

Adoption First Principles

Adoption should serve the best interests of children: The fundamental purpose of adoption is to serve the best interests of children. It does so by providing loving, responsible, and legally permanent parents when their biological parents cannot or will not parent them. Serving the best interests of children should be paramount in deciding all issues of adoption policy and practice.

Making an adoption plan for a child is a loving act: Most birthmothers make an adoption plan based on their loving and responsible consideration of their children's best interests. They want their babies and children to have loving, stable families and homes, preferably with both a mother and father. Birthfathers, when they are involved in the adoption plan, are similarly motivated. Society should honor and respect birthparents, and especially birthmothers, for these loving, unselfish decisions.

Growing up adopted is healthy and normal: Adoption is healthy, satisfying, and good for adopted persons, not an enduring challenge to identity and wholeness. The adopted person may have additional questions and curiosities to sort out, but adoption is not a psychological burden or pathology as some theorists treat it. Adoption is the way one joined one's family, not a defining characteristic or lifelong process. Persons adopted as infants grow up as healthy and productive as people raised in their biological families. To the extent there can be a greater risk of emotional or behavioral problems for children adopted out of foster care at later ages, the correlation is not the result of being adopted, but rather of difficulties experienced prior to adoption, such as neglect or abuse. The vast majority of foster children make the transition into their adoptive families and grow up very successfully.

Adoptive parents are the real parents: The "real" parents of the child who was adopted are the adoptive parents, because they are the ones who are legally and morally responsible for the child; they are the ones who parent. In general, law and society have appropriately treated adoptive parents the same as biological parents. In the best interests of children, we should continue to do so. The interests and well-being of adopted children are thoroughly intertwined with those of the adoptive family.

There is no right to adopt, only the right of the child to be adopted: The purpose of adoption is to provide the best possible parents for children, not to provide children for adults who desire to parent them. Adoption policy and practice guided by the best interests of the child recognizes no 'right to adopt,' only the right of the child to be adopted when his or her biological parents cannot or will not parent. Adult assertions of a right to adopt reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the most basic principle of adoption: The whole purpose of adoption is to serve the best interests of children.

Children's interests, not ideologies, should come first: Some of the greatest obstacles to adoptions that would be in children's best interests are ideological. Some children grow too old in foster care because judges and social service workers insist on maintaining biological connections and pursuing family reunification, even when the household is

harming the child and there is hardly a true family to preserve. Other children who could enjoy the benefits of family through transracial adoption instead remain in foster care because someone in authority believes the prospective parents have the wrong skin color.

Because some foreign authorities oppose the idea of Americans taking the mother-country's children, many foreign children languish in orphanages instead of being adopted internationally – thus, sacrificing the children's well-being to national pride. The first, best choice for placing an orphaned child born in another country is an adoptive family within his or her country of origin. But for many children, this option is not available, and they are left to grow up in an orphanage, when they could have been part of a true family through international adoption.

Consistent with the child's best interests, preference in adoption placements should be given to families that offer married mother-and-father parenting: Recent research has confirmed the teaching of centuries of historical experience that married mother-and-father parenting is most likely to produce the best outcomes for children. Because the goal of marriage is to be lifelong, married-couple parenting provides children greater security and permanence, and data show that adoptive parents divorce at lower rates than biological parents. Children also benefit from receiving both maternal and paternal love, which are complementary and distinct, and from having both male and female role models in their immediate family. For all these reasons, adoptive placements should be with husband-and-wife couples, whenever possible.

This principle is further substantiated by the fact that those who make adoptive placement decisions tend to choose married couples. Ensuring that their children have a married mother and father is one of the major reasons birthmothers give for making an adoption plan. Those who make placement decisions for foster children choose husband-and-wife couples two-thirds of the time and would do so at a higher percentage if there were more married couples seeking to adopt these children. There are 55-million married-couple households in America – 471 for every child who is waiting to be adopted out of foster care. A major goal of child welfare policy should be the recruitment and preparation of many more of these couples to adopt the 116,653 children in foster care who had been freed for adoption as of September 30, 2002.

Single-parent adoption is in the best interests of some children: Children's alternatives for prospective adoptive parents vary significantly depending on diverse factors, such as the age of the child and any special needs the child may have. Children in foster care and foreign orphanages, who are older or have special needs, often have limited prospects for parents. Many children across America benefit greatly from loving, permanent relationships with single adoptive parents. Especially for some older children, single-parent adoption can be the best option available. But adoptive placements of healthy infants should generally be with husband-and-wife couples, because there are many such couples ready to adopt them. The question of who may adopt a particular child should be based on that child's best interests, given the alternatives that exist for that child.

Mutual consent should decide issues of privacy and openness: The right to maintain or waive one's privacy in adoption is essential to the human rights and personal dignity of adopted persons, birthparents, and adoptive parents. Adoption policy and practice should not empower one party to adoption to receive identifying information or unilaterally impose contacts without the consent of another party.

Search and reunion advocacy is commonplace in the media, but the range of views regarding privacy in adoption is actually as varied and personal as there are parties to adoption. In the context of the media's fascination with openness in adoption, it is important to remember that the many who prefer privacy cannot discuss their views publicly without sacrificing the very privacy they desire to protect. Birthparents and adult adopted persons who desire to have contact should be able to do so, when *both* agree. Otherwise, both should be able to control the release of their identifying information and whether and when contacts are to occur.

Research to date is inconclusive regarding the impact of openness in placements on adopted children, their families, and birthmothers. Some adoption advocates and practitioners question the wisdom of the exchange of identifying information and ongoing birthmother visits with the family. Others believe that fully open adoptions should be the norm. There is little controversy over such openness practices as: birthparent involvement in the selection of the adoptive parents; one or two meetings between birthmother and adoptive parents before and/or at placement; and letters and photographs for agreed-upon times following placement. In practice, birthmothers and adoptive parents are working out agreements regarding degrees of placement openness; the substantial majority of agreements do not involve ongoing visits.