

CHAPTER 17



FROM THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE: TESTIMONIALS FROM CURRENT AND FORMER GROUP LEADERS



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FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN FROM SOUTH AFRICA THE JOURNEY OF ONE ADOPTION SUPPORT NETWORK (2006-PRESENT)

Families with Children from South Africa is a network for families in Ontario (and one family in Saskatchewan) who are either waiting to adopt or have adopted from South Africa.

The network provides support, mentorship and an opportunity for our children to have ongoing contact and friendships with other children adopted from the same country.

The *Families with Children from South Africa* network meets socially six times a year, co-ordinates attendance at African events, and organizes educational workshops for parents.

Structure:

- Founded in February 2006 and run by parent volunteers.
- The network receives no funding or resources from adoption agencies.
- We charge cost-recovery fees at events to cover facility rental and special workshops (i.e. African drumming/dancing workshop)
- No annual membership fee (yet)
- Network shifted in 2007 from a 100 percent social function to a more 30:70 educational/social role.

How and Why:

The *Families with Children from South Africa* network began when Nicole decided that she would like to create a community to help her raise her new South African-born son. At that time, only nine Canadian families had adopted from South Africa, and these nine families were scattered all over Ontario. Due to a fluke encounter of a close friend in different city ("*Your daughter is from WHERE? Get out!!! My friend just adopted from there too!*"), Nicole was introduced to Anne, the mother of the fifth South African-born child to arrive home to Canada.

Next, Nicole connected with Karyn, the parent who pioneered Canadian - South African adoptions in 2002. Finally, she contacted Christine, another adoptive mom, who also ran a foundation supporting children in South Africa. Each woman had her own unique strengths, skills, experiences and wisdom, and Nicole invited them to join her in creating the network.



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The first family gathering in February 2006 was a thrilling success. It was clear that the network was a valuable asset for the children and parents and that they needed and wanted it to continue.

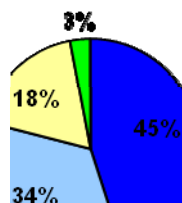
Leadership:

- An informal leadership circle of four parents.
- The four leaders regularly consult, seek feedback, support each other, and share ideas.
- Coincidentally, they also are geographically representative of four different areas of the province.
- In the future we will assess our members' desire for a formalized elected leadership.

Membership and Demographics:

The leadership circle had to make the difficult decision to accept only families who have or will be adopting from South Africa. Social workers, agencies and individuals have all asked if they (or their families) can join *Families with Children from South Africa*, but regrettably we have declined their requests.

The leaders were concerned about their ability to handle the needs of a larger and more diverse group. We decided that we needed to focus on successfully integrating and supporting our new families with South African-born children first (our priority!) before we can help other adoptive families.



- In 45% of families the adoptee is currently a single child.
Note: the majority of these families plan to adopt a second time
- 34% are blended families with children by birth and adoption
- 18% of families have completed multiple adoptions (international)
- 3% of families have both children by birth, and have completed multiple adoptions (international)

Geography:



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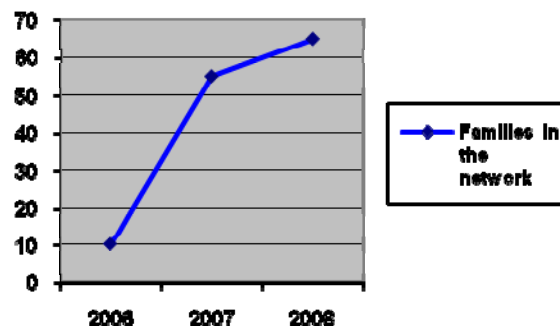
Our families live in urban and rural areas across Ontario with varied access to resources. Many families drive between 100 km – 250 km (one-way) to attend our gatherings.

If your adoption support group is also drawing families from near and far, consider:

- Tracking where the families live geographically. When you reach a certain number (i.e. 7 or 8), consider starting a smaller branch support group in that area to reduce isolation, facilitate relationships, and increase local support.
- Planning gatherings at locations near major highways for easy access.
- Rotating the location of gatherings.

Growth:

2007 was a year of change and unexpectedly rapid growth in the network. In six months, our network grew to 55 families from 12 when the adoption program expanded suddenly. By April 2008 we had grown to 65 families. “Original” families were outnumbered within the first month of the program expansion, which resulted in a sometimes-overwhelming year of transition for those families.



A big challenge has been to ensure the new families feel welcome and are successfully integrated into the group.

Here are some ideas for incorporating new members:

- Send a welcome email when families join the network.
- Mail a custom “congratulations” cards from the network when families are receive their referral.
- Wear nametags at events.
- Develop online forum (private yahoo group) to better connect your families and facilitate discussion.
- Ask new families to formally introduce themselves on the online yahoogroup when they join.
- Encourage informal mentoring between new families and “older” more experienced families.



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- Created frequently asked questions (FAQ) documents to proactively answer questions of new families about topics of common concern – in our case travel, hair and skin care and so on.

A tremendous benefit of the expansion has been the opportunity to meet and build friendships with even more great families!! We are eagerly looking forward to what may come next.

Expectations, Dynamics and Knowledge:

The majority of the first families who adopted between 2002 and 2006 had a strong connection with South Africa through work, school, travel and family. As a result they are very supportive of the program and have a passion for the country.

By contrast, 80 percent of the new families who adopted and joined our group in 2007 and 2008 families switched to the South African program after getting discouraged while waiting for a referral from China. Some of these families have expressed their frustration and are generally discouraged by the whole international adoption process. Below is an important quote from a recent article that stresses the need for extra compassion and patience with families who have changed programs:

"I would compare pulling out of the China program to having a miscarriage. We felt like we were losing our child. There was a lot of grief."

From "Bursting the Chinese Baby Bubble" Maclean's, May 7, 2008

We've found that families joining the network have a range of interest in South African culture, history and current events. Some have minimal knowledge about raising a black child in a white community, which is understandable considering their intent was to adopt a Chinese born girl.

How do we educate, mentor and facilitate interest in South Africa?

- Karyn wrote an article about her adoption journey and how she pioneered the South African adoption program in 2002 because of one special boy (now her son). We share this story with each family as they join the network to help them appreciate the personal and unique nature of the program. The program would not exist if not for the persistence, commitment and investment of one family.
- We encourage attendance at South African/African events and festivals.
- We created a South African – Canadian Cookbook (www.mnandi.ca)
- We recognize South Africa holidays.
- We rotate DVDs of South African children's TV shows.
- We organize the bulk purchasing of South African children's books.



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- We invite South African elders in the community to join our events.
- We share South African media articles about current events/ children’s issues
- On the yahogroup we discuss topics such as racism in Canada, raising transracially adopted children, negative and positive stereotypes and so on – sometimes with conflicting perspectives.
- We promote education, workshops and books and articles on transracial issues and cultural diversity.

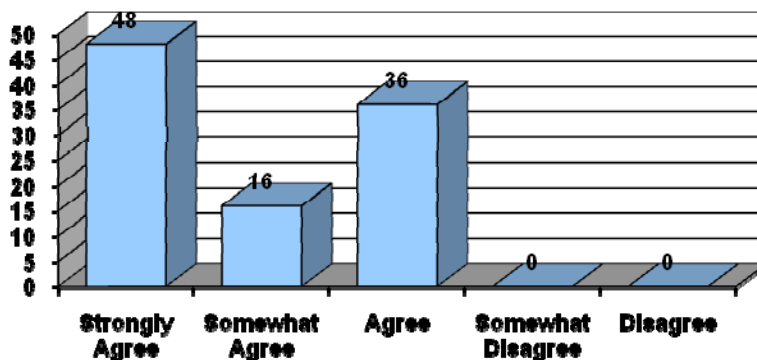
Survey Results

In July 2008 we created and distributed a survey using a free and easy online tool called ‘Survey Monkey’. The intent was to establish a benchmark so we can continually monitor that the network is meeting the needs of members as it evolves over time.

We asked 28 questions about what was important to each family, where they wanted future events, and if they wanted to establish an annual membership fee or continue on a cost-recovery event fee basis. We used a five-point rating scale for most questions.

Our results showed that overall, 48 percent “*strongly agree*” that the network was meeting their family’s needs.

Question 1: Overall, the network is meeting our family’s needs.



64% “*strongly agree*” that when they joined the network made them feel welcome.

56% “*strongly agree*” that the network had increased their knowledge of South African culture and current events. 16% “*somewhat agree*” and 24% “*agree*”.

52% “*strongly agree*” that the network has increased their knowledge and understanding of racism. 16% “*somewhat agree*” and 24% “*agree*”.

76% responded that attending network gatherings was “*extremely important*” to their family. Respondents said the most frequent reasons for not attending gathering were location and scheduling conflicts.

Anything Else?

- Always be inclusive. All our events are open to both waiting families and families who have already adopted, and even families who are just considering SA as an option for them.
- Actively recognize all the children, not just those adopted from South Africa. For instance, pictures at events should include siblings.
- Post a list of what is needed for events (such as, food, chairs, CD player), and if no volunteers offer, delegate.
- Create a website (use a cheap pre-prepared template)
- Create an online yahoogroup (free, by invite only and closed for privacy)
- Use same image/photo on the web site, yahoogroup, business cards and congratulations cards to establish a consistent look and feel to network products (Branding is simple, effective, free)
- Facilitate connections with support resources (like NACAC and Adoption Council of Ontario).
- Make contacts with other parent-led support groups and share ideas.

Web Site: www.familiesfromsa.com

For more information please contact us at: info@familiesfromsa.com

Prepared by Nicole Nel-Maynard.

Nicole and her husband Gerard live in Toronto with their son Zoen who was placed in their arms on September 7, 2005. Nicole is one of the leadership circle of this parent-led adoption support network. They plan to return to South Africa to add to their family again in 2009.