of the child. The two types of adoption – international and domestic – have a number of common and specific characteristics that should be taken into account. The work in this phase, especially concerning the development of the child–parent relationship, is closely monitored by the social worker from the Child Protection Department in charge of the child's case, in view of his/her commitment to express an opinion in the course of the court proceedings in accordance with the Bulgarian Child Protection Act (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 7; UNICEF, 2017).

The child is prepared for the first meeting with the adoptive parents by the social worker leading the case. The latter should inform the child in an appropriate manner, according to his/her age and development, about the initiation of the adoption procedure by a specific adoptive family, about how it will proceed (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 9). The child is provided with brief information about the adoptive parents and is shown a picture of them. When the child is younger, it is desirable not to use the term 'adoptive parents' but another situational setting in order to prevent disappointment if the adoptive parents refuse to continue contact (ibid.).

After the meetings, the accredited organization and the social worker from the Social Assistance Directorate discuss the follow-up work on the preparation of the child for adoption (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 11).

In most cases, by the time of the personal contact between the adoptive parents and the child, the adoption decision has already been made and the child is informed about it. During the personal contacts, the child always has the opportunity, in addition to getting to know and spending time with the adoptive parents, to view prepared photographic material (usually in the form of a personalized photo album) about the adoptive parents' house, family, pets and hobbies (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 14).

In the process of preparing the child for adoption by specific adoptive parents, social workers can discuss with them the possibility of maintaining the child's relationship with some important people for him/her – brother, sister, friends, a significant adult (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 15). This relationship can be planned and supervised by an adult (if necessary through the Child Protection Department of the Social Assistance Directorate).

The stage of subsequent preparation, which is carried out by the social worker, begins after the application for adoption is submitted to the court and continues until the court decision enters into force and the child is transferred to the adoptive family.

The social worker from the Social Assistance Directorate, who is in charge of the child's case, contacts the adoptive family and suggests a meeting to prepare a plan for the child's transition to the adoptive family. The plan is agreed upon by all parties involved, and everyone fulfills the commitments outlined in the plan. The actions and steps in the plan are implemented by the time the adoption proceedings are completed (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 15).

For a child who has reached the age of ten, additional preparation should be made for appearing in a courtroom and for expressing an opinion (consent) on the adoption. A hearing in a safe environment, special room, etc. may be offered.

The child must be prepared in an age-appropriate way by his/her social worker from the Social Assistance Directorate and supported by the foster family, by the Regional Foster Care Team, or by the staff of the residential care service or the integrated health and social service for residential care. If there are fears and unknowns, these should be addressed and allayed by providing information, clarification, planning, and additional support.

In parallel with the adoption, the work with the child should continue in preparation for the final transition to the adoptive family. To this end, it is appropriate for the child to gradually begin to prepare the personal belongings that are important to him/her and that he/she would like to keep and bring along to the new home. The child should be helped with positive conversations, support, and reassurance that, although a big change lies ahead, it is for the best, that the people he/she is going to will be his/her family forever, and that they want more than anything for him/her to feel comfortable and happy in his/her new home with them (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 16).

It is especially important for caregivers to provide adoptive parents (directly or through the Child Protection Department of the Social Assistance Directorate) with recommendations on important points in the act of caregiving: regimen, habits, preferences of the child (food, clothing, favourite activities, books and games, music, etc.), calming techniques, extracurricular activities and so on according to his/her age (ibid.).

When the child is transferred from the foster family to the adoptive family, the former should be prepared in advance that they have fulfilled their task and that their rights and obligations end with the transfer of the child. Support should also be provided to the foster family (if necessary).

The work on the subsequent preparation and transition of the child to the adoptive family should be planned in the short term with specific commitments and responsibilities for each of the participants in the process. This is monitored and supervised by the child's social worker from the Child Protection Department. The planned activities are strictly individual for each case, tailored to the specifics of the child and the adoptive parents' "movement towards each other" – pace of acceptance, coping with fear of change, etc. (ibid.).

The preparation of the child for the moment of the upcoming separation is the most difficult and complex period of the whole process. It must be carried out by the person(s) with whom the child has established a trusting relationship, with the active assistance of the family/caregivers. This may be the foster family, a member of staff from the service in which the child is placed, a member of staff from the Social Assistance Directorate, or any other person at the discretion of the foster family (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 16).

Adoptive parents should be advised on the need to provide a period of time after the adoption to devote solely to the child, to show how important he/she is to them and to create a relaxed environment for getting to know each other better and for building a trusting relationship (Методически насоки за подготовка на дете за осиновяване, 2022, 17).

Results and Discussion

Over the years, adoption has gradually stepped out of the shadow of the heavy stigmas of the past. More and more adoptive parents are not keeping the secret from their children and are introducing them to their story from an early age, including the extended family and friendship circle. Legislation, albeit slowly, is also evolving and several positive changes have been made to maternity in adoption at the initiative of adoptive parents, with the support of the Bulgarian Adopted and Adoptive Parents Association. Unfortunately, Art. 105 of the Family Code concerning the secrecy of biological origin remains unchanged.

Adoption practices are evolving and improving, but there is a long way to go. Despite the increased length and breadth of topics in the training of prospective adoptive parents, which provides a basis for and basic knowledge of the process, the motivation and attitudes of prospective parents need to be explored more in-depth. This is essential for building a strong parent–child relationship and for preventing re- abandonment.

Unfortunately, there is no state policy to support and prevent future problems in the adoptive family. Regulated two-year post-adoption monitoring is not always conducted thoroughly to identify potential problems in the parent–child relationship.

In this regard, to support adoptive parents with already adopted children, it is necessary for social workers to organize monthly group meetings; the aim is to help adoptive parents feel secure in caring

for the child, to understand some of the peculiarities in the children's behavior during the adaptation period, to raise important questions that they cannot answer, to share experiences and to provide mutual assistance in raising and educating the children, to exchange good practices and ideas (Практическо пособие, 2007, 66).

Another challenge the social worker faces is to draw up a report on the child for the purposes of adoption, which must be based on a preliminary study. It is an essential document needed to proceed with the adoption in the best interests of the child. Sometimes, the social worker responsible for the screening of prospective adoptive parents is overloaded with other duties, which prevents him/her from carrying out a thorough assessment. In this connection, it would be very useful, for example, to have a team of specialists in the department that only deals with adoption (Практическо пособие, 2007, 76).

Another difficulty for the social worker is the organization of a group meeting with the prospective adoptive parents, which has proven to be more effective. One of the reasons for this is a non-serious attitude on the part of the prospective adoptive parents; on the other hand, the Child Protection Department periodically refers one family or person for training. In order to solve this problem, perhaps some thought should be given in the direction of fixing a specific period when the training will take place, e.g. once a quarter.

Another challenge facing the social worker in preparing the child for adoption is the lack of (sufficient) information about the prospective adoptive family. It will be helpful for the social worker to have more information about the family or the individual prospective adoptive parent.

Furthermore, one should not formalize the preparation of the child for adoption in the absence of prospective adoptive parents, and there should be no continuous imputation and conversations about adoption, especially when there is no suitable adoptive family/applicant for the child. In this sense, it is good to stick to the thesis "We are looking for a family for the child, not a child for the family."

Conclusion

The specificity of the children subject to adoption must be taken into account in view of the fact that they are at risk and that adoption is one of the protection measures. Accordingly, the training of prospective adoptive parents should include information about the impact of various adverse conditions on children at risk, which may lead to disruptions in their socialization and adaptation, and which are a serious prerequisite for the emergence of emotional and behavioural problems, as well as intellectual underdevelopment (Zlatkova-Doncheva, 2022, 108). The lack of preparation and information on these issues can lead to premature termination of the adoption.

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