Remove Barriers and Latino Families Will Adopt

Adoption in the Latino Community

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The Latino Family Institute (LFI), a federally and state funded adoption and foster care agency in Southern California, understands that certain factors keep Latino families from pursuing formal adoption. Director Maria Quintanilla has identified procedures that neutralize barriers for Latino families, foster trust in agencies, and empower families. Her findings, summarized below, address issues unique to the Latino adoption experience.

Like many other communities of color, Latinos have an established history of informal adoption?children have long been raised by grandparents, aunts and uncles, and godparents. The Latino Family Institute (LFI) was founded to help Latino families navigate the adoption process and help Latino children. Then, before implementing a program to help families, LFI developed a clear understanding of the organizational and cultural barriers that keep Latino families from adopting.

Organizational Barriers:
Mistrust of government agencies: For Latinos, experiences both in their countries of origin and in the U.S. keep them from seeking contact with government agencies or organizations they view as government agents. Corruption and political persecution are common in many Latin American countries and inspire fear in both immigrant families and acculturated Latinos. Social service agencies, often perceived as extensions of the government, are automatically mistrusted. In California, recent anti-immigrant initiatives have led to even more government mistrust. Prospective adopters' concerns about their immigration status, as well as that of other family members, may prevent Latinos from submitting to fingerprinting and background checks. Families may also be reluctant to openly talk about themselves during the home study process.

Traditional agencies not viewed as community friendly: Many traditional adoption agencies are located in areas inaccessible to the Latino community. Staff members fail to reflect Latinos' community or speak their language, forms are not available in Spanish, and agency hours do not accommodate working people. Other discouraging practices include a lack of timely response to initial inquiries; delays in processing; limited agency contact between the time when the home study is completed and a child is placed; and the length and complexity of application forms, financial reports, and legal documents. Few traditional agencies are open to walk-in clients or those who prefer to drop off paperwork, common practices for Latinos and consistent with the cultural custom of personalismo?the preference for personal rather than impersonal or institutional contacts.

Lack of culturally and linguistically responsive recruitment strategies: Efforts to approach the Latino community with culturally-appropriate recruitment and retention strategies - available in both English and Spanish - have been limited. Culturally responsive services may be lacking because traditional agencies harbor the institutionalized belief that Latinos, particularly immigrants, do not adopt or will not meet qualifications. The Latino community in general is viewed as system dependent, rather than as a resource for children in the system. Because of these beliefs, traditional adoption recruitment approaches are not well suited for Latino families.

Cultural Barriers:
Lack of knowledge about eligibility requirements: Many Latinos are not aware that they are eligible to adopt, since only the wealthy are able to adopt in their countries of origin. Believing that the income standards must be even higher in the United States, some Latinos are reluctant to pursue the adoption process.

Stigma attached to infertility: The stigma of infertility is painful for any couple and Latinos?raised in a culture that highly values fertility, virility, and children?are especially vulnerable. For many Latinos, giving birth to children may be their life goal and how they define family. Infertility affects the entire family and as the couple deals with their loss, the extended family grieves their lost roles as grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Some infertile couples feel that inquiring about adoption is an admission of their infertility.
Religious beliefs may further intensify the stigma. Some Latinos believe that infertility is a punishment from God. Because they cannot oppose God's will, these couples believe infertility is their cross to bear and they must simply accept childlessness.

High number of male children available for adoption: Historically, Latino families have been proud of raising sons, yet when it comes to adoption, Latinos prefer daughters. Our experience indicates that when married couples adopt, wives who initiate the adoption process feel more able to relate to girls. As with other ethnic groups, Latino parents believe that females are easier to handle, less aggressive, and more openly affectionate than males.

In addition, cultural beliefs suggest that a girl is more likely to remain close to her family throughout her life, while a boy will be less involved with his family of origin as he gets older. Latino families may also be influenced to adopt a girl because of negative media portrayals of Latino males as criminals and gang members. To respect his wife's wishes, a Latino husband may put his desire to raise a son on hold, and take full responsibility for the couple's infertility. In this way he can compensate for his feelings of helplessness and regain his role as the family provider.

Misconceptions about children with special needs: Latino families may become discouraged about adopting a child who has an alarming diagnosis or label, such as prenatal drug exposure, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Since children of color are more likely to be labeled, many Latino children available for adoption will have one or more of these designations.

Medical etiology versus folk etiology: Some Latino families have misconceptions about the cause of their adopted child's behavioral, health, or developmental delays. For example, a family might believe that a child's medical conditions are due to the birth mother's choice of adoption for the child. Depending upon how strongly entrenched they are in these beliefs, parents may be less willing to be matched with children who have special needs and less willing to comply with treatment plans.

Overcoming Barriers:
To retain Latino families, agency staff must anticipate prospective parents' needs. Address the topics listed below - in recruitment materials, orientation sessions, pre-service trainings, and throughout the approval process - and your agency can help to address Latino families' concerns, and make the path to adoption welcoming.

"Reinforce that services are free. In Latin American countries, only the wealthy can afford to pay the cost of agency adoptions (though informal and kinship adoptions without agency involvement are quite common). Explain early on that the government pays the agency to find families and even provides subsidies to help families raise adopted children. Let the families know that the government wants to help children find permanent homes" because families are good for children and because adoptive parents save the government money.

* Clarify your agency's relationship with the government. Latino families - especially immigrant families - are often more willing to work with private nonprofits than public agencies. If your agency is nonprofit, tell families that it is not government run. Whether your agency is public or private, reinforce that information collected about families is confidential. Prospective parents worry (for themselves or for other family members living in their home) that getting involved with adoption agencies may bring scrutiny from immigration bureaus or police. Be upfront about what information will be collected and why, and with whom it will be shared.

* Establish personal relationships between staff members and prospective families. Introduce all staff members at orientation. Give families an organizational chart with all of the staff members' names and contact information. Clarify staff members' roles and responsibilities, and emphasize that staff are trained professionals, available as resources to the families. Latino families typically appreciate knowing the title and training that professionals who are serving them have earned.

* Acknowledge stereotypes and help families examine their own biases. Latino families frequently express a preference for girls. Ask them about this preference. They will likely say that girls stay closer to the family, cause less trouble with the law, and won't have substance abuse problems. Discuss societal stereotypes about Latino males and help families to see that they too are buying into the belief that Latino boys are criminals and gang members (and help them to recognize that girls get into trouble too). Highlight that without permanent, loving families, children are far more likely to live up to these stereotypes.
Address spirituality. Allow families to talk about spiritual beliefs, especially any related to their infertility. Overcome their initial hesitation to talk by de-personalizing the discussion. Say, “Other families have told us that they believe infertility is a punishment from God or a cross to bear. Have you heard those sorts of ideas?” Always mention that many families see infertility not as punishment from God, but instead as a calling to adopt. Involving other Latino families who have already adopted as speakers can also help.

* Explain who the children are and where they’ve come from. Explain in detail the process by which children become available for adoption, letting prospective parents know that children have not been kidnapped or stolen (as may be a concern in their country of origin). Be honest about abuse and neglect the children may have suffered. Clarify the difference between corporal punishment and abuse?Latino families may fear that the way they were raised or the way they raised other children was abusive and withdraw from the process. Still, tell them that because of the children’s histories, spanking is not an acceptable form of discipline. Then share other techniques that are effective. Discuss common treatment plans used to help children with different special needs (medication, physical therapy, counseling, etc.), mentioning that using folk treatments is acceptable but only in conjunction with the traditional interventions.

The Latino Family Institute has worked hard to make adoption a feasible option for Latino families in California. To learn more about adoptions and foster care, contact Latino families at LFI, 1501 West Cameron Avenue, Suite 240, West Covina, California 91790; 800-294-9161 ext. 212 (Bilingual) or log onto www.latinoadoptions.com.

About Maria L. Quintanilla, LCSW, Executive Director, Latino Family Institute:
Maria Quintanilla is Executive Director of Latino Family Institute, Inc. (LFI). LFI is the only Latino Adoption Agency in Southern California. LFI specializes in providing adoption, kinship and foster care services to the Latino community.