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Expanding Resources for Children III

Research-Based Best Practices in Adoption by Gays and Lesbians

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***EXPANDING RESOURCES FOR
CHILDREN III:***

***RESEARCH-BASED BEST PRACTICES IN ADOPTION
BY GAYS AND LESBIANS***

Policy and Practice Perspective

October 2011

Prepared by: David M. Brodzinsky, Ph.D.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In every region and state in America, gay fathers and lesbian mothers are raising children. For a range of reasons, not everyone in our country likes or wants to accept this reality, but it is a reality nevertheless. And it is also true that adoption – primarily of “waiting” children and youth from foster care – is one of the reasons for this growing phenomenon. The good news is that both research and experience indicate that non-heterosexual parents are bringing up their children with sensitivity and competence comparable to that of their straight counterparts and, as a result, their sons and daughters are adjusting just as well.

Nevertheless, societal stigmas relating to adoption by lesbians and gay men remain, as do institutional barriers. These impediments do not further the best interests of children; indeed, they prevent or delay permanency for many, undermining their long-term psychosocial and academic adjustment. With over 100,000 children continuing to linger in foster care, despite being legally freed for adoption, every effort must be made to find timely and permanent placements for them, as well as for all the other children, in our country and abroad, who would benefit from adoption.

To maximize the number of suitable, vetted, trained and available families for the children who need them, all adults – regardless of gender, race, marital status, income level and/or sexual orientation – should be given the same opportunity to apply and be assessed for adoptive parenthood, using the same standards and guidelines. While the majority of adoption professionals today explicitly agree with that conclusion and already accept applications from gay and lesbian applicants, many if not most acknowledge that they are unsure about the best ways of working with such clients.

In keeping with its strategic priority to conduct work that improves children’s prospects of living in safe and successful families, the Adoption Institute has conducted a four-year-long research project that culminates in the publication of this report. It reviews what is known about adoption by lesbians and gay men and presents new empirical data about their perceptions, experiences and needs as parents. Based on this knowledge, the Institute provides best-practice recommendations for improving adoption practice and for strengthening pre-adoption and post-adoption services for families headed by non-heterosexual adults.

The components of this project included an extensive review of adoption practice literature and research on gay/lesbian family life, a national survey of gay/lesbian adoptive parents, a survey of adoption agency practices (still being analyzed and not included in this report), and an edited interdisciplinary book entitled *Adoption by Lesbians and Gay Men: A New Dimension in Family Diversity* (2011a).

This report also draws from and follows up on three previous publications of the Adoption Institute in this same realm: 1). *Adoption by Lesbians and Gays: A National Survey of Adoption Agency Policies, Practices and Attitudes* (2003); 2). *Expanding Resources for Children: Is Adoption by Gays and Lesbians Part of the Answer for Boys and Girls who Need Homes* (2006); and 3). *Expanding Resources for Children II: Eliminating Legal and Practice Barriers to Gays and Lesbians Adopting from Foster Care* (2008). In addition, it is informed by the work of others, notably the Human Rights Campaign, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering and Dr. Gary Mallon of Hunter College.

Key Findings from Previous Adoption Institute Publications

The body of work conducted by the Adoption Institute on gay/lesbian adoption has produced a number of important findings that provide a context for understanding the conclusions and recommendations in this report. Among them are:

- Children growing up in lesbian- and gay-headed households show similar patterns of adjustment as those raised by heterosexuals.
- Lesbians and gay men are motivated to adopt children at significant rates, and in fact are doing so, with over 65,000 adopted children and 14,000 foster children in the U.S. residing in homes headed by non-heterosexual individuals or couples.
- Most children adopted from foster care are adopted by their foster parents; banning or hindering lesbians and gay adults from fostering or adopting will reduce the number of permanent and nurturing homes for children in need.
- At least 60% of U.S. adoption agencies accept non-heterosexual parental applicants, and almost 40% have knowingly placed children with them – meaning almost any lesbian, gay man, or same-sex couple can find a professional to work with them. About half the agencies surveyed reported a desire for staff training to work with such clients.

Major Findings of the Current Project

- Over 50% of lesbian and gay parents adopted children from the child welfare system, and 60% adopted transracially. These findings demonstrate that non-heterosexual individuals and couples are important resources for children who linger in foster care.
- "Gay-affirmative" images and information in an adoption agency's "marketing" materials – website, brochures, newsletters and recruitment documents – increase the comfort and confidence of non-heterosexuals in working with the agency and its staff.
- Over 80% of lesbians and gays report that they voluntarily shared information about their sexual orientation with their adoption workers, and most workers responded in a positive and accepting manner. *Seventy-five percent were also generally satisfied with the professionalism and competence of their workers, but fewer than half felt the same way about the workers' knowledge and sensitivity regarding LGBT issues and family life.*
- Adoptive parents reported feeling more satisfied with their experience when they were comfortable disclosing information about their sexual orientation to agency staff, received positive reactions, and obtained good pre-adoption preparation and support.
- About one-third of the adoptions by lesbians and gay men in our survey were "open," and the birth families' initial reactions upon learning of their sexual orientation were strongly positive (73%). *Interestingly, gay male couples more often reported having been chosen because of their sexual orientation than did lesbians, explaining that the birthmothers expressed a desire to remain the child's "only mother."*

- Fewer than 20% of lesbian and gay parents received any pre-adoption preparation about managing sexual orientation issues in family life, and only 13% indicated any post-adoption training in this area.
- Two-thirds of lesbians and gays identified multiple areas of unmet training needs, including those related to general parenting, children's developmental issues, helping children cope with adoption and parental sexual orientation, and race and culture issues.
- There were more similarities than differences in the adoption experiences and views of lesbians and gay men. Lesbians were more likely to adopt transracially and to be less satisfied with their pre-adoption preparation and more likely to report unmet post-adoption education and support needs than gay men.

Best-Practice Recommendations

- **Advocate to remove legal and cultural barriers for LGBT adoption**, with a particular focus on improving the prospects of “waiting” children and youth in foster care. *This includes: advocacy for the passage of “gay marriage” laws, because the social institution of marriage brings clear long-term psychological (and other benefits) to children; partnerships between adoption professionals and LGBT organizations; and the promotion of positive press coverage of gay- and lesbian-headed families.*
- **Foster positive leadership and values among adoption professionals**, including by ensuring that agency Boards and CEOs are knowledgeable about and supportive of adoption by qualified non-heterosexuals and create workplace environments, including paperwork and employee attitudes, that are also inclusive, welcoming and respectful.
- **Develop recruitment and promotional strategies that demonstrate a desire to include LGBT clients**, including on websites and in brochures, newsletters, advertisements and recruiting/marketing materials. The addition of staff members who are non-heterosexual (and are professionally qualified) can also play an important role.
- **Provide appropriate pre- and post-adoption preparation and support for LGBT clients** because such education/services can be critical to the family's stability, particularly since these parents often adopt children with complex histories (such as abuse or neglect). *Issues relating to the parents' sexual orientation should be included in preparation and support, since they are likely to play a role in the experiences of the family in general and in those of the child in particular.*
- **Provide pre-adoption preparation and support for birth families**, including information that counters misconceptions and stereotypes about gay/lesbian parents; and provide education, guidance and support to older children who are being adopted to help them decide about and adjust to their new families.
- **Support research on LGBT adoption and parenting** because these families exist throughout our country and it is incumbent on the field to ensure that their children's interests are served through establishing and promulgating best practices.

Conclusion

Each year, over 130,000 children are adopted in the United States by married couples and single adults; by parents of every color and ethnicity, by financially secure parents and ones with limited incomes; by biological family members and strangers; by individuals who have struggled with infertility and ones who could make babies but choose this course instead; and into families where there already are biological children and ones where there are not.

Although most adoptive parents are heterosexual, one of the historic changes in adoption practice over the past several decades is the growing number of children entering families with lesbian and gay parents. They are mainly girls and boys from foster care who are older or have special needs, but also domestically born infants placed by their first mothers (and sometimes fathers), and children from other countries. They are being adopted in every state and live in nearly every county in the nation, and lesbian and gay parents, like their heterosexual counterparts, are providing nurturance and life-long permanence for these children. Moreover, they are doing so with a high level of parenting sensitivity and competence, comparable to that found among heterosexual adopters. And the evidence is that their sons and daughters are adjusting just as well as those being raised by straight parents.

Until recently, relatively few guidelines existed in this area of adoption practice. In addition, insufficient research has been conducted on adoption by LGBT families or on their experiences and needs in raising their children. Best practice guidelines need to be grounded in sound theory, experienced casework and valid empirical data. The research and policy analysis of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, as well as the work of other organizations and individuals, represent important steps in developing improved ways of working with these families. As better practices are identified, validated, disseminated and utilized by well-trained professionals over coming years, the lives of many thousands of boys and girls will be improved.