

A Look at the Growing Need for Nontraditional Adoptions

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When picturing a family with an adopted child, the first image that comes to many people's mind is that of a mother, father, and their child, but have you ever stopped to consider the alternatives. Who says that every family has to consist of a male and female who are married? Can a single parent, homosexual couples, or couples with a differing ethnicity from the child provide the same love and support as a tradition couple? These are options that adoption and foster care agencies have begun to consider due to the lack of available nontraditional families.

In recent years there has been a drastic shortage of available homes for children in the adoption and foster care network. Because many of these children suffer from considerable health problems or happen to be of minority races, they have often been considered "unadoptable" (Overview 2). Therefore, many of the children move from one foster home to another throughout their lives, which can lead to "increased emotional problems, delinquency, substance abuse, and academic problems" (Overview 2). In order to reduce the number of children floating through the system, child welfare agencies have expanded their policies to allow adults, including single parents, families of minority races, and even people who have physical disabilities, to make an adopted child part of their family (Overview 2-3).

Perhaps one of the most debated groups included in this expansion are gays and lesbians. It has recently become quite common for homosexual couples to adopt children, yet many people question the ability of the couples to provide a mentally healthy and moral environment. It has been questioned that if children who have already led a difficult life were to be placed into a

homosexual household they would have to deal with problems that they would not face living in a heterosexual household. Many scientists feel that this would add to the stress of adjusting to their role in a new family (Brooks 2). However, studies have shown that “there is no evidence to suggest that the children of lesbian and gay parents are less intelligent, suffer from more problems, are less popular, or have lower self-esteem than children of heterosexual parents” (Overview 2). Therefore, it is unfair to assume that a person’s sexual preference will affect their child’s ability to grow up to be a normal and mentally healthy adult.

Many oppose the idea of homosexual adoption because they feel that the couples can not provide proper role models for the children and do not know how to be good parents. This is interesting considering that many gay and lesbian parents that successfully adopt are generally given children with serious physical, mental, and behavioral problems. Many of these children are in need of extra love and support and are therefore looking for strong role models (Brooks 5). In all actuality, children are influenced by more people than solely their parents, such as other family members, teachers, and neighbors. Also, social workers make sure that a child is going into an atmosphere that can provide acceptable role models long before they actually move in (Overview 3). As far as gays’ and lesbians’ parenting abilities go, the American Psychological Association states, “gay and lesbian parents are as likely as [. . .] those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children’s psychosocial growth” (Overview 3).

Another concern that many who oppose same sex adoptions express is that children that are raised in a homosexual household will themselves become homosexual. Children raised in homosexual households have just as much of a chance to grow up to be gay as children growing up in a heterosexual household. Interestingly, it is often found that children of gay parents are

more accepting of diversity, and, if by chance, they do grow up to be gay they are surrounded by parents that will provide support and love despite their sexual orientation (Overview 4).

Many feel that to allow gays to adopt would be allowing them to raise a child in an “immoral” atmosphere. However, if an agency were to consider every “immoral” value that a potential parent might possess, then there would be very few families that would meet the criteria for adoption (Overview 4). Nobody is perfect; therefore restricting adoption to only those who are is a losing battle.

Another concern that surrounds nontraditional adoptions is that in the United States the majority of parents looking to adopt are white, whereas the majority of the children looking for placement are of a minority race. Therefore, there is a lack of matching parents to the races of the children. In this situation it has become increasingly more common to look toward transracial adoption. In Rita James Simon’s book, *Transracial Adoptions*, she says that “adoption of children with differing ethnicity did not come about solely to serve the population in need, but instead to face the reality of the increasing ratio of multi-ethnic children to adoptive parents.”(11). Simon also observed that “recent social changes regarding abortion, contraception, and reproduction in general had significantly reduced the number of white children available for adoption, leaving nonwhite children as the largest available source.”(11). With the recent lack of same race families, social workers began to explore the options of transracial adoptions. Many argued that it was better for a child to be placed into a family, despite cultural differences, than to be left in the child welfare system (Simon 11). Simon argues that when placing a child the best interests of the child should be considered, and this is usually letting the child grow up with a family instead of spending much of their life in an institution or in foster care (22).

Another popular debate about transracial adoption is whether families of differing race can educate the child of their particular race and cultural background. According to the article, “Transracial Adoption Sparks Debate”, transracial adoptions have been questioned as far back as 1972, beginning with the National Association of Black Social Workers. Like others, they believed that to place a child of a different ethnic background with parents of contrasting ethnicity would be detrimental to the child’s racial identity and sense of community. States such as California, Minnesota, and Arkansas, agreed with this organization and have since passed laws that require social workers to place children with parents of the same race (Transracial 1). In contrast, many feel that with so many children floating around in the welfare system, it is not fair to place such restrictions when attempting to find an adequate family for a child. In order to regulate the somewhat segregated adoption that many agencies participate in, whether consciously or not, Congress passed the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994. This act helps ensure parents the right of adopting children of any racial background (Teicher 1). In addition, all federally funded agencies are prohibited to deny or delay adoptive parents from adopting a child based solely on ethnic differences (Transracial 1).

For years it was believed that a child and their adoptive parent should “match” in racial aspects in order to make it easier on the child to be able to identify with their background and to reduce the difficulty of adjustment that many children will face after adoption. However, the idea of transracial adoption has helped move people from the concept of “matching” a child to their adoptive parents and now children are no longer restricted to parents with the same “physical, emotional, and cultural characteristics” (Simon 12-13). Rita James Simon feels that a child’s social and cultural attitudes are learned, making a child’s living environment very important. “The home selected should be one in which the child will have the opportunity to

develop his own capacities, and where he is not forced to meet unrealistic expectations of the adoptive parents” (Simon 14-15). Organizations such as The North American Council on Adoptable Children believe that racial differences do play a role in a child’s racial identity. However, instead of condoning transracial adoptions they are making attempts to educate parents about children of differing races. Many believe that transracial adoptions encourage minorities to adopt and help eliminate the barriers that have divided our country by race for many decades (Teicher 2).

Some of the hardest children to find placement for are those who are older, those with extreme emotional and behavior problems, and those with special needs. Over the years the declining number of couples willing to adopt such children has caused social workers to accept the idea of allowing single parents to fill this gap. In fact, single parents make up almost twenty five percent of the families adopting children with special needs, as well as accounting for five percent of all other adoptions (Prowler 1). Single parenting is the least controversial group in the expansion of adoptive parents, but they still face extreme criticism of being inferior to married couples. It is becoming more apparent that single parents are actually a better option for the children that are more difficult to place with couples. However, despite this observation, individuals are met with a great deal of objections and obstacles which often lead to termination of the adoption attempt.

There are several factors that have brought about the recent surge in acceptance of single parent adoptions. Many women are now finding themselves waiting to get married and start families in order to pursue careers. As a result they find themselves in their thirties and unmarried, yet with the desire to raise a child. Therefore, many of them turned to adoption agencies to provide them with a child. Also, with the growing number of single parent

households due to divorce and single mothers having and keeping their children, society is becoming more accepting of this picture. Adoption agencies realize that many children live in single parent circumstances and the agencies are now opening their policies to allow such arrangements for prospective adoptions (Prowler 2-3).

It has been suggested by many who oppose single parent adoptions that an individual is not capable of raising a child on their own. Richard B. Knight, a family research professional, states that, "Children of single parents are at higher risk of early sexual activity, drug abuse, and delinquency" (Espejo 81). Others are set in their views that a child needs a mother and a father to experience healthy growth and development. Although many mental health experts say that it is ideal for a child to be raised in a two parent home with a mother and a father, it is not always possible for a child to be placed in such a home (Prowler 3-4). It is because of many opposing views like this that single parents find it difficult to adopt a child.

Perhaps the most stigmatized individual when trying to adopt is a single male. Many think that a man could not provide sensitivity to a child's needs, or think that a boy needs a mother, while others question the man's reasons for wanting to raise a child by himself. Because of such discrimination the majority of single parents that successfully adopt are women. However, the number of single men who successfully adopt a child has increased and is becoming more acceptable. In fact, many agencies have found that it is often better to place a boy who is in need of a strong role model with a single father (Prowler 5).

When single parents work with agencies to try to find a child they are often met with obstacles that slow the adoption process significantly. Because different agencies have different policies about single parent applicants the individual may have to be very persistent. Another

situation that the applicant may face is that their application and request for a home study may take far longer for review than that of a couple and may even become “lost” (Prowler 4). Before a child can even be placed with an individual they must undergo a house study which basically evaluates the applicant’s ability to care for the child and informs the court that it is an adequate living environment for the child. Although the circumstances of the visits differ for each agency, most are concerned with the individual’s ability to provide role models, support during difficult times, financial resources, and knowledge of parenting (Shireman 372).

It is often found that because of the difficulties that single parents face when trying to adopt they are willing to adopt children who are older, of minority races, or categorized with special needs. Ironically, single parents have now been acknowledged as being the ideal choice for many of these children. It has been found that those who make it through the extensive screening process are those who truly want to adopt and are truly eager parents. Also, because they are single their living environment is simpler compared to that of a couple, giving the child less to adapt to and reducing the number of relationships that the child has to form initially. Since the parent is single they are able to focus more of their time and attention to the child’s needs and spend a great deal of time building a relationship with the child (Prowler 7). Due to the parent’s freedom to focus solely on the child, researchers have concluded that, “Single parent homes may be particularly suited for children who need intense and close relationships . . . [f]or some children, such a close bond may meet a need and be a path to normal development” (Prowler 3). As with the other nontraditional forms of adoption, there are many benefits and advantages, despite the opposition that many feel towards such situations.

In a system that is filled with more children than they are able to place, it has become increasingly pertinent for agencies to expand their options. Many people may disagree with

homosexuals having the right to adopt or foster children, but in a world that has so many children looking for homes it will become impossible to improve the situation unless we start looking at the alternatives. For many families, transracial adoptions provide the couple with new choices in bringing a child into their home, while helping to alleviate the stress that has been put on the child welfare system due to the increase in children up for adoption. When given a chance, many agencies may find that allowing nontraditional adoptions may work out in a more positive manner, such as with single parent adoptions. Since many claim that a child's best interest needs to be taken into consideration, what could be more in the best interest of a child than providing them with a home and parents to love and care for them? Although much of this expansion is done with reluctance, many agencies across the United States are seeing more children placed with loving and supportive parents. It is time for us to move past prejudices and look into the alternatives that can help our country continue to provide the best future possible for our children.

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