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Child Preparation for Adoption as an Ethical Requirement during Pre-Placement: The PPCA

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ABSTRACT

Child adoption is a highly demanding process for all those involved, including the child, parents, and professionals. Support is needed to maximize the chances of adequate preparation, focusing on not just the parents' preparedness but also the child's preparation for adoption. Preparing a child for adoption is an ethical obligation. Assuming that the child is at the center of the adoption process, this paper highlights the importance of acknowledging the child's specific needs and giving them adequate opportunity to develop into a fully engaged agent throughout the process. This article focuses on the Program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA), a specific manual intervention designed to help professionals prepare children for adoption. The program is based on theoretical concepts of the psychology of adoption, the bioecological development perspective and a narrative psychology approach. First, the PPCA's theoretical background is presented, followed by each one of its core aspects and specific activities. The article concludes with a summary of this program's major contributions to child preparation as well as recommendations for future research and practice.

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The adoption process involves considerable psychosocial complexity for those involved. Particular attention has been devoted to identifying ways to facilitate an adoptee's recovery process (Baptista et al., 2013), including their psychological adjustment (Brodzinsky, 2011) and adaptation (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014).

Developmental research has suggested that adoption often results in better outcomes for adoptees than foster care, enabling improved intelligence quotient and school performance as well as reduced behavioral problems (Christoffersen, 2012), improved behavioral adjustment, and higher self-esteem (Kernan & Lansford, 2004); this is accompanied by a decrease in the child's internalized and externalized problems (Nadeem et al., 2017). Therefore, creating optimal conditions to improve a child's psychological

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readiness for adoption (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010) should be at the heart of pre-adoptive work (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The appropriate preparation of children thus represents an ethical requirement for the adoption process itself as well as a right of the child.

This article focuses on the process of preparing children for adoption. We argue that children should be at the center of pre-placement work, which should pay attention to the specific psychological needs of the children and provide them with adequate opportunities to act and develop as fully engaged agents in the process. We first set out the context for a child's psychological preparation for adoption, and discuss this as an ethical requirement for welfare systems. We then present the Program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA), a structured program that has been specifically developed to ease the transition of children into a new adoptive family in an appropriate and ethically sensitive manner.

Children's preparation for adoption

Parent, child, and adoption characteristics contribute to an adoptive family's functioning and adjustment (Lee et al., 2020). Specific child characteristics may impact their adjustment with the adoptive family (Goldman & Ryan, 2011). Characteristics such as being an older child (Wind et al., 2005), a member of a sibling group (Smith et al., 2006), or experiencing severe emotional and behavioral problems (Selwyn et al., 2014) have been associated with negative post-adoption outcomes (Denby-Brinson et al., 2017). Attachment to the biological family (Smith & Howard, 1991) and the length of time spent in care (Rushton & Dance, 2006) are frequently associated with disruption or adoption breakdown, as reflected in the "various situations where children placed in families with an intent to adopt exit the family either before or prematurely after the completion of the legal adoption procedures" (Palacios et al., 2019, p. 131).

Disruption rates hover around 10–25% in the US (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012), 3–10% in the UK (Selwyn et al., 2014), and 1.3% in Spain (Paniagua et al., 2016). This is cause for concern among professionals and researchers.

Given that certain factors associated with adoption disruption or dissolution (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Palacios et al., 2019) are permanent, it is necessary to offer specific interventions, focused on mitigating the impact of such factors on the adoption process and increasing the chances of post-adoption well-being and stability. Achieving lasting success in adoption requires not just preparation and support for the pre-adoptive parents but also direct pre-placement work with the child (O'Dell et al., 2015).

The child welfare system has traditionally emphasized the psychological preparation of children for adoption as one of its major goals (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Child preparation for adoption is a process that begins once adoption has been identified as the goal for a child, and it continues after the child's placement within the adoptive home (Hanna, 2005) to smooth the adaptation process. Thus, it combines two distinct, interconnected goals in permanency planning: (1) the child's readiness for adoption and (2) actual placement work (Henry, 2005).

Focusing consciously on the child's readiness, Henry (2005) proposed the 3-5-7 Model. The model offers an approach for preparing children for permanency; it involves the use of seven critical skills to answer five conceptual questions, thereby allowing the child to explore three pivotal tasks in preparation for adoption: clarification, integration, and actualization (Donley-Zeigler, as cited in Henry, 2005). These tasks, in turn, reflect most of the common attributes of previous approaches to child preparation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). These include helping the child to understand the facts of their removal; enabling the child to explore feelings of loss, anger, and confusion; and empowering the child to play an active role in making plans for the future (Henry, 2005).

Clarification relates to supporting the child's understanding of the various events in their life and the meaning thereof in a developmentally and cognitively appropriate manner. This is a lengthy process and requires a trustworthy and secure collaborative relationship between the child and professional, one that supports open communication about past, present, and future events, including the concept of adoption and joining a new family (Brodzinsky, 2006). Information, facts, histories, and memories are keystones in identity formation (Grotevant et al., 2000), but disruptions and discontinuities frequently threaten this specific goal among adoptive children (Josephine & Wright, 2009).

Integration addresses the child's perception of belonging to several families, in different forms, by actualizing relationships, loyalty issues, and losses. Quite often, children who are eligible for adoption have lived with several family members and/or in diverse care settings (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009). This plural membership needs to be explored so that children can understand who had meaning for them and for whom they had meaning. In turn, they can grieve the loss of past relationships and allow themselves to form new ones in the present and future (Bowlby, 1980), such as with adoptive parents.

Actualization refers to the task of helping the child envision themselves as a member of a specific family, ideally prior to permanent family placement. This opportunity provides space for children to engage in the choices and decisions made for their benefit, thus promoting the children's

empowerment and agency in developing relationships with their new permanent families (Christens & Peterson, 2012).

The core idea of what is important in child preparation for adoption is well defined and consensual, and diverse strategies are followed by adoption agencies worldwide to prepare children for adoption. These include using lifebooks, reading adoption-related stories, conducting visits, counseling, and asking the pre-adoptive family to create photo albums or communicate over Skype so the child can gain insight into their adoptive family before actually meeting them (O'Dell et al., 2015). However, research into these techniques is lacking, and so empirical evidence on how they impact the child's subsequent development and placement quality is limited (Rushton et al., 2006).

To our knowledge, studies on the impact of preparation of the child for adoption are unclear. There is evidence showing that children with the highest level of preparation typically exhibit fewer behavioral problems in the first month after adoption (Rushton et al., 1997); however Festinger (2002) pointed to conflicting results with regard to the relationship between preparing a child for adoption and adoption disruption. One could argue that standardized and clearly specified interventions would benefit the research on the effectiveness of pre-placement work activities.

In this sense, some efforts are being made to define the preparation components for children and providing relatively standardized and clearly specified interventions (Selwyn et al., 2014); The National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness, the National Child Welfare ACC – Child/Youth Assessment & Preparation Spaulding for Children Resource Center for Adoption, the Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Partnership, Wendy's Wonderful Kids, Extreme Recruitment, Family Focus Adoption Services, Family Bound, and many others in the USA use standart preparation. More organizations are listed in the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013).

Following calls for the universalization of pre-placement preparation as a legal right of children, some countries like Portugal have established preparation of the child as a mandatory legal requirement for adoption (Regime Jurídico do Processo de Adoção, 2015). The above-mentioned objectives of clarification, actualization, and integration are at the core of a specific intervention, the Program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA) (Henriques et al., 2017c). The program includes a set of activities and techniques—such as lifebooks, timelines, and collages—to provide a frame of reference for addressing both the critical tasks related to the child's readiness for transitioning to a new family and the support for placement activities.

The ethical dimension of preparing children for adoption

There is growing recognition that preparing children for adoption should be a mandatory pre-placement activity. While the primary goal of

preparing children for adoption is to ensure their readiness to accept a new permanent family, issues of identity, loss, and attachment must also be carefully addressed to enhance the child's ability to form new bonds within a perceived safe environment (Henry, 2005).

Western societies generally recognize parents—or a child's legal guardian—as having the authority to decide what is in the child's best interests (Miller, 2010). In the case of adoption, however, such decisions are made primarily by professionals working in child welfare and protection services, and they may often be perceived by children as relative strangers imposing their decisions upon them. This dominant approach has been criticized for seeing children *solely* as vulnerable individuals in need of protection. In addition, it also commonly portrays children as being incapable of understanding or participating in the discussions and decisions that affect them (Carnevale, 2016; Montreuil et al., 2018). Consequently, children are frequently demoted to being mere subjects of the decisions made about their adoption. This may result from a commonly held, stage-focused conception of children that tends to emphasize their difference from adults —such as in their styles of moral reasoning—as deficiencies and to disregard the agential dimension of their demonstrated capacities (Carnevale, 2016).

In contrast, interdisciplinary research into childhood has demonstrated that children are active agents with moral agency (Prout, 2004). They have morally rooted understanding and preferences and a strong interest in participating in discussions and decisions that affect them, even if the widespread societal view is that they lack sufficient maturity to competently exercise such abilities. Children's intellectual capacities and emotional understanding do not necessarily develop in the same way due to the significant individual and societal variations with respect to the age in which particular levels of competence are achieved (James, 2007). This suggests that any rule about competence based *solely* on age will never be ethically satisfactory. When assessing competence, it is important to not just assess the child's general competence but also their level of understanding in relation to the specific issue at hand (Smith, 2002), adoption in this case.

The right to participate has been a relevant aspect of the Convention on the Rights of the Child since the United Nations adopted it in 1989. More recently, the Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child states children's right to participate in legal decisions affecting their life, as is the case with adoption, and their right to have their views be 'given due weight' (Council of Europe, 2016). These initiatives clearly state that children have the right to "express views freely and have an opportunity to be heard" and receive information in formats "appropriate to their age and capacities on all issues of concern to them" (Articles 13, 17), as well as to receive guidance (Article 5) within a social context that is capable of

communicating information effectively to them, while being receptive to their views (Cashmore, 2002; James, 2007). In addition, children should receive all necessary information and explanations about the possible consequences of their expressed wishes (Leviner, 2018).

Activities that are commonly part of preparing children for adoption within the foster care system should provide the best possible care to the child during pre-placement. Some ethical issues are particularly salient, though, namely: (i) the moral obligation to ensure that the child's best interest is promoted while also acknowledging the rights of the pre-adoptive parents and (ii) that what may be best for most children may not necessarily be best for a *particular* child.

It is widely acknowledged that children in the care of a child welfare system, and therefore eligible for adoption, are considered the most vulnerable children in society. For this reason, the ethical standard of the 'best interest of the child' applies (UNICEF, 1989). In general, the concept of best interest is coupled with that of beneficence, which involves 'acting to promote the good of the individual to the maximum extent', namely through taking decisions and actions that will ensure the greatest benefit in relation to a likely burden (Buchanan & Brock, 1990). This concept is frequently referenced in the literature (Kernan & Lansford, 2004; Miller, 2010; Wardle, 2004) and in international documents, and it has been argued that considering best interest and beneficence should be standard when making welfare decisions involving children, even if the rather general character of the concept often creates interpretation difficulties when applied to real cases (Kopelman, 1997). In particular, the distinction between physical benefits and social and psychological benefits is often controversial. Article 3.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that "in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (UNICEF, 1989, p. 4).

Pre-adoptive children are entitled to the presented set of rights during any pre-placement preparation work and are based on our own clinical and research practices with children eligible for adoption and candidate adoptive families in Portugal. They also formed the conceptual basis for developing the PPCA, which is presented next.

Program for preparing children for adoption (PPCA)

Overall framing of the PPCA

Before describing PPCA's structure and contents, we present the core assumptions and characteristics of the program: (a) building a trustworthy relationship, and (b) implementation of the manual intervention program.

Trustworthy relationship

PPCA's design was inspired by (i) a constructivist epistemology expressing the proactivity and agency of the person's meaning-making process, and ensuring change in order to achieve better self-organization; and (ii) a bio-ecological and transactional perspective of human development that emphasizes the critical role of the *quality* of the relationship being maintained with the child as a means to facilitate the child's agency and well-being.

Moreover, the program attempts to engage the child in the adoption project, while promoting the coherent entwinement of interactions between the various microsystems in which the child participates (e.g., school, foster home, community). Therefore, the program's application occurs within a natural context and in accordance with the bioecological and transactional perspectives described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Sameroff and Fiese (2000), respectively.

According to the PPCA, preparation for adoption should start with an exploration of the child's actual life and then evolve to the next stage, i.e., involving the adoptive family. This builds upon strong support from the care professional, with whom the child has already constructed a secure relationship, to accept and promote the child's emotional expression of fear and doubt. The adult should base their relationship with the child on trust, respect, clear communication, and transparent information (Gallagher et al., as cited in Gal, 2017). The care professional also embraces preparation for adoption as a collaborative endeavor through which decisions are shared while, ultimately, still being responsible for the process.

Manual intervention program

This program aims to provide consistent support to the child in their preparation for adoption, and it features a common language among those working with children, which can be useful in assuring continuity in the preparation process across care professionals and families (Henry, 2005). It intends to offer a comprehensive system for care professionals to address all the crucial aspects of adoption preparation. Before applying it, though, professionals should undergo twenty-one hours of presentational training where they will learn and experience the program through role-playing techniques. Supervision should also be available to support professionals throughout the program's application.

The PPCA allows flexibility in conducting sessions and making overall preparations. As a broad guideline, however, sessions should typically happen on a weekly basis and take place in a space familiar for the child. The professional is expected to manage the pace and regularity of the sessions, and the number of activities in each session of the program, according to

the specific characteristics (e.g., age), reactions, and needs of each child. In addition, family and placement history are crucial aspects of each child's preparation, so the professional should give them due weightage when applying the PPCA. The PPCA is clearly structured to allow standardization of preparation practices across cases, but it also embraces the subjective nature of the relationship between the child and the professional, with the latter being responsible for making decisions about the preparation process while also exploring the child's perspectives and considering them for such decisions. This includes offering the child shared control over how the application of the program should evolve and how the child's preparation should take place. What is more, suitable adjustments based on age should also be considered and negotiated between professional and child. The PPCA was designed for children from 3 to 15 years old, so a wide range of adaptations in the type of proposed activities should be considered. Other possible adaptations concern cases with LGBT adoptive families, international adoptions, groups of siblings (even in the case of separation), and children with disabilities.

The PPCA is published and organized in three volumes: a manual (Henriques et al., 2017c), a professional's workbook (Henriques et al., 2017a), and a child's workbook (Henriques et al., 2017b). The manual presents detailed information about theoretical background objectives, activities, and materials for implementing the ten stages of the program. Comprehensive considerations about the role of the applicant are also presented. The professional's workbook includes detailed suggestions for introducing the activities to the child and allows care professionals to register the process of applying the program as well as monitor overall progress in terms of the child's reactions to the program and the goals for child preparation. A workbook is offered to the child during the second encounter, which is then used for performing all the drawing and writing activities. This workbook is introduced to the child as a journey diary alongside a backpack and collectible stickers, using the metaphor of an "adventurous journey" to represent the transition to a new adoptive family.

The PPCA's theory, main components, stages, goals, and specific activities

The PPCA comprises four main components: i) talking about life changes; ii) understanding one's own history; iii) dealing with loss; and iv) transition to the new family. The PPCA intervention aims overall to help the child deal with the main challenges of the adoption. However, we can consider that each PPCA component is specifically connected with: openness of

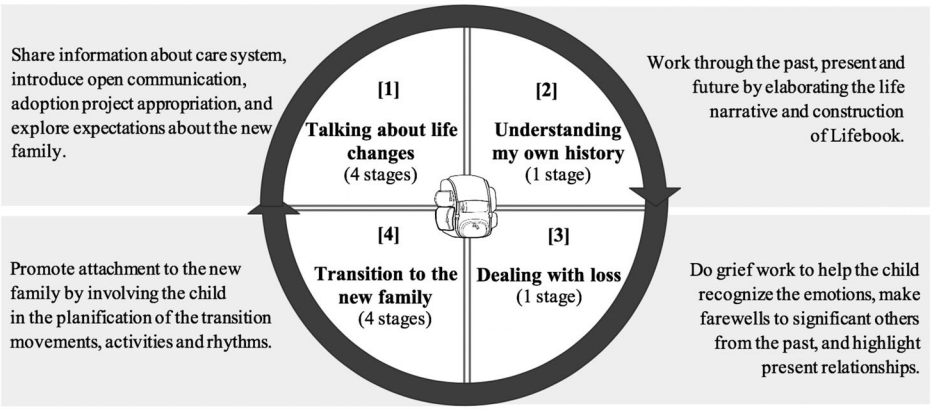

Figure 1. PPCA's components.

communication about adoption; adoptive identity; loss of biological ties; and child participation in their own adoption plans, respectively (Figure 1).

The four components are divided over ten progressive stages, and each stage contains specific objectives, organized activities, and tasks that are mainly inspired by narrative and cognitive behavioral approaches. They address the specific demands of the adoption process, and they are to be completed at the child's own pace and rhythm and according to their needs and sensibilities. Transcribed examples of ways to present activities are suggested, as are the specific materials needed. In what follows, we present each component, stage, and activity of the PPCA.

Talking about life changes

The PPCA's first component, *Talking about life changes,* seeks to develop an adequate understanding of adoption and frame it within a wider structure of protection that aims to achieve the best outcome for the child's life.

The concept of openness in communication about adoption underpins this component, and this refers not just to information sharing but also the co-construction of meanings, emotional empathy, and connectedness (Brodzinsky, 2006). More open communication patterns are associated with improved psychological adjustment of adopted adolescents and their adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2005; Grotevant et al., 2011; Kohler et al., 2002; Wrobel et al., 2003) and enhanced relationship quality (Passmore et al., 2007).

The underlying thread of openness in communication includes ongoing discussions with the child about their perceptions of adoption, family, and protection, while integrating and organizing past, present, and future experiences. It is, therefore, necessary to ensure that children are given the opportunity to express their beliefs and doubts about all these concepts, so that any misunderstandings can be clarified before they are guided through

the adoption process. Talking about previous experiences within the biological family or care settings and of legal decisions about adoption is also encouraged, thus empowering children to confront their uncertainty (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010) and helping them understand what it means to be an adopted child (Grotevant et al., 2000). Promoting open communication about adoption intends to support the child and to reduce the stress from the novelty of potentially being adopted. Ideally, the child will generalize conversations to other contexts and progressively feel at ease discussing their own adoption project. As this happens, more questions and answers are explored, thereby increasing the child's sense of control, self-involvement, and agency. Fostering sense-making and encouraging the integration of the child's life events in a developmentally appropriate manner is key to forming a coherent narrative (Galvin, 2003). Open and honest communication with children should include the reasons that led to their removal from the biological family, their current placement, and the prospect of being adopted by a new family, because this should enhance the adoptee's sense of place, history, identity, and value (Friedlander, as cited in Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001).

Specific activities are organized around four stages: (1) *Different live projects*; (2) *The news*; (3) *I know where I am, and I know where I'm going*; and (4) *This is also my project*.

Different live projects

In the first stage, the activities focus on information and conversations about foster care and the decisions that need to be made to ensure security and well-being. This starts with an exploration of the children's views about foster care and future arrangements (activity 1), situating them among other foster children they may know, and their permanency plans (activity 2). This creates a space for clearing children's doubts and helping them understand the measures in place for their protection.

The news

The second stage is dedicated to communicating the legal decision for adoption (activity 1). The program includes two activities that assist in and support this stage: the presentation of an "adventurous journey" as a metaphor for adoption, thereby inviting children to "prepare for adventure" (activity 2); and an activity to help children distinguish their doubts, fears, and requests in connection to the news of being adopted and becoming part of a new adoptive family (activity 3). At the end of this stage, the PPCA promotes a fourth activity centered on communicating the adoption decision to significant others in the child's life (activity 4). Although

lengthy, this crucial and impactful step is intended to help the child consider the court's decision and the implications of terminating contact with the biological family by clarifying the procedure, people involved, and expectations.

I know where i am, and i know where i'm going

In the third stage, professionals emotionally support children following the adoption news and clarify their expected doubts and fears. This stage is also aimed at informing the child of and explaining complex concepts like "adoption" and "adoptive family" as well as manage any disorder or confusion in this regard. In particular, activities for exploring the emotional impact of the adoption news (activity 1), the 'visualization of a family' (activity 2), and an exploration of the adoption concept (activity 3) are presented during this stage.

Evolution of the process toward stage 4 requires competent handling of the previous steps. Professionals need to feel secure with how children are assimilating the novelty of the adoption project, and they should feel confident that a secure space for expressing questions, doubts, and further curiosity has been created.

This is also my project

This fourth stage addresses the child's participation in their own adoption project by focusing on the child's expectations and demands. The child is invited to 'dream' about the new adoptive family (activity 1), to go 'shopping' for new parents (an adaptation from National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption) (activity 2), and to create a 'wish list' for the matching process (activity 3).

Understanding one's own history

The second component of PPCA, *Understanding one's own history,* uses narrative-based activities (McAdams, 1993) to integrate spatio-temporal information and memories of past events, connecting them with a child's present reality.

From an early age, children build stories about events, and these grow in complexity with their development (Fivush et al., 1995). A life-narrative approach links and integrates single-event narratives, relating them to the self and giving unity and purpose to the individual (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Thus, this complex process requires the children to integrate their adoptive identities (Grotevant, 1992) into this larger self (Brodzinsky et al., 1993; Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011).

Identity formation is an ongoing process that begins in early childhood and continues throughout one's later life (Erikson, 1980). Often, an adoptive child has limited, and sometimes dubious, information about their biological family, which presents an extra challenge to identity formation (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Freundlich, 2000; Grotevant, 1997; Wegar, 1997). This can potentially result in an "identity crisis" (Erikson, 1968, p. 17) or identity confusion (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010), which may, in turn, lead to relational or psychological distress.

Children's adoptive identities also include an element of considering themselves as permanent members of a new family (Hanna, 2007) and an elaboration of their dissimilarities from their adoptive families (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). This comes about through the process of pre-adoption preparation, with professionals playing a critical role in helping children comprehend the permanence of the new relationship (Hanna, 2007). The specific activities in this component are organized around a single stage.

Constructing my identity

This stage is focused on helping children develop an understanding of their own history through a coherent and clear sequence of events. It facilitates the construction of a narrative for their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, which are frequently affected in children who have experienced early adversity (Fivush, 1998; Howe et al., 2006). For this purpose, two activities are presented. The first, 'my houses' (activity 1), involves the graphic expression of houses and living arrangements as a sequence of contexts aimed at offering structure and sequence to the child's past and present experiences. The second, 'a lifebook' (activity 2), involves the child organizing, telling, and writing their life story, filling it with particular moments, memories, and family history. As a tangible object, the book serves to safeguard the child's own history and identity as well as act as a resource for self-presentation in future contexts, such as with the adoptive family.

These activities take place through adult scaffolding (Stadler & Ward, 2006), allowing children to share the meaningful episodes of their lives and build their own stories. They also ensure that a child's past is not projected onto the future by giving it a new meaning and helping the child prepare to live a different future with an adoptive family.

Dealing with loss

The third component of the program, *Dealing with loss*, addresses the significance of loss and grief when entering a new family and grieving for the biological family.

Despite the benefits, adoption entails inevitable losses. Regardless of the reason or the child's understanding, this relinquishment of their previous life may be perceived as a loss, leading to feelings of uncertainty about the reliability of the adoptive family (Brodzinsky et al., 1984; Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994). Research indicates that adopted children often feel a sense of loss because of their lack of personal stories (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Wrobel et al., 1998). These losses inevitably cause the child to grieve, and it is crucial to recognize and support this. It is, therefore, essential for adoptive children to be allowed to reconcile their histories and genealogical continuity so they can begin to build trust and feel more confident about establishing new relationships with their adoptive parents (Di Ciacco, 2008). Bowlby (1980) pointed out that children and adults are more capable of managing their transitions and placing their trust in new relationships when they are supported in their grieving of earlier losses. Grief, anger, and distress result from the temporary or permanent loss of access to existing attachment figures (Bowlby, 1980, 1997), but they can be resolved if the child develops attachment relationships with alternative caregivers. But without support, the child often becomes disoriented and has trouble knowing how to deal with such pain.

It is paramount to recognize the psychological task of grieving because many children in the child welfare system have unresolved issues that stem from the breaking of their biological ties. This includes grieving for the unfulfilled expectations of past relationships, the support of which allows a child to build an enhanced sense of self-understanding and confidence for new, future relationships (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Therefore, successful engagement in grieving serves to boost a child's ability to form an attachment later on. On the other hand, asking a child with unresolved losses to commit to a new family would conflict with that child's internalized reference of the biological family, thus creating unnecessary ambivalence. Psychotherapeutic work toward a constructive detachment from the biological family is, therefore, critical, and this involves creating a psychological space in the child's inner world with the aim of giving them the opportunity for recollection or even maintain a dialogue with those significant others (Carsten, 2000). Such physical and emotional distancing from the biological family should be articulated with the prospect of engaging with a new family. Specific activities in this component are organized around a single stage.

Saying goodbye to the biological family

The activities in this stage aim to dialogically co-construct meanings, thereby facilitating a historical continuity between the biological family and

an openness to accepting a new family. It involves helping the child to deal with ending contact with their biological family through emotional expression such as grieving and farewells, so the child can create emotional availability and embrace the construction of new intimate relationships. It starts by mapping important relationships and exploring the concept of grieving (activity 1). Next, a focus on emotional expression (activity 2) supports the child in discovering feelings, locating their bodily source, and accepting them. The PPCA then evolves this into a ritualized farewell directed toward each important relationship within the biological family (activity 3). This experience is followed by a relaxation technique (activity 4). Finally, this stage ends with an exploration of current important relationships (activity 5), where the child points out and reflects upon support and care relationships that are present in various contexts.

On completing the first three components, children are expected to show their willingness to invest in their adoption plans. This should involve accurate expectations about the new family and motivation to make the transition to an adoptive family. These are accessed by the rating scales on the reactions of the child to their preparation, as monitored by the professionals' recordings in the program's "professional workbook."

This state should be supported and maintained with regularly scheduled meetings, organized celebrations, and informal individual or group talks about the ongoing adoption project during the waiting period. Children should not feel neglected or deprived of information during this period.

Many children do not effectively complete their adoption plans in terms of achieving permanency in a new adoptive family. Several factors can challenge the matching process, including i) age; ii) physical, mental, or developmental disabilities; iii) behavioral problems; and iv) the existence of siblings (Selwyn et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2006; Wind et al., 2005). In addition, a lack of available adoption candidates is a major reason why children who have been approved for adoption are hardly matched with potential adoptive parents.

However, when the relevant services do identify suitable potential adoptive parents, the PPCA and preparation for adoption continue to the fourth component: *transition to the new family*.

Transition to the new family

The PPCA's fourth component, *Transition to the new family,* ensures that all the information about the prospective parents—including the first meeting, the subsequent reunions, the new family's habits, and the expected consolidation into a new family—is presented and explored with the child within the framework of a trustworthy relationship. The child's views,

opinions, and ideas are encouraged and taken into consideration in making real decisions that affect the integration process.

The literature stresses that children should be given the opportunity to actively participate and be supported throughout the preparation process so they can formulate and express their views (Hanna, 2005; Shier, 2001). However, evidence suggests that the views of the children concerned are seldom taken into consideration or even encouraged in the adoption process (Hill et al., 2004; McEvoy & Smith, 2011). In addition, an enduring view among professionals working in child welfare systems is that children should be "protected from participation" so as to avoid confronting them with potentially 'upsetting feelings' that they are not fully prepared to deal with (Van Bijleveld et al., as cited in Leviner, 2018). This welfare discourse seems to serve as the foundation for child welfare systems, but it essentially hinders children's agency and limits their capacity to influence decisions about their own lives (Leviner, 2018).

Children who find themselves able to participate in family decision making demonstrate greater subjective well-being (González et al., as cited in Gal, 2017). Most models of child preparation for adoption try to involve the child in the process, with the extent of involvement depending on the child's age and maturity as well as the circumstances surrounding the adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Most of the literature on the subject emphasizes that as soon as children are able to communicate and participate in decisions that affect them, they should be encouraged to participate in all aspects of the decision-making process (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Shier, 2001). They should, therefore, be properly informed about any welfare issues that affect them and allowed to express their views, ask questions, or communicate their concerns (e.g., they should be asked what type of adoptive family they envision and what they would value the most) (Hanna & McRoy, 2011). All these processes should be transparent, informative, voluntary, child-friendly, and inclusive, ideally within a model that is empirically validated, accountable, and supportable through training (Gal, 2017).

The effective participation of children is more feasible when relationships are based on trust and when children are supported and encouraged to participate. Professionals may use a "scaffolding" approach, thereby providing support for children throughout their engagement in participatory encounters, with the assistance gradually being withdrawn as the child's competence and independence increase (Cashmore, 2002; Graham et al., 2015).

It is crucial for professionals to create the conditions for an active dialogue with the child in a manner that is suited to the latter's developmental stage. This should include occasions when the child's opinion is sought about each activity and their feedback acquired on how they feel

throughout the process, all while being transparent about important information (Lodge, 2005; Mannion, 2007). Overall, a genuine interest in children's contributions to discussions and decision-making processes related to important matters is likely to ensure that any decisions taken will account for their needs (Mason, 2008). In turn, this increases the likelihood of children respecting these decisions because of the active role they played in making them (Mason, 2008). Involving the child in these processes in a genuine and ongoing manner that is mediated through relationships—rather than limiting it to formulaic, episodic decision-making moments—respects the rights and dignity of the child and places them at the center of decisions that may profoundly affect their lives. Self-engagement in this process is also crucial; the child's participation should be defined based on their capacity to act deliberately, speak for themselves, and actively reflect on their social world, thus shaping the child's own life and the lives of others (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

This PPCA component comprises three stages that progressively include the participation and involvement of adoptive parents to not only scaffold the construction of a new relationship but also mirror the overall process of attachment and transition to a new environment.

Getting ready for the first encounter

The seventh stage of PPCA is about preparing the child for their first meeting with the new adoptive parents. The child is informed that the prospective parents wish to adopt him or her, and, together with the professional, they then explore the idea of an effective transition to a new family. The first activity presents the new family, and this is usually supported by a photo album or a video provided by the prospective parents. The child is presented with all the details of the new family at a respectful pace and according to their desire. Next, some presentation strategies are proposed to the child and then discussed, planned, and executed (activity 2). Deciding what to do next is up to the child. For example, letters, drawings, photos, or videos may be created to give to the new parents. This forwarding of communications may happen as frequently as necessary before the first gathering. PPCA then works with the child in preparing the first meeting (activity 3) in detail—such as exploring what to do, the space, the persons involved, and activities where the encounter will take place—while also dealing with the child's expectations, fears, and concerns.

My integration into the new family

The eighth stage is designed to support children through an effective transition to the new family, and it sustains the sense of participation and

security from previous steps. The PPCA proposes six progressive moments for transition: a first meeting led by professionals; a second meeting with the professionals present but less engaged in conversation or activities; a third meeting to share the child's lifebook with the adoptive parents; a fourth meeting to visit the family home; a fifth meeting without the presence of professionals; and a sixth encounter involving a sleepover in the family house. For each encounter, the professional works with the child on the scheduling, meeting itself, balance after the experience, and plan for a subsequent meeting (activity 1). After those encounters, the PPCA encourages the construction of a genogram for the new family, thus exploring the knowledge available on the family and reflecting on the child's place within it (activity 2). In addition, a drawing of the new home's layout is provided (activity 3), which helps the child to assimilate details of the new environment. This stage ends with the process of packing up the child's belongings for a sleepover at the new family home (activity 4); this includes selecting the most important items and packing a suitcase, identifying potential difficulties such as having to sleep in a new bed, and addressing the child's doubts.

Getting ready to say goodbye

The following stage is dedicated to a ritualized farewell to the foster home and relevant persons in the child's various contexts, particularly at school. This includes selecting the persons whom the child would like to say goodbye to (activity 1); preparing a book to register friends' messages (activity 2); saying goodbye to important persons and, if possible, offering something of emotional value (activity 3); packing things up ready to move into a new family home (activity 4); and finally, having a farewell party (activity 5). It is expected for children to leave the foster care institution and enter a new permanent home at the end of this stage.

Revisit the place i used to live in

In the tenth and final stage of the program the children are given the opportunity to return to the institution for visits. This fosters connections between the different life experiences, thus promoting coherence and the opportunity to validate the child's experiences with the new family while also bolstering the child's sense of self-worth through being missed. In addition, professionals have the opportunity to assess a child's evolution and adaptation in a new family and offer help and support if needed. This starts with a conversation/interview with the family, which is focused on the experience of being a family. Next, two separate conversations take place to explore the child and parents' experiences (activity 1). A certification/award for completing the PPCA is offered to the child (activity 2), and

then a final visit to the foster care facility, friends, and caretakers takes place (activity 3).

The implementation of the PPCA can be seen as a standard practice for child preparation for adoption. It seeks to establish a common language among those working with pre-adoptive children around four key elements: openness in communications about adoption, life narrative temporal organization (in adoptive identity formation), loss and grieving for the biological family, and child participation in preparation and transition for adoption. Care professionals can use a variety of activities to assist children in the transition to a permanent adoptive family.

The PPCA professional workbook (Henriques et al., 2017a) contributes to monitoring the fidelity in the implementation of the model, through the material prepared for a standardized application of activities and for documenting the program (e.g., adherence). This workbook presents specific cues and elaborate indications on ways for presenting and exploring the activities with the child, ensuring fidelity in implementation between children and care workers. It also includes a checklist of tasks, activities, and key ideas. Checklists are to be filled at the end of each session by the professional, with some personal notes about the process. Finally, PPCA's authors suggest supervision in order to assess the adjustments made in each case and improve the quality of the program implementation.

Conclusion

Children should be at the center of their adoption process and must be given adequate developmental opportunities to act as fully engaged agents. In this paper, we first presented the child's specific psychological needs in the context of adoption. We then discussed the ethical dimensions of addressing those psychological needs of children during the pre-placement process and reflected on how they should be engaged in the preparation for adoption in an appropriate and ethically sensitive manner. Finally, we presented the PPCA as an example of a structured program for preparing children for adoption in Portugal.

Ethical preparation for adoption is achieved not only by conducting the specific activities and objectives presented in this program but also through overlapping theoretical contents that are implemented in the context of a trustworthy relationship.

A strong theoretical background guides not just the PPCA's design and contents but also the collaborative relationship with the child. It defines clear professional practices and enhances the ethical dimension by placing children at the center of their adoption preparation.

Overall, PPCA's major contributions comprise the focus on (1) the narrative inspiring the many tasks at several stages of the program aiming to involve the child in the co-construction of meaning of preparation and transition to a new adoptive family; (2) the materials available, specifically the child workbook, highlighting once more the active role of the child in the construction of their preparation using the metaphor of adventure travel; and (3) the expected involvement and collaborative work of the child, professionals, and new adoptive parents in the completion of the established PPCA activities.

PPCA's complexity poses difficulties for the dissemination of the program due to the need for specialized training as well as a strong commitment from professionals to work with the child. To address this limitation, we suggest the implementation of a system of "cascade training," wherein a selection of care professionals with specialized PPCA training can assist inexperienced colleagues. This kind of training would be supervised and include peer discussions with different professional teams.

Wider dissemination of this program may contribute to achieving homogeneity and accountability in care services, as well as promote cooperation between the various professionals involved in the adoption process.

Future plans include research on how children and professionals experience the program, as well as the efficacy of the program components in the process of the child́s adaptation to the new family.

Thus, we have described a program for empowering children who are eligible for adoption so that they can "have a voice" throughout the adoption process. The PPCA seeks to ensure that children are supported in expressing their views, which are then taken into account during the decision-making process, thereby adequately safeguarding the children's rights to protection and participation.

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