

## In Adoption, the Emotional Bond is Built: Does Love at First Sight Exist?\*

[English version]

En la adopción el vínculo afectivo se construye:  
¿existe el amor a primera vista?

Na adoção, o vínculo afetivo se constrói:  
existe o amor à primeira vista?

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## Abstract

Family experiences of couples who adopted their children in Medellín through the ICBF are presented. **Objective:** To understand the meaning that couples attribute to how the affective bond was generated in the adaptation phase of their adoption process. **Methodology:** Qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach, multiple case study typology, in-depth interview technique, open-ended question guide instruments, timeline. **Results:** The particularity of each experience in the construction of the affective bond with adopted children is reported. The adaptation phase extended over time and was described by the couples as an extremely intense stage, as bonding cannot be measured chronologically but is emotionally constructed within the intersubjective relationship. **Conclusions:** The complexity of the bonding process in adoption cannot be anticipated; emotional bonding is the result of a bilateral and patient approach by the parents, requiring affection, validation of emotions, and acceptance of everyone's vulnerabilities. In most of the cases studied, there was an asynchronous rejection by the children towards some of their adoptive parents, which generated feelings of frustration, disappointment, and hopelessness, and required coping strategies.

**Keywords:** adaptation; adoption; adoptive couple; rejection; affective bond (obtained from the UNESCO thesaurus).

## Resumen

Se presentan vivencias familiares de parejas que adoptaron a sus hijos en Medellín, a través del ICBF. **Objetivo:** entender el significado que las parejas atribuyen a la forma como se generó el vínculo afectivo en la etapa de adaptación de su proceso adoptivo. **Metodología:** cualitativa, enfoque fenomenológico hermenéutico, tipología estudio de caso múltiple, técnica entrevista a profundidad, instrumentos guía de preguntas abiertas, línea del tiempo. **Resultados:** se da cuenta de la particularidad de cada vivencia en la construcción del vínculo afectivo con hijos adoptivos. La etapa de adaptación se

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extendió en el tiempo y fue definida por las parejas como una etapa extremadamente intensa, dado que la vinculación no puede medirse cronológicamente, se construye emocionalmente en la relación intersubjetiva. **Conclusiones:** la complejidad del proceso de vinculación en la adopción no puede dimensionarse por anticipado, la vinculación afectiva es producto de un acercamiento bilateral y paciente por parte de los padres que requiere afecto, validación de las emociones y aceptación de las fragilidades de todos. En la mayoría de los casos estudiados se presentó el rechazo asincrónico de los niños hacia algunos de sus padres adoptivos, que generó sentimientos de frustración, desilusión y desesperanza, y exigió estrategias de afrontamiento.

**Palabras clave:** adaptación; adopción; pareja adoptiva; rechazo; vínculo afectivo (obtenidos del tesoro Unesco).

## Resumo

Apresentam-se vivências familiares de casais que adotaram seus filhos em Medellín, por meio do ICBF. **Objetivo:** compreender o significado que os casais atribuem à forma como o vínculo afetivo foi gerado na fase de adaptação do processo adotivo. **Metodologia:** pesquisa qualitativa, com abordagem fenomenológica hermenêutica, tipologia de estudo de caso múltiplo, técnica de entrevista em profundidade e instrumentos como guia de perguntas abertas e linha do tempo. **Resultados:** evidencia-se a singularidade de cada vivência na construção do vínculo afetivo com os filhos adotivos. A fase de adaptação se estendeu ao longo do tempo e foi definida pelos casais como extremamente intensa, visto que a vinculação não pode ser medida cronologicamente, mas é construída emocionalmente na relação intersubjetiva. **Conclusões:** a complexidade do processo de vinculação na adoção não pode ser prevista antecipadamente. O vínculo afetivo resulta de uma aproximação bilateral e paciente por parte dos pais, exigindo afeto, validação das emoções e aceitação das fragilidades de todos os envolvidos. Na maioria dos casos estudados, observou-se a ocorrência de rejeição assincrônica por parte das crianças em relação a alguns de seus pais adotivos, o que gerou sentimentos de frustração, desilusão e desesperança, exigindo estratégias de enfrentamento.

**Palavras-chave:** adaptação; adoção; casal adotivo; rejeição; vínculo afetivo (obtidos do Tesouro UNESCO).

## Introduction

Adoption in Colombia represents a broad spectrum and constitutes an inexhaustible source of knowledge. However, in the literature review, approaches were identified that are more focused on the legal aspect rather than the psychosocial realm, revealing gaps in the scientific production of the phenomenon within the local context. In this regard, Sánchez et al. (2012) suggest that “[...] it would be desirable [...] to initiate longitudinal studies that allow the peculiarities and needs that these families encounter in the initial moments of coexistence to be measured in *situ*” (p. 565). The approach to the experiences of adoptive families allows for the emergence of different and unique narratives, which are susceptible to being investigated from their intersubjectivity, providing an understanding of the adoption phenomenon and shedding light on what has yet to be said in this context.

The Colombian Law of Children and Adolescents agrees with the literature found, which conceives and understands “adoption” as “[...] a legal instrument that establishes a filial bond between a minor and their adoptive parents, equivalent to the biological bond for all purposes” (Moliner, 2012, p. 102). From the social perspective, it is seen as a positive option and the most desirable experience for children, as stated in the Code of Childhood and Adolescence (2006), Article 61, which defines adoption as “[...] primarily and above all, a protective measure through which, under the supreme supervision of the State, the paternal-filial relationship is irrevocably established between people who do not have it by nature”. From the moment the adopted child and their adoptive family meet, they embark on a journey together, facing challenges in building an emotional bond.

According to Berástegui (2007), the transition to parenthood, whether biological or adoptive, brings changes in roles and family dynamics. This is particularly reported in the case of adoptive families. The adoptive event is widely recognized internationally as a situation that often exceeds the ideals, plans, resources, and preconceived notions of adoptive parents. In this sense, it becomes a common source of stress, leading to transformations, requiring a shift in priorities, and demanding focus on the newly arrived child.

During the research, couples defined special moments that marked milestones in their adoption process. *Expectation*: the period between the moment of eligibility approval and the assignment of the child; *encounter*: a unique reality for each family; *rejection*: when the child showed a preference for one of the parents; *adaptation*: the initial period of coexistence that began the affective bond; *acceptance*: requiring the ability to let go, learn, agree, and self-regulate.

It can be affirmed that adoption is itself a transformative event, a learning process that arises from both recognition and empowerment, as well as the

experiences of the people involved (París, 2005). Therefore, it requires the desire to welcome the child (Rosser, 2015) and involves reflecting on one's own identity as adoptive parents (Montano, 2012). Under these premises, this study is pertinent, as it reveals previously unknown accounts of the intersubjective experiences of adoptive families that emerged naturally.

Thus, the guiding question of the research was: how was the emotional bond generated between the adoptive parents and the adoptive children? From this, the objective emerged to understand the meaning that couples attribute to the way the emotional bond was formed during the adaptation phase of their adoption process. During the research, the couples, as subjects of analysis, were the creators of their personal, relational, and parental history, through the content and forms in which they narrated their experiences. In this way, the contributions, findings, and insights gained from the study enriched the understanding of reality, both for the participants themselves and for those studying the adoption phenomenon.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative research study that sought, in accordance with Martínez's (2011) explanation, to understand the behavior of the individuals studied and interpret the meaning they attribute to their own behavior and that of others. This approach allowed the adoptive couples to have a voice in the research. Hermeneutic phenomenology is not a "[...] univocal or unidirectional approach, so its application demands a continuous attitude of discovery, knowledge, and interpellation" (Pérez et al., 2019, p. 28). By being chosen, it allowed for the expression of the meaning given to each adoptive experience based on its historicity, context, and interests.

The multiple case study was defined as relevant according to Yin's (2003) assertion, which states that when the research focuses on real-life contexts, the researcher has little control over the events and asks "how and why". In-depth interviews were conducted in which, according to Kvale (2011), the researcher asks questions and listens to what participants express about their experiences, sharing ideas, opinions, dreams, fears, and hopes to learn about the situation from the participants' own words. Open-ended and guiding questions, as well as a timeline, were used as data collection instruments. The timeline allowed for the graphic and chronological organization of the reconstruction of the stories. Additionally, the categorization, coding, and analysis were done manually.

The participating couples adopted their children between 2016 and 2018. By the time of the interviews (2021), they had completed the post-adoption

follow-up phase and had no ties to the ICBF which could have hindered their participation in the research.

The following criteria were considered for case selection:

1. Couples who opted for adoption as the first and only option (a rare case, given that, in many instances, couples first exhaust all possibilities of conceiving biological children).
2. Couples who adopted a child over the age of five (it is uncommon for couples to voluntarily opt for an older child, as the collective imagination tends to favor adopting infants).
3. Couples with second adoption (facing a second process, having gone through a previous experience, does not usually become an option).
4. Couple with a biological child who opted for the adoption of a pair of siblings simultaneously and surpassed generalized imaginaries.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Antioquia and adhered to established protocols within the framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, complying with the required ethical codes and standards. Each couple signed an informed consent form, and to preserve their privacy, they chose their pseudonyms. Case one: The couple self-identified as Atenea (Ate) and Marte (Mar), naming their child Mercurio, inspired by their affinity for Greco-Roman mythology. Case two: Mona (M), Rey (R), the biological son as “Mono”, and his daughter is called *Princess*, reflecting their everyday use of these names. Case three: The couple selected Isabel (I), based on religious beliefs, and Antony (A), for his rebellious nature; their children were named Juan and Sara. Case four: Yoko (Y), John (J), the biological son “Paul”, and the two children who came through adoption are “Linda” and “Sean”, for musical preferences. In the results section, their voices appear under the designated initials, followed by the number corresponding to each interview conducted during the study.

## Results

During the research, couples identified special moments that mark milestones in their adoption process, namely: the waiting period, assignment, encounter, rejection, adaptation, and acceptance.

### Case 1. Couple who Opted for Adoption as the First and Only Option.

The *waiting period* did not exceed four months. The meeting with their child was described by the couple as “[...] a shockwave, it’s an earthquake, it’s a seismic experience” (Ate1), and they considered that “[...] the adaptation phase is tough, extremely intense emotionally; we had a two-year-and-one-month-old child, and, the first three months were terrible” (Ate3). According to their account, their child arrived in a state of “[...] wild nature, he didn’t sleep properly, he hit me. The work of regulation was tough” (Ate3); and demanded transformations: “[...] we love our little one very much, but it was high voltage [...] these years have been a whirlwind of change; a loving whirlwind, but one that has shaken us completely and exposed our shadows” (Ate1). They also recognize the romantic side of this stage: “[...] very beautiful, very wonderful, that knowing our child” (Ate3), an ambivalence that showed that facing adoptive parenthood is a complex process.

*The rejection* occurred in the first days and was defined as a difficult situation: “[...] I was very bad, he saw me and started to cry, he didn’t want me to hug him, that was horrible” (Ate3); “[...] then he got attached to his mother and forgot about me, and I too went into crisis” (Mar3). It was necessary to go through these moments of parental stress individually and as a couple.

During the first months of *adaptation*, the family dynamics changed, “[...] the unimaginable happened [...] everyone came to visit Mercurio” (Ate3), and they changed their lifestyle: “[...] we have been a very closed couple, we have almost no friends, we hardly go out with people, we have almost no visitors” (Ate3). The crisis as a couple did not wait and lasted several months:

[...] That first year, until Marte got a job, we started arguing a lot, everything annoyed us, we were in a bad mood, we even started having disagreements regarding parenting, and Marte’s emotional intelligence deteriorated. (Ate1, personal communication, August 27, 2021).

As time passed, *acceptance* arrived and the couple began to recognize Mercurio’s abilities: “[...] as we got to know him, we were very surprised by his talent and intelligence” (Mar3); “[...] it was astonishing to feel so lucky to have been assigned such a wonderful child” (Ate3). They established agreements on the issue of parenting: “[...] with Mercurio, we never saw him as one of those

kids who throw tantrums in the street for no reason” (Mar3). Heteroregulation of emotions has been part of the process of accompanying your child.

## **Case 2. Couple with Biological Child who Adopted a Girl over Five Years Old**

Having openness in the age range minimized the *waiting time*: “[...] we received approval in May 2016, they told us we were on the waiting list, and the next day they said, ‘you already have the girl’, and we couldn't believe it” (M3). The *encounter* with their daughter meant “the shock” (R2), “[...] when they showed us the photo, we all started crying” (M3); confusion and joy arose simultaneously.

The attitude and openness of the older brother generated motivation in the girl: “[...] we went to a shopping center, our son was a success there” (M3). When they arrived home and disrupted their routine, there was a substantial change in the family dynamic: “[...] with the Mono we already had a routine and he was not very demanding over time, life was very quiet, he did not demand anything more from us. When the girl arrived, everything changed to accommodate the new objective” (R3), modifying schedules and activities counteracted the initial stress.

The couple faced the arrival of their daughter with empathy: “[...] my five-year-old daughter arrived, and it was as if she were a newborn. You have to learn to understand them, you have to give them confidence, love, and dedication” (M3). Empathy allowed them to understand and accept the girl's emotions and behaviors: “[...] I saw my girl crying and my soul broke” (M3). The parents were aware of the situation, identified the girl's expressions of discontent as part of the transition she had just undergone, supported each other, and placed their daughter as a priority.

*Rejection*: the girl accepted her new mother, but the same did not happen with the father: “[...] I had a breaking point because I did not feel appreciated by her at all, I kept trying everything possible, and she gave me nothing in return” (R3), a situation that lasted for three months. In the first moment of *adaptation*, there were shifts in attitudes: “[...] these are things that, even if they don't come naturally, one must learn” (M3); “[...] I was afraid of not being able to complete the whole process of adaptation of the girl with us” (R3). It required learning, understanding, and conscious acceptance.

The bonding process was presented asynchronously: “[...] I took a little longer because I had the Mono. It took about a year, but when I felt her as my daughter, I already felt that she was mine, mine, mine” (M3). The mother acknowledges that “[...] time told me, yes, yes, she is her daughter. At first, it's like she's borrowed, you don't feel she's yours, but over time that changes and



daily experiences shape your mindset” (M3). Living together made it possible to establish a connection between everyone, a bond recognized as a joint construction process that involved consciously embracing parenthood.

Regarding *adaptation*, having a biological child led the mother to feel she was being inequitable in expressing affection and treating her children: “[...] it was very difficult for me to learn to share my love equally between the two without leaning more toward one. Rey opened my eyes, and I reacted” (M3); “[...] when I gave so much attention to the girl, I felt guilty before my love was only for my son and now it was love for both” (M3). Mothering again created new dilemmas that were part of the bonding process.

The couple took responsibility for the situation: “[...] children should not feel like they are the problem; rather, the problem lies with us. While we adapt to the situation, we must support, protect, and understand that they are different and should never be compared” (M3). The empathetic and respectful attitude facilitated the connection and allowed the parents to give their daughter the differential treatment she needed: “[...] learn to understand her, because she comes from a very complicated situation” (M3), accepting the fragilities empowered the couple to respond to the girl's needs.

In *acceptance*, taking responsibility for their actions, feelings, and thoughts as adoptive parents facilitated the bonding process: “[...] the most important thing for me is to let go, everything has to flow. Not feeling bad about the feelings you have at the moment, not judging yourself, for me it was difficult to share love, and for the girl, it was difficult to start loving strangers” (M3). Feelings evolved, and love was built naturally, without being forced.

### Case 3. Couple with a Second Adoption

They adopted their first child in 2013, the *wait* was a long process, but “[...] waiting was worth it” (I2). Finally, after obtaining the final diagnosis, Juan was certified “[...] as a normal child with a small head, that was a celebration for us” (I2). In their second adoption, they felt they had already paved the way: “[...] in the process of our first child they realized who we were and what our commitment was”. The boy was also interviewed, and he said: “I was happy with my dad and my mom” (A3). Sara was adopted in 2018 when she was 23 months old, and the couple indicated the process was “[...] much more relaxed, but just as demanding” (I3); “[...] she was small and underweight and we said calmly that in the house she will recover! everything else was great” (I3). The previous experience provided them with the serenity to face reality.

*Encounter:* the day Sara arrived home “[...] she was not distant, she was very calm, let everyone carry her, but at night she saw her father and it was as if she were looking at an ogre” (I3). This situation required patience, understanding, and the search for strategies, to face *rejection*: “[...] as a parent, one must be very conscious and mature” (A3). They recognized that every adoption experience is unique, has its demands, and requires the couple to readjust and establish new parenting approaches.

*Adaptation:* Juan's arrival was very smooth, as if “[...] he was born here” (A2), although “[...] the routines are very different” (I3), there were no major disruptions. In the second adoption, “[...] we understood that everything in life is a process. That idea of love at first sight, that's just infatuation, not love because love in adoption is something that is built” (I3), a statement that contradicts popular belief. Furthermore, the adoption of two children brought learning such as “[...] becoming aware, because, beyond a romantic ideal of motherhood and fatherhood, a child proves one's sufficiency, every day” (I2), a situation that is similar in biological parenthood.

*Acceptance:* the arrival of each child had a different meaning, “[...] Juan has been happiness [...] Sara was the cherry on the cake” (I3); “[...] we are more and more in love with those boys every day, time with them has flown by” (A3). They have focused on affective balance: “[...] we have worked consciously not to have preferences for either” (I3), ensuring that each child has their rightful place.

#### **Case 4. Couple with Biological Child who Adopted a Group of Siblings Simultaneously**

*The waiting period* did not exceed three months, “[...] we already had a biological child and we thought it was easier for us, you know how the daily schedule works” (Y2). *The meeting:* “[...] we never imagined that life with three would be chaos” (Y2). Their children arrived at 42 and 18 months old, and as parents, they felt overwhelmed: “[...] when we decided to welcome our two children, we didn't grasp the full extent of what was coming our way” (Y1). “The first year is a situation that overflows the financial, emotional, planning capacity” (Y2); despite preparing for it, reality exceeded their expectations.

*Rejection:* the girl presented unexpected attitudes: “[...] Linda's first reaction was, I don't like the room, I don't like the color, she didn't like anything; it was a shock, especially with her” (Y3). Her denial emerged as a response to her adoption: “[...] what surprised me the most was that she didn't like anything, nothing amazed her” (J2). It was as if she did not feel comfortable in any place or situation. “[...] We had this romanticized idea of love at first sight, that from the

moment we saw each other, we would assume our roles as parents and child, and but her adaptation remains a challenge” (J2). The complexity of the experience oscillated between imagination and the harsh reality they faced.

At first, they came to feel that the situation was getting out of hand: “[...] I had always dreamed of a girl and when my girl arrived, I didn't know what I was going to do with that love I was supposed to have for her” (Y3). They wrestled with contradictions and ambivalence: “[...] I even asked myself, if I would be able to love her as much because, with my son, it was different because he was very young, and one quickly forms an attachment with a baby” (Y2). Finally, reflection, recognition, and affection became the outcome: “[...] the children came into our lives to help us through internal processes” (Y3). Considering this premise allowed them to take responsibility and address their internal challenges to embrace their new reality as an adoptive family.

*Adaptation:* “[...] the first year is very hard, but after that, life flows, and then the challenge is to have passed the first year together. I believe it strengthened us as a couple; we needed a lot of mutual support during that time” (Y2). Understanding and redefining the adoption experience was both an individual and a couple's journey that evolved. “It was complex for us, that period was very exhausting. She often told us I love you, but it did not feel natural” (J2), feeling that the expression of affection was not genuine caused concern, however, they considered it understandable due to the complexity of the situation itself.

*Acceptance:* facing the difficulties of the first year and overcoming them was considered crucial, “[...] that first year is a learning experience” (J2). For them, the bond and attachment between parents and children was generated inexplicably:

Sometimes, I also think, would it be that difficulties make us fall in love and develop affection? I also think it is something magical. That's magic, because those things that used to bother us, we now find amusing. Everything shifts to the other side, now we see things as beautiful, I don't know how it happens, but it happens. (J2, personal communication, October 21, 2021).

Subsequent reflection allowed them to reinterpret their experiences, and humor became a catalyst for parental demands: “[...] we have been so busy with life that we barely talk (laughs), everything has been so intense” (Y2). Time and love are the key elements for a successful adoption process and recognizing that life gradually returns to normal. “I always say, it is difficult, but it is beautiful, it needs time and a lot of love” (Y3), the perception from the outside generates well-being within the home.

In retrospect, valuing the adoption experience brought gratification: “[...] the love we feel now is just as deep and immense, allowing us to see the family as a whole. We are happy with our achievements, everyone sees that we are doing well, so we say, all this was worth it” (Y3). When they reflect on their achievements, they feel rewarded for the effort they have made.

When there is a biological child, questions arise about their role within the family since “[...] he became just one among the others; at one point, he expressed this, but he now knows that we love them all equally and that sometimes one needs more support than the other” (Y3). The parents’ maturity allowed them to foster fairness and reassurance: “[...] our two children bonded with us through love, it’s a process that involves the heart and time” (J2). In the resignification of the adoptive event, parents demarcate affection and coexistence as essential elements in the bonding process.

## Discussion

Mothering and fathering through adoption is possible when the child is symbolically represented in the parents’ desire (Rosser, 2015). When adopted children are wanted, they find their place and are truly recognized as sons or daughters. As one couple stated: “[...] these children are desired a thousand percent, it was not an accident” (A3). Desire is a differentiating element in adoption, which supports the resignification of the child’s and parents’ lives. According to Boetscht et al. (2001), when a child occupies the space of desire, an encounter is created that fosters emotions linked to well-being, as well as new meanings in interactions. In this context, the family begins to rewrite its own story.

Attachment in adopted children acquires a specific characteristic, marked by a significant event: an interruption in the bond with their biological mother due to separation (Pérez, 2015), which shapes what Newton (2010) defines as the “primary wound”. The adoptive family cannot overlook this reality; understanding and accepting in advance that the new bond is complex can provide peace of mind and reassurance to the new parents.

[When] this natural evolution is interrupted because of a postnatal separation from the biological mother, the resulting experience of abandonment and loss is indelibly stamped into the unconscious psyche of these children, causing [...] the primary wound. (Newton, 2010, p. 20).

It is essential to accept that the previous experiences of the adopted children were marked by moments of discontinuity in their ties: with the members of the family of origin, with the transitional caregivers in case of remaining in protective institutions, or with the members of the foster families. In this way, recognizing this trajectory in the child's life before adoption can facilitate the bonding process with the adoptive family. This preparatory phase demands empathy, patience, acceptance, respect, consideration, and hope from new parents, as love in adoption emerges as a sentiment built over time and through daily interactions.

The child arriving through adoption is a stranger, carrying a history of abandonment and trauma that does not end with adoption. If they have suffered mistreatment, they may even come to believe they deserve it. Transforming this defensive and challenging attitude into a relationship based on love and trust is a process that presents significant challenges (Pérez, 2010) and involves moments of suffering.

New parents and siblings are also strangers to him/her. For parents, understanding the child's previous detachment process is complex, and the challenge is to approach it with an empathetic and understanding attitude. The adoptive bonding process is expected to lead to a sense of parenthood. However, each bonding experience is unique; the connection between all involved develops gradually through effort, cognition, learning, and the development of parental skills and competencies.

In this regard, families expressed this in their own words: "[...] that first year we cried, we laughed, we were frustrated" (Y2); "Mercurio has always shown, since arriving, that eternal fear of being alone" (Mar3); "[...] we will never know exactly what she experienced, no matter how much they try to document it for us" (I3); "[...] I say that our daughter is very strong because her life changed overnight" (M3); "[...] she has her father, her mother, and her siblings, among them it was very important to create that bond, because at first, our daughter denied it for three years, while she incorporated in her language that she had an older brother" (Y2); "[...] now she looks at me and says 'Oh no, poor dad sleeping alone!'; In adoption, everything requires management; we cannot be ignorant about it" (A3). These accounts acknowledge the difficulties faced in the months and years following adoption and do not dismiss future challenges. Accepting the ups and downs of the new family reality and the ambivalence in daily relationships can help reduce initial parental stress and foster a gradual emotional bond that must be continuously nurtured throughout life.

The construction of emotional bonds is a two-way process. On one hand, the child needs to understand what it means to have a mother and/or father, learn to recognize them as fundamental figures in their lives and feel loved and valued by them. Essentially, they must experience love to learn to love in the future

(Lapastora, 2021). On the other hand, for parents, it involves accepting that child as their own, feeling and reading their needs, and connecting with them, thereby learning to be parents.

Family life takes its course: “I always say it is difficult, but it is very beautiful, [...] the comment has always been, your children look very good, that they seem very calm and are normal children” (Y3). Thus, the perception from the outside, sometimes, generates in the parents a sense of balance and well-being. Conceiving ourselves as a family and recognizing adoption as an event that will accompany its members throughout their lives as an indelible mark is a great challenge: “[...] the concept that we are five, and six with the dog, I think that is the moment when we understood that we are already the family that recognizes itself” (Y3); “[...] completely fulfilled, that missing piece arrived, what we needed to be a complete family” (A2); “Mercurio is a son of the heart, a loving child” (Ate1); “[...] every adoption process is different, the children are different, the parents are different; families need time to connect, and each person needs their own time for the feeling of love to emerge” (M3). Not judging oneself but instead recognizing that forming a family is a process that unfolds over time is crucial.

During the first years, each family faced dilemmas and challenges before achieving an adoptive family identity. This involved accepting that, although it differs from a biological family, it is equally valid and legitimate (Montano, 2012). The process leads to the construction and consolidation of the bond, aiming for a reparative intention. Additionally, it follows a step-by-step progression that shapes each family's story.

The construction of an adoptive family identity, with the arrival of a new member in the home, presents significant questions and challenges. This was expressed by the consulted individuals: “[...] I think the first year is one of deep reflection on the decision made; you think, wow, are we capable of making this work?” (Y2); “[...] I told my husband, to accept this situation, ‘Don't worry, raise the child and I will be the provider’, because, at that moment of arrival, I felt emotionally overwhelmed” (Ate3). Literature has referenced that children's responses during the bonding process can be difficult and distressing for new parents (Berástegui, 2004). The adaptive process requires parents to adopt flexible, conscious, and reflective attitudes that allow them to accept the complexity of their children's lives before adoption.

Coping requires the implementation of strategies, the use of available family resources, the development of new ones, and the mobilization of personal, familial, and environmental support networks. At times, adoptive families may need to seek therapeutic assistance to navigate complex situations, receive support, and define their path forward.

Thus, it is clear that love at first sight is not a characteristic of adoptive family relationships. Love is neither idyllic nor should it be idealized; it is deconstructed and reconstructed with each step. It does not emerge spontaneously, nor does it flow effortlessly. It is a demanding and challenging loving relationship that requires maturation and consolidation as a family over time.

## Conclusions

Adoption meant a shock, an upheaval, an earthquake, a seismic shift, a whirlwind, a collision, a passionate upheaval, pure change, and a high-voltage situation that overwhelmed financial, emotional, and planning capacities for families.

Rejection was present in all cases, generating moments of crisis for the new parents, characterized by disagreements, discomfort, disappointment, hopelessness, irritability, and frustration. This necessitated the search for coping strategies to overcome these challenges.

When the adoptive couple already has biological children, dilemmas and ambivalence may arise as part of the emotional bonding process with the adopted children. Feelings evolve, and love is built without being forced.

The most significant fears of adoptive families stem from the fear of being judged, of being the only ones experiencing difficulties during the adaptation stage, and from feelings of guilt and shame due to lacking the resources to handle complex situations.

The adaptation stage extended over time and was defined as emotionally intense, tough, challenging, and unimaginable. It required empathy, respect, mutual support, good humor, learning, understanding, acceptance, trust, love, and dedication.

The emotional bond between the members of the adoptive family is the product of a patient and bilateral approach. This process requires affection, validation of children's emotions, acknowledgment of their feelings, adults taking responsibility for uncertainties, and accepting everyone's vulnerabilities to understand and respond to each other's needs.

In the life of an adopted child, previous experiences of detachment shape the development of later attachment processes. Understanding that a child's life does not begin with adoption allows new parents to accept and comprehend their attitudes, behaviors, and emotions connected to the complex experiences each child has endured.

The development of parental desire before adoption must be firmly established before the child's arrival, as it serves as an emotional foundation for families

when facing the realities of relationships with their children. If this desire is strong and enduring, it is more likely that families will have the resources needed to navigate adaptation difficulties. Conversely, if this desire is not sufficiently established, emotional pain arises, and conflicts tend to be greater and more challenging to resolve. However, these challenges can be addressed along the way, as long as parents engage in conscious reflection on these difficulties.

Strengthening the socio-educational and psycho-educational processes of adoptive families, both before and after adoption, is essential. Professional guidance and reflections on the challenges posed by adaptation and cohabitation with adopted children should focus on the construction and nurturing of the emotional bond.

Accepting and recognizing that adoption is not as easy as you might think allows you to empower yourself and feel that it is essential to implement strategies, use the tools you have, develop others, and deploy all the personal and partner resources. Moreover, seeking professional assistance to manage difficult situations and define a personal path is important, as the complexity of the adoption process cannot be fully anticipated.

The main limitation of this study was the tendency of adoptive couples to maintain secrecy regarding their post-adoption experiences, which they perceive as highly impactful due to their intensity, the unexpected reactions, and the difficulties they consider challenging to resolve.

Listening to the narratives of adoptive couples in the local context and translating them through research became an opportunity to understand the particularity of their experiences and bring them out of silence. Participation in the study allowed couples to conceptualize and redefine the adoption experience as both an individual and a shared journey that has been reconfigured over time.

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