A TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS IN ANDALUSIA

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In order to respond to prospective adopters' needs of preparation and support, a training programme was launched in Andalusia to be included in the initial phases of adoption procedures. Using a methodology based on active participation, the goals included adopters' reflection on the challenges of adoption, on their own resources and on how to respond to potential problematic situations, with the ultimate aim of making the adoption experience a more positive one for all those involved. This article describes the training programme as published in 2006 in Andalusia. The programme has become a reference for others developed in different Spanish regions.
Keywords: Adoption, Training programme, Intervention model, Adoptive families, Adopted children.

Para dar respuesta a la necesidad de apoyo y formación a las familias que se disponen a realizar una adopción, se ha diseñado el Programa de Formación para la Adopción en Andalucía, constituyéndose como una de las primeras fases dentro del nuevo modelo de intervención en materia de adopción. A través de una metodología activa se pretende que los participantes analicen las características de los procesos adoptivos, reflexionen sobre los retos que la adopción supone, consideren sus propios recursos y aprendan a afrontar posibles situaciones conflictivas, con el objetivo último de que las adopciones sean más satisfactorias para todos. En el presente trabajo se describe el programa de formación editado en 2006 en la comunidad autonómica de Andalucía, que se ha constituido como modelo de referencia de otros programas de formación posteriores llevados a cabo en otras comunidades autónomas.
Palabras clave: Adopción, Programa de formación, Modelo de intervención, Familias adoptivas, Niños adoptados.

THE NEED FOR ADOPTION TRAINING PROGRAMMES

In recent decades, adoption policy in Spain has undergone notable developments, due above all to a new perspective on adoption. Today, the adoption process revolves around the needs of the child, both in the phases prior to the adoption itself and in those which follow it. The adoptive parent training programme presented in this article forms part of initiatives in relation to the pre-adoption phase.

The idea for training emerged from the needs detected in families who had adopted children in the Spanish autonomous region of Andalusia (*Andalucía*) between 1987 and 1993. In 1995, a study was carried out with nearly 400 adoptive families (Palacios, Sánchez-Sandoval, & Sánchez Espinosa, 1997), providing a wealth of information on many aspects. The level of satisfaction reported by these families with regard to the adoptions was very high, and 98% considered their children to be totally integrated in their family. Likewise, at the time of the study, between 90% and 95% of the families rated as good or very good the children's health status, growth, psychological development, school adjustment and relations with other people.

In spite of this general level of satisfaction, some problems were also identified. For example, the families expressed their dissatisfaction with the information they had received about the characteristics of the children they adopted, which was rated as insufficient by 46% of the families with regard to physical and health antecedents, by 72% with regard to psychological and behavioural characteristics, and by 64% with regard to social circumstances.

Substantial deficiencies were also found with regard to specific aspects of adoptive parenthood. Thus, despite the advantages associated with adoptees' knowing about the fact that they are adopted, many of the children in the cited study were unaware of it, and a high percentage even over the age of 6 or 7. Although nearly all those parents who had not yet spoken with their children about the adoption said they were intending to do so, the proposed moment or form of telling them were not always the most appropriate; thus, for example, only 15% of

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these families were intending to do so before the age of 6 years, and 17% of them did not intend to take the initiative, but were going to wait until the children themselves asked questions, whilst 30% thought that talking to the child just once about this issue would be sufficient.

The study also highlighted the existence of families in which the adoption could be considered satisfactory in general, but in which information about the adoption was not being well handled (36% of the sample), as well as appreciable percentages of families in which the adoption experience could be considered problematic (18%) or quite/highly problematic (18%). It seemed there was a clear need to try and reduce these percentages, increasing attitudes and behaviours that would produce better communication, and in general a more positive experience of the adoption situation.

The difficulties and needs for support of adoptive families are not, of course, confined to the sample studied in the work to which we have just referred. Various studies in other countries (e.g., Brooks, Allen & Barth, 2002; Cohen, Duvall, & Coyne, 1994; Rushton, 2004) have also highlighted the preparation and support needs in those who adopt. Such needs have grown, moreover, as the profile of adoptions has evolved from being relatively simple (newborns with scarcely any problems adopted by couples with fertility problems) to being increasingly complicated, with respect to both adoptees (children of highly diverse origins, often adopted together with siblings, and frequently after strongly adverse experiences) and adoptive families (all types of personal and family circumstances, presence of other children in the family, etc.).

This change in adoption profiles has been occurring in all Western countries, which have recognized the need to respond with increasingly complex intervention models to the ever-increasing and progressively diverse demands of adoptive parents and adopted children. As part of this more complex and sophisticated professional response, there is increasing reference to adoptive parent preparation in numerous countries in both empirical analyses and more general reflections on professional intervention in adoption (Biafora, Javier, Baden & Camacho-Gingerich, 2007; Farber, Timberlake, Mudd, & Cullen, 2003; Hart & Luckock, 2004; Sar, 2000). Brodzinsky (2008) recently collated a large body of information on adoptive parent preparation, its foundations and its principles, discussing also proposals for intervention initiatives, which should form part of a continuum that begins prior to the adoption and extends beyond the incorporation of the adopted child into his or her new family. The implication is that while more and more importance is ascribed to preparation for adoptive parenthood, it should not be seen as the only type of intervention necessary for ensuring the smooth running of adoptions which are, in general, increasing in their complexity.

In any case, and as Brodzinsky (2008) points out, it is not enough to develop good training programmes: it is also necessary to provide better training for the professionals involved in adoption processes (including those who run training programmes) and to make training programmes mandatory in the same way as are suitability assessments. Another crucial aspect concerns the empirical assessment of the programme's impact, a process replete with difficulties, as highlighted in the work by Rushton and Monck (2009), who compared, in a randomized controlled trial, the outcomes for a cognitive-behavioural approach, a psychoeducational approach, and a third group without any special kind of intervention.

In the Spanish case, the need to improve intervention processes in the field of adoption was not confined, therefore, to training programmes and was not exclusive to Andalusia. Indeed, at the same time as the programme discussed in this article was being developed, other changes in professional intervention policy were being introduced (for example, with regard to suitability assessments). That the need for adoption training was also being considered elsewhere was highlighted by the fact that other autonomous regions, such as Extremadura and Castilla-La Mancha, also commissioned the design of adoptive parent training programmes. In the case of Andalusia, a multidisciplinary team led by Jesús Palacios, Pere Amorós and Jesús Fuertes began work with the aim of developing an initial project (Palacios, Amorós, Fuertes, León, Sánchez-Sandoval, & Fuentes, 1999) that was run as a pilot scheme in the province of Seville, with a total of 147 applicants for adoption who attended various training programmes. Thanks to the contributions of many professionals who applied the pilot version with these groups of applicants and who provided detailed assessments of each activity and each session, a final revision and refinement produced the *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* (Adoption Training Programme) (Palacios, León, Sánchez-Sandoval, Amorós, Fuentes, & Fuertes, 2006), which constitutes a new, totally revised and updated edition of the original version.

In accordance with the underlying principles of the programme, which closely resemble the later proposals by Brodzinsky (2008), preparation for adoption should have three essential features: first, as a general objective, it should provide applicants for adoption with a series of resources that enable them to cope with the realities of their new situation as adoptive parents; second, the training programme should be adapted as closely as possible to the particular characteristics of the type of adoption involved; and finally, the programme should be designed for adults and with a view to producing durable, significant and profound changes.

Education and support for families wishing to adopt, as a preliminary step in the process:

✔ on the one hand, permit applicants to prepare themselves for the different challenges and difficulties they may face throughout the adoptive process;

✔ and on the other, act as a preventive instrument, giving public authorities and those working with them better guarantees of successful adoptions, bearing in mind their responsibility for ensuring that the children in their care are placed in a family environment that is adequate for their development.

DESIGN OF THE PROGRAMME
Participants in the preparation process
The preparation process is designed for groups of around 15 people who obtain, at the end of the course, a certificate stating the number of education sessions they have attended and the type of adoption preparation (international, national, and special-needs national).

Objectives
The general objectives of this programme can be grouped in two blocks:

✔ *Short-term objectives*:
  ✔ To help applicants for adoption to thoroughly consider their decision to adopt, and to find the closest fit between the type of adoption they apply for and the current reality of adoption.
  ✔ To facilitate self-selection or self-appraisal of applicants, based on the idea that adequate information and education puts them in a better position to judge their own possibilities and family resources.

✔ *Long-term objectives*:
  ✔ To support applicants in their preparation to be adoptive parents through the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and strategies that help them to prevent the appearance of some problems and to resolve satisfactorily any conflictive situations that may arise.

✔ To promote in applicants durable, significant and profound changes in relation to the adaptation, integration and upbringing of the adopted child.

Structure of the Programme: Distribution and content of the sessions
The first version of the programme comprised eight sessions. The first four were basic, common to all applicants, and sufficient for those applying to adopt young Spanish children without special needs or problems. After these sessions, applicants for special adoptions took two specialized sessions, as did those opting for international adoption.

The *Programa de Formación para la Adopción*, in its final version, is organized on the basis of two clearly different itineraries, one for national and the other for international adoption. Although there are many similarities in the specific content of the two itineraries, there are also some subtle or more pronounced differences. However, the basic structure of the two itineraries is the same, and the content worked upon can be summarized as follows:

✔ the *first session* deals with questions related to the motivation for the adoption, general doubts about the subject of adoption, the profile of potential adoptees and the experiences of those who have already been through this type of adoption process.

✔ the *second session* focuses on preparation for the arrival of the child and the subsequent process of adaptation. Here it is a question of being able to situate the participants in the programme, in terms not only of their own perspective as people waiting for the child, but also, and above all, of the adoptee's perspective. This session also includes work on familiarizing the adoptive parents with the processes that will ensue once the child is incorporated into the family, and to provide strategies for ensuring that the incorporation of the child and the subsequent process of adaptation go as smoothly as possible. In the case of international adoption, this session should also address matters related to the parents' trip to collect the child.

✔ the *third session* covers issues of upbringing, with the aim of familiarizing applicants with the range of problematic situations that may arise and helping

them to explore appropriate approaches for dealing with them.

- ✔ the *fourth session* deals with communication about the adoption, attempting first of all to sensitize applicants to the need to communicate with the child on the issue, and secondly to provide them with principles and strategies that permit them to develop appropriate and satisfactory communication processes with their children.

Whilst in the case of the international adoption itinerary these four sessions focus from the outset on issues related to that type of adoption and its peculiarities, the national adoption itinerary explores in all sessions various situations and cases specifically relevant to the two sub-categories involved: special-needs adoption and ordinary adoption. In the particular case of special-needs adoption there is an additional *fifth session* focusing specifically on analysis of the differences involved and the implications of these for the child's upbringing.

Methodology of the programme and techniques employed

The training programme is characterized by an experiential, participatory, interactive and face-to-face methodology, so that the active involvement of the participants, on the one hand, and an optimal management of group dynamics, on the other, are essential. The combination of these two ingredients will help create a climate of confidence that facilitates communication and encourages participants to express doubts and discuss feelings and experiences; this, in turn, accommodates the exchange of experiences between those making up the course group, and helps the sessions

to flow in a well-organized setting amenable to good relations between all those involved.

Many of the programme activities follow a problem-based learning methodology, involving identification of the problem in question, analysis of its possible causes and the proposal of potential solutions. In line with this methodology, participants must first of all identify and become familiar with the characteristics of the children awaiting adoption, the different challenges involved in the adoption process and the problematic situations that may arise during the period of adaptation. Secondly, and based on the necessary reflection and analysis in relation to the issues addressed, participants must analyze the reasons behind the situations considered, with a view to facilitating the understanding, acceptance and internalization of the issues raised. Finally, guided by the training coordinators, they should seek strategies, skills and resources that could be useful for resolving the difficulties identified.

The techniques employed for putting this methodology into practice are mostly based on participation. Thus, simultaneous dialogues, guided discussion, work in small groups, brainstorming, case studies, role-play, video forums, guided fantasy, paper-and-pencil exercises and (rather less frequently) theoretical presentations all form part of the preparation sessions, adapted to the objectives and content to be addressed. Such group techniques make it possible to work systematically and in structured fashion on knowledge, ideas, feelings, expectations, experiences, skills and attitudes, following the internal logic to which we referred in the previous paragraph.

Within the *Programa de Formation para la Adoption* the role of the coordinators is fundamental. Each course

	International Adoption	National Adoption	Special Adoption
TABLE 1 **STRUCTURE OF THE PREPARATION SESSIONS**			
1st Session:	*"What do we want? What will it be like? How will it all go?"*	*"What do we want? What will it be like? How will it all go?"*	*"What do we want? What will it be like? How will it all go?"*
2nd Session:	*Prepare the arrival, facilitate the adaptation"*	*"Prepare the arrival, facilitate the adaptation"*	*"Prepare the arrival, facilitate the adaptation"*
3rd Session:	*"The task of upbringing"*	*"The task of upbringing"*	*"The task of upbringing"*
4th Session:	*"What to say and how to say it? When to start? Reaction?"*	*"What to say and how to say it? When to start? Reaction?"*	*"What to say and how to say it? When to start? Reaction?"*
5th Session:	-----	-----	*"Recognizing and accepting the differences"*

group is "dynamized" by two coordinators, one of which has basic training in psychology or education and the other with a background in social work.

In addition to the printed material in the handbook, the adoption training programme is complemented with audiovisual material on the DVDs (one for national and one for international adoption) that accompany it, as well as a guide for parents called *Adelante con la adopción* ("Going ahead with adoption") (Palacios, Sánchez-Sandoval, & León, 2004), which is given out to participants at the end of the course and summarizes the main content covered in the sessions.

Organization of the time

The programme is non-intensive, so that it is not concentrated in a period of two or three consecutive days. Given the complexity and profundity of the issues involved in this type of training programme, participants need some time for reflection between one session and another, at both the individual level and to discuss things with their partner and other people. An intensive format would make such individual and joint reflection quite difficult, preventing the proper assimilation and internalization of content, skills, attitudes, and so on.

Each session is of around a maximum three-and-a-half hours' duration, with a break of some 20 minutes.

APPLICATION OF THE PROGRAMME

The *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* was launched in 1999 as a pilot project in the province of Seville. The project was commissioned and funded by the Social Affairs Department of the Andalusian Regional Government (*Junta de Andalucía*), to be implemented by the Andalusian Association for Adoption Assistance (*Asociación Andaluza de Ayuda a la Adopción*), known as LLAR, a non-profit organization offering attention and information to people interested in adopting or fostering children. After preliminary work providing information to applicants on waiting lists and helping them update their applications, the two first preparation groups were formed, in a joint initiative with the Adoption and Fostering Department of Seville's Child Welfare Service.

From the year 2000, application of the programme was extended to the rest of Andalusia, also via an agreement with the LLAR Association. The first province in which it was launched, after Seville, was Malaga, followed by the remaining Andalusian provinces. As for the *sequence of events*, this training programme is situated after the provision of initial information and prior to the suitability assessment. Thus, applicants for adoption who participate in the programme will not yet have begun the series of psychological and social interviews necessary for obtaining their suitability certificate, but they will have attended an information meeting on the current adoption situation in the Andalusia region.

As regards the question of the *dependence or independence of the preparation and suitability assessment processes*, it was decided to consider them as totally independent from one another, so that the professionals who impart the training programme are different from those who will subsequently carry out the suitability assessment on the same people, with no transfer of information between the two teams about the applicants. The procedure is organized in this way basically to allow training programme participants to feel free to express any doubts, concerns and points of view, without fear of these being used against them in the suitability assessment. At the beginning of the sessions, participants are informed of the independence between the two processes and urged to express themselves with total freedom.

ASSESSMENT AND ADJUSTMENT OF THE PROGRAMME

At the end of each training programme, participants are requested to rate the experience. In general, highly positive opinions are expressed with regard to the dynamic of the sessions, the group reflection on the challenges of adoptive parenthood, the opportunity to express one's doubts and fears, the information provided, the preparation for facing future difficulties, the companionship among programme participants, and the exchange of ideas and opinions about adoption. In fact, over the course of the sessions, participants' satisfaction translated in most cases into high levels of participation and involvement, which often led to the sessions being extended, given the interest aroused in the groups by some topics and their desire to continue the discussion. As already mentioned, one of the outcomes of this dynamic has been the emergence of informal support networks among the participants, which without doubt constitutes one of the great contributions of the programme.

In addition to the global assessment made by the participants themselves, in the pilot phase the programme was also assessed by its coordinators. To this end, together with the programme material, they were given a series of assessment forms on which to provide a detailed

rating of the programme. Coordinators were requested to fill out the rating forms on the day of the session or the following day, so as to give as faithful a report of the experiences as possible.

This assessment was considered essential so that the pilot phase of the programme could serve to adjust content, techniques and time schedules, and in general to improve the programme. A report card was provided for each activity, for the rating of its timetabling, implementation and results, and another card for each session, rating objectives, content, carrying out of the activities, technique, materials and scheduling.

Throughout 1999, a total of 147 applicants for adoption participated in the preparation process. Of these, 137 (93.2%) completed the course, with just 10 (6.8%) opting to leave. Of those who completed the training programme, 46 (31.3%) took part only in the four first, basic sessions, given the characteristics of their application (adoption of Spanish children under 7 without special needs); 85 (57.8%) also participated in the two sessions for special-needs adoptions, and 6 (4.1%) completed the four common sessions and the two international adoption sessions.

The 147 applicants involved in the preparation process were distributed among 10 groups. The majority of these groups were basically characterized by their *heterogeneity*, made up of applicants for different categories of adoption (young Spanish children without special characteristics, and special-needs and/or international adoptions). However, *homogeneous* groups were also formed (groups made up of applicants for a single adoption type), so that the different grouping options permitted by the programme were represented in the pilot phase.

After the first, experimental phase of implementation of the training programme, a series of conclusions were reached:

✔ The short-term objectives were met, since for a small but significant number of applicants (10 people), this process acted as a self-selection filter; these participants, after receiving the necessary information and education, were capable of considering their own expectations, possibilities and resources and deciding not to continue with the preparation process. More numerous, on the other hand, were the participants (over 75%) who after the preparation process modified their initial application to some extent (type of adoption, characteristics of the child they wished to adopt, etc.), obtaining a better degree of fit between their desires and the real possibilities of adoption, as a product of reflection and work individually, with their partner and in groups.

✔ Some problems were observed in relation to the length of the sessions, which in some cases exceeded the three-and-a-half-hour mark. Although the participants did not express dissatisfaction with regard to the duration of the sessions, it would seem reasonable not to prolong them, for various reasons of a pedagogical and practical nature.

✔ Some people with low educational level had difficulties following certain activities, mainly those which required them to write down their ideas or conclusions. This is an important issue, since the programme should be designed for people from a wide range of profiles and characteristics to feel comfortable with it.

✔ In general, the programme works extremely well, with a high degree of satisfaction reported by both the participants attending it and the professionals coordinating the sessions.

On the basis of the expert assessment of the pilot training programme carried out not only in Andalusia but also in other regions (Castilla la Mancha, Galicia, Extremadura), the year 2003 saw the completion of the first full review of the *Programa de Formación*, which gave rise to a second version. Various modifications were made, details of which follow, though the general characteristics as regards objectives, content, techniques, etc., are the same as those of the initial course, the principal difference concerning the reorganization of the activities to be worked on in each session:

✔ the structure of the programme was changed, with a reduction in the number of sessions both for national (the original 6 sessions were reduced to 5, the final one being specific to special adoptions) and international adoption (the original 6 sessions were condensed into 4).

✔ activities were removed or added, whilst others were modified with regard to their materials or resources, length or form of implementation.

✔ the video-recordings of testimonies were also substantially modified. Some parts were removed, while new statements from adoptive families were added, above all for the case of international adoption, which was perhaps under-represented in the initial version.

At the end of 2004, and after a second and exhaustive assessment by the professionals who had been testing the

second version of the training programme, a third version of the *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* was completed. In this third version the modifications and adjustments made did not alter the final structure of the programme (two itineraries: national adoption, with 5 sessions, 4 common and one specific to special adoptions; and international adoption, with 4 sessions). What was changed or adjusted was the organization and content of some of the activities, while the video was also improved, with some adjustments to the sound and dubbing of some voices.

The final edition of the *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* was completed in 2006, funded and published by the Directorate-General for Children and Families of the Equality and Social Welfare Department of the Andalusian Regional Government (*Junta de Andalucía*). This final version is in printed paper form (a handbook for the National Adoption Programme and second handbook for the International Adoption Programme). Both handbooks have also been published in CD format, and there is audiovisual material on two DVDs, one focusing on testimonies recorded by adoptive families and designed for the preparation of applicants for national adoption and another designed for the preparation of applicants for international adoption.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* (Palacios et al., 2006) has been employed successfully in Andalusia since 1999 in its initial version (Palacios et al., 1999) and since 2006 in its definitive version. Moreover, other autonomous regions in Spain have taken it as a model of reference in the design of their own preparation/education programmes, adapted to the specific needs of each region (e.g., Bizkaia, Asturias, Cantabria).

Both in the first and in subsequent appraisals of the programme, it has been possible to draw some general conclusions about its functioning. In general, it can be concluded that the training programme amply fulfils its objectives, with a high degree of satisfaction both in the applicants who took it and in the professionals who coordinated the programme sessions.

Today, after more than seven thousand families from Andalusia have taken the *Programa de Formación para la Adopción*, the results can be considered extremely satisfactory. Both the professionals using it and the applicants for adoption who participate in it report high

levels of satisfaction. Clearly, then, the *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* is helping many families to be better prepared for taking on the challenges of adoption.

As stressed in the introduction, the programme easily meets the criteria for good adoptive parent training programmes (Brodzinsky, 2008), and its content is based on a well-balanced combination of the two approaches assessed by Rushton and Monk (2009), one with a clearly cognitive-behavioural orientation and the other of a decidedly psychoeducational nature.

By and large, there would seem today to be a general consensus among those involved in adoption processes – be they experts, professionals running interventions, applicants or adoptive families – as regards the need to include training programmes as an essential part of those processes. Even so, and in the wake of innovative developments in our own country (such as the case of the *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* in Andalusia), it would be advantageous to carry out an in-depth, and perhaps more long-term, assessment of the repercussions of such training in the applicants, once the adoption has taken place. It would be revealing and useful, with a view to improving the programmes and raising the quality of preparation and support for adoptive families, to be able to study the knowledge, attitudes and skills generated in families that attend such programmes, both in the short term – straight after the adoption – and in the long term – in the months and years following the child's incorporation into the family. Various areas of general content would be subject to such an in-depth assessment: ideas, attitudes and feelings about the adoption itself; the promotion of a realistic, but healthy and positive perception in adoptive parents toward their children – that they are seen by their parents as basically competent and full of potential; the encouragement of parents to feel competent, capable and self-efficacious for influencing their children in a positive way; the creation and reinforcement of affective bonds between parents and children; the promotion of specific parenting skills and strategies; the encouragement of care and other practices favourable to the children's health and development; and so on. As mentioned in the introduction, carrying out such evaluations, particularly if the aim is to compare the efficacy of diverse approaches and content, is a process replete with practical and methodological difficulties, as became clear in the recent work by Rushton and Monck (2009), though this merely means that the time and

resources devoted to this type of assessment must be greater than they would be in the case of a simpler and mostly problem-free undertaking.

It would also be of great interest to assess and subject to critical judgement, through comparative studies of different adoption training programmes, the various controversial options in relation to the adoptive parent preparation process. Such options are related to issues such as: the position of education or preparation in the adoption intervention model – whether the suitability assessment should precede the training programme or follow it; whether or not the education and suitability assessment processes should be related to one another – whether the fact of a person's taking a training programme should be one of the elements used in rating their suitability for adoption; or the homogeneous or heterogeneous composition of education course groups – whether it is preferable for preparation course groups to be made up according to the adoption category chosen or to mix in the same group people who have opted for different types of adoption.

These assessments of a structural and long-term nature could help clear up some doubts about aspects related both to the influence and effects (positive and negative) of preparation on the participating families, and to the organization and execution of the programme.

What is beyond doubt is that the launching of training programmes cannot be held up pending the availability of this sophisticated information, since in the meantime families are adopting children whose characteristics mean that responses are required immediately. In any case, if participants' satisfaction can be taken as an indicator of success, the *Programa de Formación para la Adopción* in Andalusia should be rated as satisfactory. Time will tell whether a similar approach could also be fruitful in post-adoption support, whose format has up to now in Spain tended to be of a more clinical than educational nature, when in fact the problems faced by many families after adoption demand more educational than clinical responses.

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