

EVAN B. DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

**Expanding Resources for Children:
Is Adoption by Gays and Lesbians Part of the Answer
for Boys and Girls Who Need Homes?**

Policy Perspective

March 2006

Funded by: The Gill Foundation and the Human Rights Campaign

Prepared by: The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

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Executive Summary

It is a mantra of political rhetoric, a guiding principle of professional policy and practice, and an explicit goal of our nation's laws and practices: Every child deserves to live in a permanent, loving home. Yet tens of thousands of boys and girls remain mired in the foster care system, unable to return to their original families and without realistic prospects of being adopted.

At the same time, agencies and attorneys report the number of gay and lesbian adults expressing an interest in adopting these children is growing. This reality raises hopes among many child welfare professionals and policy-makers, who see a new pool of prospective parents for children who need them. But it also generates controversy and criticism among others, who are concerned about the consequences of permitting adoption into families headed by gay or lesbian parents.

In an effort to inform the debate, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute has conducted an extensive examination of the relevant issues, laws and practices, and available research spanning the last several decades. This effort – which represents one of the broadest, most thorough reviews and analyses to date on gay/lesbian adoption and parenting – is part of a larger, more detailed project that will be completed and released in several months. This paper, meanwhile, is intended as an overview that serves two principal functions: to inform and provide context for the often-fractious debate over gay/lesbian adoption currently taking place in our country; and, most important, to provide information that can be used to shape best practices that focus on providing boys and girls in the child welfare system with safe, committed and enduring families.

Principal findings

- Against a backdrop of increasing public acceptance, social science research concludes that children reared by gay and lesbian parents fare comparably to those of children raised by heterosexuals on a range of measures of social and psychological adjustment.
- Studies are increasing in number and rigor, but the body of research on gay/lesbian parents is relatively small and has methodological limitations. Still, virtually every valid study reaches the same conclusion: The children of gays and lesbians adjust positively and their families function well. The limited research on gay/lesbian adoption points in the same direction.
- Though few states have laws or policies explicitly barring homosexuals from adopting, some individual agencies and workers outside those states discriminate against gay and lesbian applicants based on their own biases or on mistaken beliefs that such prohibitions exist.
- Laws and policies that preclude adoption by gay or lesbian parents disadvantage the tens of thousands of children mired in the foster care system who need permanent, loving homes.

Background

Despite federal legislation and state initiatives aimed at getting more children out of foster care and doing so more quickly – and despite a surge in adoptions from the system during the last decade – the number of children in need of permanent families continues to be large. The latest available count, by the U.S. Children's Bureau for 2003, estimated there were 119,000 children awaiting adoption from the child welfare system, only 20,000 of whom were in pre-adoptive homes.

Many prospective parents are interested in adoption, but the significant majority of them are interested in adopting infants or young children without histories of maltreatment and without physical or mental disabilities. In short, the number of waiting children in foster care far exceeds the supply of parents seeking to adopt them. Achieving permanency, safety and well-being for these children requires creative policy and practice to expand the number of families available. In this context – and against the backdrop of changing cultural values – many, if not most, agencies nationwide have become increasingly amenable to gay and lesbian individuals and couples as one such resource.

However, the move to expanding the pool of adoptive parents in this way requires legal, organizational and attitudinal change. If child welfare professionals, children's advocates and policymakers wish to enlarge the pool of parental resources to include these parents, among the steps they should consider are:

Recommendations

- Move to end legal and de facto restrictions on adoption by gays and lesbians. This includes working to expand co-parent and second parent adoption, as well as revising agency policies and practices that may impede their consideration as an adoptive resource.
- Develop clear statements in support of such adoptions, recognizing a “don't ask, don't tell” approach disadvantages parents and, ultimately, their children. And develop contacts with the gay/lesbian community in order to engage in genuine, informed outreach.
- Help workers, supervisors, and agency leaders examine their attitudes and beliefs about gay and lesbian parenting, while affirming the value of these families by including them in outreach, training materials, and parent panels.
- Conduct research to inform the development of resources, training, and support to improve post-adoption success. And work to include and educate children in the process, recognizing that they may encounter prejudice if adopted by gay parents.

Conclusion

Based on both the available research and growing experience, adoption by gays and lesbians holds promise as an avenue for achieving permanency for many of the waiting children in foster care.

Policy Perspectives are research-based Adoption Institute publications that focus on important and timely issues in the field. This report was researched and written by Professor Jeanne Howard of Illinois State University, who is the Adoption Institute's Policy and Research Director. Special thanks to two of our Senior Fellows, Professor Scott Ryan of Florida State University and Professor David Brodzinsky of Rutgers University, for their valuable contributions. This Policy Perspective was edited by Executive Director Adam Pertman. Send questions and comments to info@adoptioninstitute.org.

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