



National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information National Adoption Information Clearinghouse



Gateways to Information: Protecting Children and Strengthening Families

Single Parent Adoption: What You Need to Know

Introduction

In 1970, if you had gone to an adoption agency as a single person and applied for a child, you would have, unfortunately, been turned down—it just wasn't done. In fact, in some States, there were laws against single parent adoption. Now, thousands of children in the United States and other countries are living with single men and women who have chosen to become parents and who have been given the opportunity to provide a loving permanent home for a child. In the last 20 years there has been a steady, sizable increase in the number of single parent adoptions—some people feel that it is the fastest growing trend in the adoption field. Approximately 25 percent of the adoptions of children with special needs are by single men and women,¹ and it is estimated that about 5 percent of all other adoptions are by single people. The outlook for single parent adoption is encouraging as it becomes more widely accepted.

In this factsheet, we will look at the reasons for the growing acceptance of single parent adoption and discuss some of the questions that you, as a prospective adoptive parent may ask as you begin the adoption process. We will explore, too, some of the issues facing a single adoptive parent, and learn about the available resources to guide you in this exciting new venture.

Why Does a Single Person Adopt?

Why would a successful, independent single man or woman want to give up his or her freedom and assume the responsibilities of raising a child?

The desire to nurture and to share life as a family is a strong universal need that is felt by a large number of people and one that is not exclusive to married people or couples. Often a single person finds life incomplete, as one single woman expressed, "I had a stable job and could give a child many benefits. And I had love that needed to be given and a need to be needed. I wanted some purpose to my life other than my work and my cat." Because many women have pursued careers and put off marriage and having children until they are older, they find that they have reached their thirties, without a husband, but with a compelling desire for a child. Adoption becomes a viable option for single women who feel that having a child out-of-wedlock is unacceptable or who find that they are infertile.

Some men and women feel that they can provide a better life for the children living in institutions or foster care or in countries that cannot provide them with the basic necessities. One teacher said, "Because I continually saw children in my special education classes who lived in institutions or went from foster home to foster home, I decided that even as a single parent I could do more for a child."²

Loneliness may be another factor in deciding to become a single adoptive parent. As Dorothy Dooley, adoption director at the New York Foundling Hospital, said, "Loneliness cannot be your only motivation for adoption but it certainly could be part of it. The need to



share is a complex human response. If you care enough about children to want to share your life with one of them, that's a healthy need.³

Why Is Single Parent Adoption Becoming More Prevalent?

A number of factors have encouraged the acceptance of single parent families. Perhaps most is the growing number of one-parent households due to divorce and to unmarried women having and keeping their children. A recent *New York Times* article reported that more than half of the Nation's 9.8 million African-American children under 18 years of age, nearly one-third of the 7 million Hispanic children, and one-fifth of the Nation's 51.1 million Caucasian children live with a single parent.⁴ While women are the primary caregivers for most of these children, there are also one million single fathers in this country.⁵ With so many children living in this type of home environment, adoption agencies have been more willing to consider unmarried men and women as prospective adopters.

Most of these single parents work full-time and are financially responsible for their families. While shouldering the economic burden, they continue to maintain the home and care for the children.

The issue of personal finances has become less important with the availability of adoption subsidies in almost every State for children with special needs. This has encouraged those with limited incomes who are otherwise capable and willing to adopt to pursue adoption.

The adoption picture has also changed. The number of healthy Caucasian infants available for adoption has decreased dramatically due to birth control, legalized abortion, and the decision of unwed mothers to keep their babies. Therefore, agencies have a shortage of babies to offer couples who are interested in adoption. Most of the children who are available for adoption are older or have disabilities. As the adoption agencies struggle to find homes for these children, single parent applicants have become more widely accepted.

Another factor is that single adoptive parents have proven to be very successful in encouraging their own acceptance. The latest research indicates that children raised in single adoptive parent families compare favorably with other adopted children and show a healthy involvement with friends and family as well as in the activities of their age group. It has been shown that it is the instability of broken homes, rather than the absence of a parent, that causes difficulty for a child.⁶ In 1985, an 8- year longitudinal study of 22 single adoptive parents reported that the child care provided by the parents had been consistent and of high quality. The researchers stated that, "The single parents of this study lead busy lives and seem to manage the demands of jobs, home, and parenting with a sure touch."⁷ The parents interviewed, who were both African-American and Caucasian, had adopted young children, most of whom were under the age of 3. The authors questioned whether a single parent placement would be as appropriate for an older child who has had difficult experiences, since more older children are available today.

These researchers concluded that "single parent homes may be particularly suited for children who need intense and close relationships and thus particularly appropriate for many of the older children in foster care who are now being prepared for permanent homes. For some children, such a close bond may meet a need and be a path to normal development."⁸

What Are the Obstacles?

Despite the greater acceptance of single parent adoption, the traditional view of parenting, that a child needs a mother and a father for healthy growth and development, still exists. Mental health experts say that the "ideal" is to place a child in a two-parent home with a mother and father who are compatible and loving. However, there are many children for whom this "ideal" is not possible and many single people who feel that such bias is unfair.

Your family and friends may be your first hurdle. They may not understand why anyone would assume the responsibility for raising a child alone. They may ask if you have lost your senses. It may or may not be possible for you to convince them that you know what you are doing.

Agencies have varying policies in dealing with single applicants. Some don't accept them at all. Others may put your application and request for a home study (a family assessment) on the back burner while waiting to find a couple who wants to adopt. The children offered to you may have disabilities that you cannot handle or be 12-years-old when you requested a toddler. If you pursue independent adoption (a path to adoption with no agency involvement) birth mothers may balk when they learn you are single.

Single men face even tougher scrutiny as they are asked intimate questions about their sexuality, motives, friends, and living arrangements. They may be qualified to parent and still be turned down.

Going it alone is not easy. Adoptive parents and agencies, in preparing prospective adoptive parents, stress the importance of having friends and family who can lend support and serve as a back-up system. All the responsibilities will land squarely on your shoulders, such as caring for a sick child, picking the child up at his or her friend's house, choosing the right school, and speaking to school counselors. Having a strong network that you can rely on will ease some of this responsibility and provide relief from the constant role of parent.

It will also help if you can demonstrate to a potential adoption agency that you have thought through some of the long-term implications of being a single adoptive parent. For example, if you have evaluated your financial situation thoroughly before going to an agency, and can present a realistic picture of how you plan to provide for a child over the years, they will see how serious and stable you are. Also, expect questions about how you will handle your social life once you become a parent, and be ready to discuss your feelings about this in an open, straightforward manner. You are not expected to give up your adult relationships when you adopt. In fact it would be unhealthy for you to do so. However, you will need to strike a new balance in your life as you juggle the new role of parent with your other roles. It would be good for you to show that you have thought about these issues in a mature and sensitive manner.

As you approach agencies and other adoption resources, you have to believe in yourself. The process may not be a smooth one and you may have some doors closed to you. But as one successful adopter put it, "You have to believe that there is a child somewhere in the world waiting for you." Your determination and assertiveness can make your dream come true.

Who Has Adopted?

All kinds of people choose to adopt—there is no one "acceptable" type. There are women and men who are highly educated with well-respected jobs, high school graduates with blue-collar jobs, people with grown children, and others who want to care for a child with special needs. They are all capable people who have a lot of love to share. Many are in the "helping" professions—psychologists, teachers, nurses—and want to improve the lives of children.

In spite of the many obstacles often put in their way, single men do adopt. In fact, 1 out of every 10 members of a national support organization, the Committee for Single Adoptive Parents, is a male. Traditionally, there has been a strong bias against male applicants by adoption agency personnel. They might think that, "a single man could not be sensitive to a child's needs;" or, "a boy needs a mother;" or, "I wonder what kind of man wants to raise a child alone."⁹ These beliefs are diminishing as the number of men who are successfully caring for children grows. The rising number of divorced men with joint custody, coupled with the inroads made by feminists who expect men to take a larger role in childrearing, has led to an increase in the number of men who feel comfortable and are competent in raising their children. Adoption agencies have found that single fathers can be the best placement for boys who need strong role models and guidance in an accepting, loving environment. The men who have persevered and overcome the prejudice are outspoken advocates for adoption. Taurean Blacque, an actor and single father of nine, felt that "I had to give something back . . . to share something."¹⁰

What Are the First Steps?

Lois Gilman, in her thorough and informative book entitled *The Adoption Resource Book*, suggests that as a prospective adopter, you should begin by exploring resources that will help you build your family and that will provide information and support in the coming years. Her advice is (1) make contact with adoptive families and parent groups, (2) obtain general information from social service agencies and learn any details about specific adoption programs, and (3) read.¹¹

Single parents are almost unanimous in extolling parent groups as a rich resource. These groups can provide information about which agency to go to, which social worker to ask for, and exactly how to proceed. As the process gets underway, parent group members can provide support and encouragement as well as stories of first-hand experiences that can prove invaluable. A list of parent support groups in your area and other single parents to talk to is available by writing to the Committee For Single Adoptive Parents, P.O. Box 15084, Chevy Chase, MD 20825. The Committee serves as a clearinghouse for singles seeking information. The modest membership fee entitles you to a listing of agencies and other contacts, with updates, as well as recommended readings and information about recent adoptions (including country of origin and age of child).

Meeting or corresponding with other single parent adoptive families will help you learn more about adoption first-hand and guide you in focusing on the type of child you might consider adopting. For instance, if you think you want to adopt a foreign child, try to spend time with a family who has gone through an intercountry adoption and learn as much as you can about their experience.

To learn more about the adoption situation in your State, you will want to contact the State's Department of Public Welfare or Social Services and local public and private adoption agencies. Their addresses can be obtained from your local phone book or by

contacting the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse can provide listings by State of agencies and can answer specific questions about the types of children who are available. You may choose to find a child through a private or intercountry adoption, but as Lois Gilman points out, "touching base initially with local agencies gives you a better grasp of adoption in the United States and in your State today."¹²

Books on adoption in general and single parent adoption in particular may be available in your local library or book store. The bibliography included with this fact sheet may help you in gaining an understanding of some of the relevant issues. Books on child care and development are also relevant as you consider raising a child, especially books with sections on single parenting. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse is a valuable resource that provides information free of charge and can recommend more books and articles on these topics.

How Do You Find the Child You Want?

Perhaps the most important concept to keep in mind in searching for a child is determination. Whether you work with a public agency, pursue an independent adoption or look to another country for a child, you must be your own best advocate and stay focused on your goal of becoming a parent. This perseverance will serve you well as you enter the adoption arena.

You may have a good idea of the type of child you are interested in adopting. Or you may still be open to considering a variety of children.

If you are willing to consider an older child, a disabled child, or a sibling group, you should approach a public or private agency. Many are responsible for children who are living in foster care or institutions, and who are waiting for permanent homes. Applicants must meet certain requirements, but depending on the agency, there is some flexibility in the selection process. Agencies are eager to place children with special needs. In general, an applicant needs to be at least 25 years old and need not own his or her own home or have a large income (subsidies are available for many of these children). Stability, maturity, and flexibility are characteristics that are highly valued by agencies. In assessing single applicants, social workers are particularly concerned with your plans for child care, the kind of support network (friends and family) that can serve as your back-up, and your ability to provide male or female role models.

A growing number of public agencies acknowledge that a single adoptive parent may, in fact, be the "placement of choice" for some children. Kathryn S. Donley, former Executive Director of New York Spaulding for Children sees single adoptive parents as having special capabilities that can be especially helpful to children who have had traumatic histories. They can provide (1) a high caliber of parenting potential (the screening process for singles is so exhaustive that only the most persistent survive), (2) a simplified environment where the number of complex relationships is reduced to a minimum, and (3) focused nurturing. Since the single parent has fewer distractions, he or she can perhaps spend a fair amount of time analyzing and responding to a child's needs and building a relationship.¹³

Many of the children available through public and private agencies are from minority cultures. Most agencies are hesitant to place a child of one race with a parent of another race, and try, whenever possible, to find a parent of the same ethnic, religious, and racial

background. Some private agencies have religious affiliations and work primarily with adopters of that religion.

If you have your heart set on finding an infant or if you find that a public or private agency is not responsive to your needs or eager to work with you, there are other adoption resources available.

A number of foreign countries will consider single adoptive parents and have a wider range of children from whom to choose. At this time, Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru, and Bolivia are among the countries who accept single applicants and have infants and young children available for adoption. The volatile nature of the governments in these countries makes it difficult to know, with certainty, what the adoption policy will be over a long period of time. Most require that an adopter be at least 25 years old.

Pursuing an intercountry adoption is expensive and can be complicated, time-consuming and fraught with uncertainties. It also may be your best chance of adopting a young, healthy child. To help you determine whether you are truly interested in pursuing this type of adoption, an experienced intercountry adoption agency, Holt International Children's Services, has devised a series of questions and comments for prospective adoptive parents to consider. They deal with issues of race (since most of the children are of Asian, Indian or African heritage) and of your motivation for adoption. A copy is included at the end of this paper.

If you are considering foreign adoption, try to find people who have adopted children from abroad and meet their children. Attend parent group meetings where children accompany their parents and look at photographs of children from other countries. A child from Chile looks different from an Indian child or a child from El Salvador. See if this type of adoption "feels right" for you.

Betsy Burch, Director of Single Parents Adopting Children Everywhere (SPACE), a Massachusetts support group, thinks that singles should consider adopting siblings. "If you want more than one child, and you want both children from the same country, you may want to adopt them at the same time," she says.¹⁴ In doing this, you will not have to deal with the very changeable international adoption scene, where a country may accept single adopters one year and close their doors the next year. It may also speed the process, since, countries are eager to keep families intact and will let you adopt, for instance, an infant with his 3-year-old brother. The Committee for Single Adoptive Parents can provide a listing of adoption agencies that will work with you to locate a foreign child or children.

Another way to adopt a baby is through an independent or private adoption. It is important to find out if it is legal in your State and then find an attorney or physician willing to work with you. Like other adoption sources, singles compete with couples for available children. In this situation, it is often the birth mother who makes the final selection. There are pros and cons to pursuing an independent adoption. Those who are against this method of finding a child feel that the screening process for adoptive parents is not rigorous enough and that birth parents don't receive adequate professional counseling before deciding to make an adoption plan for their child. In some cases, this lack of preparation may lead to an uninformed decision and a contested adoption later on. If for some reason the placement doesn't work, there is no licensed agency to accept responsibility for the child. The child would then become a charge of the State agency.

Those who have adopted independently cite the lack of bureaucracy and restrictive selection by an agency as a positive aspect, especially if you are single, older than 40, divorced, or physically handicapped. Many welcome the chance to speak to and possibly meet the birth mother and to have some knowledge of her educational or socioeconomic background. Like foreign adoption, the costs are high and you may need to travel to pick up the child.

What Are the Costs?

Fees at adoption agencies vary. Some agencies charge no fees—these are usually public agencies where the children often have special needs and subsidies can be offered to help defray the costs of raising the child and taking care of medical expenses. The subsidy may include a monthly care payment, medical assistance coverage, and a one-time cash grant to offset initial adoption costs. Other agencies operate on a sliding fee scale, based on a family's income.

Private agencies deal with children of all ages. Today many of these children are older and have special needs. Private agencies operate differently from public agencies and are usually set up as nonprofit organizations with a governing board of directors, rather than as a department run by a city or State. Many have religious affiliations, and birth mothers are often referred by clergy. Most, though, will place children of all religions. In the case of older child adoptions, they may also offer subsidies and may charge no fee or a minimal one based on income. In the rare instance where an infant is placed with a single parent, the adopter sometimes assumes responsibility for the birth mother's expenses until the child is placed in a permanent home. These expenses could include sheltering, legal, or medical costs which could range from \$5,000 to \$20,000. The higher figure would be for a long sheltering period and for a difficult delivery and extended hospital stay.¹⁵

Stanley B. Michelman and Meg Schneider, authors of *The Private Adoption Handbook*, explain that the costs of independent adoptions can vary dramatically. They offer a breakdown of fees, estimating the range to be from \$3,000 to \$20,000. They advise that fees over \$10,000 do not necessarily mean that the adoption is "black market" or illegal. They state that, "If your lawyer believes the expenses are necessary and he or she is willing to fully disclose to a judge the entire amounts paid, you can assume that he or she thinks the amounts involved are reasonable, justifiable, and legal expenses." They say to "trust your own feelings and your lawyer's reputation."¹⁶

Foreign adoptions are expensive as well. While the costs in each country differ, they often are in the same range as domestic adoptions. The costs will vary depending on whether you must travel to the country to complete the adoption, and if you must stay there for a period of time, how much those expenses are. To familiarize yourself with the types of fees associated with intercountry adoption, you might refer to the aforementioned *Adoption Resource Book* for a detailed listing,¹⁷ or to the Clearinghouse factsheet "Intercountry Adoption."

What Services Are Available After the Adoption?

For some children who are adopted, the adjustment period takes a few months; for others it takes years. Bringing a child home is not the end of the process. And despite your strong motivation and readiness for the job, you may need some help in making the adjustment to parenthood.

You may find that your shy teenager has become belligerent, refusing to obey the rules you have established. Or maybe you have started to resent the demands on your time that your baby makes—you are tired and overwhelmed. Or your daughter refuses to sleep at night and has nightmares when she does. She may be afraid that you are not going to keep her, if she has suffered serious rejections in the past. All children pose issues for their parents at various stages of their development. Adopted children have additional questions about their identity and heritage that will need to be addressed.

Whatever the issues, there is help in the form of postadoption services. Postadoption services include support groups, therapy, workshops for adoptive families, and books and articles that address parenting issues with a focus on adoption.

More and more licensed adoption agencies now offer these services and would be the first resource to contact for help. If you've adopted through an agency, you probably have a contact there who can guide you.

Support groups can be invaluable in providing encouragement, suggesting resources, validating your feelings, and recommending therapists. By this point, you are probably already connected to one. If not, The Committee For Single Adoptive Parents can help you locate a local group and put you in touch with experienced single adopters.

It is important to realize that asking for help is not a sign of weakness or an indication of failure. As a single parent, it was your determination that enabled you to find a child and get through the adoption process. Using this strength and resourcefulness to work on family relationships is a positive way to establish a new lifestyle, and one that will benefit you and your family.

Written by Mady Prowler of the National Adoption Center in 1990. Revised by Debra G. Smith of the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse in 1994.

Footnotes

¹ Piasecki, Marlene, "Who Adopts Special Needs Children," National Adoption Center, (1987):9.

² Dougherty, Sharon Ann, "Single Adoptive Mothers and Their Children," *Social Work* Vol. 23 (1978): 612.

³ Gertz, Kathryn R., "Single Parenthood," *Harper's Bazaar* Vol. 114 (August 1981): 185.

⁴ "Rise in Single-Parent Families Found Continuing," *The New York Times*, National Edition (July 15, 1990): 17.

⁵ *Real Life With Jane Pauley*, WNBC, aired July 17, 1990.

⁶ Wooderson, Glenna, "Single Parents Making Progress," available from NAIC.

⁷ Shireman, Joan F. and Johnson, Penny R., "Single Parent Adoptions: A Longitudinal Study," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 7 (1985): 332.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁹ Marindin, Hope, *The Handbook for Single Adoptive Parents*, Chevy Chase, MD: Committee for Single Adoptive Parents (1987).

¹⁰ Sanz, Cynthia and Armstrong, Lois, "Generations' Star Taurean Blacque Becomes a Single Father to Nine," *People* Vol. 32 (Oct. 9, 1989): 101.

¹¹ Gilman, Lois, *The Adoption Resource Book*, New York: Harper & Row (1987): 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³ Donley, Kathryn S., "Single Parents As `Placements of Choice,'" workshop handout available from National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (1977).

¹⁴ Adamec, Christine A., *There Are Babies to Adopt: A Resource Guide for Prospective Parents*, Bedford, MA: Mills and Sanderson (1987): 168.

¹⁵ Canape, Charlene. *Adoption: Parenthood Without Pregnancy*, New York: Henry Holt and Company (1986): 35.

¹⁶ Michelman, Stanley B., and Schneider, Meg, *The Private Adoption Handbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to The Legal, Emotional and Practical Demands of Adopting a Baby*. New York: Villard Books (1988): 20.

¹⁷ Gilman: 77.

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