Externalizing Behaviors Reported by Adoptive Parents

Many adopted children are vulnerable to ongoing behavioral and emotional difficulties. These behaviors often challenge the child's successful integration into their adoptive families. The most common are externalizing, or acting out behaviors. Over half of adoptive parents of "children with special needs" ** have reported challenges caused by their child's externalizing behaviors.

These behaviors include:

- Lying and manipulation
- Defiance
- Verbal aggression
- Violation of family norms
- Peer problems
- Tantrums
- Physical aggression
- Destruction of property
- Stealing
- Hyperactivity
- Curfew violation
- Running away

Several problems related to attachment problems were reported:

- Rejection of affection
- Withdrawal

Very serious problems were reported by a small minority of adoptive parents:

- Sexual acting out
- Arrests and legal difficulties
- Suicidal behavior
- Fire setting
- Sexual aggression

Many serious behavior problems are antisocial responses to internalized feelings shaped by early trauma. These internalized feelings might include anger, powerlessness, low self-esteem, fear, and anxiety.

Earlier trauma experienced by foster and adoptive children contributes to separation and attachment issues, feelings of grief and loss, identity issues, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Early experiences and trauma histories play a significant role in the development of a child's emotions and behaviors. Not all children who are adopted display such challenging behaviors.

** "Children with special needs" are those for whom permanent homes may be difficult to find. This includes the child's race or ethnicity, older age, sibling group status, and mental, physical, emotional, or behavioral difficulties. Learn more in the *Adoption from Foster Care* handout.

References:

Smith, S., Howard, J., & Munroe, A. (2000). Issues underlying behavior problems in at-risk adopted children. *Children & Youth Services Review, 22*, 539-562.