

respect
life

A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

Offering a Baby for Adoption Can Be a Lifelong Gift

By MARY BETH SEADER

The term adoption conjures up many images. Unfortunately, to many people the emotions associated with the term are negative. Attitudes range from sympathy for the poor woman who "must give up her child" to condemnation for the heartless creature who is "giving her baby away." Adoptive couples are generally portrayed as selfless, loving people who are opening their hearts and homes to poor, abandoned children. Adoptive children are sometimes pitied because the "rejection" by their birth parents is perceived by some as putting them at a disadvantage in the game of life.

Such attitudes are by and large the result of misunderstandings about adoption. Adoption is by no means an easy process for anyone. There certainly is sadness in placing one's child with another family. However, adoption has proven to be a very positive and successful way to meet the needs of children, birth parents and adoptive families.

Stereotyping inhibits a full and honest exploration of the choices available to persons considering adoption. Just as it is not helpful to view birth parents as helpless or bad, it is also not helpful to view adoptive parents as perfect people doing a poor, unfortunate child a favor.

A look at the persons involved in the adoption triad may take away some of the mystery and provide a more realistic view of adoption and its hope for the future.

The most important person in an adoption placement is the child. Adoption is not promoted to find children for families, but to find families for children. Children do not have to be born of wealthy parents to be happy and prosper. However, they do need parents to provide the nurturing and support which will enable them to reach their fullest potential. Adoption provides an opportunity to parents and children when parents cannot provide for their children's needs.

While the child is the center of an adoption plan, the birth parents are necessarily the focus in pregnancy counseling. The term "birth parents" refers to both the pregnant woman and the expectant father, who is often overlooked.

Discussion of adoption as an option is certainly an important part of pregnancy counseling. But counselors must be careful that birth parents know that the process is meant to help them to make their own decision about what is best for them and their baby.

Birth parents approach an emergency pregnancy service or Catholic Charities agency because



(Photo by Jim Whitmer)

they are experiencing difficulties during pregnancy. When the problems focus on the individual's or couple's readiness or ability to raise the child, a discussion of adoption as an option for parenting is important.

Good adoption counseling does not negate the relationship between birth parents and child. Rather, it helps the birth parents to define the relationship. It recognizes that once pregnancy has occurred, the two persons involved — mother and father — are parents for life. However, it also confronts the reality that birth parents who make an adoption plan will not have ongoing direct contact with the child and will not have the day-to-day responsibilities or joys of parenting.

Viewing adoption as a responsible way to meet one's child's needs enables birth parents to come to terms with the decision. It is important that the birth parents feel they have participated in the selection of the adoptive family. They need to know that they have fulfilled their responsibilities in planning for their child's future. All adoption agencies make efforts to include birth parents in the decision-making process; some allow more involvement than others.

When adoption takes place relationships between birth parents and child, and adoptive parents and child are redefined, and for the birth parents there is a grieving process for which they need time and support to resolve. Sorrow is normal and does not indicate a wrong decision. Family

and friends should allow birth parents to discuss their feelings without judging the rightness or wrongness of their decision.

At later points in life, birth parents may express regret at having placed a child for adoption. This, too, is normal. Often the older person is reviewing the situation in light of current maturity levels and living situation. We all spend a part of our lives reworking previous losses until we reach a positive resolution. Placing one's child for adoption involves a deep loss and family and friends can help birth parents come to terms with their previous decision. Adoption agencies also provide continuing services to birth parents after adoption if necessary.

The third group of participants in an adoption triad is the adoptive family. It was mentioned earlier that society views adoptive couples as selfless, loving individuals who are opening up their hearts and homes to children in need. This is accurate. Adoptive families are wonderful people. But they are also human and have needs to which the community should be sensitive.

The myth that adoptive couples must be perfect increases the anxiety of the typical person contemplating adoption. The thought of an in-depth home study which may uncover our faults is very frightening. This fear can be compounded by anxiety over the scarcity of newborn infants available for adoption, an anxiety which has led good people to try short-cut methods such as "surrogate motherhood."

The adoption home study was

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not designed to terrify good people. One of its purposes is to screen couples in order to protect children from serious problems.

The adoption process also includes a counseling segment which helps the adoptive parents assess their own strengths and weaknesses. For many, it allows them to confront their own infertility and to grieve the loss that accompanies it.

People often overlooked when discussing adoption, because they are not part of the immediate triad, are the child's birth grandparents. They go through a process similar to that of the birth parents. They must be given the opportunity to express their feelings about the future of their grandchild. While ultimately the decision is that of the birth parents, their families play a tremendous role in that decision. Often, particularly when the birth parents are teenagers, it is the birth mother's parents who take on much of the financial and sometimes nurturing responsibility for the child. After the adoption, the probably will be the main support for their daughter or son, and they often need a little support themselves.

Adoption is a serious and complex issue which requires skillful balancing of the needs of all parties. It is a positive solution to a very difficult situation for birth parents and adoptive parents alike. But it is also often misunderstood. Misconceptions about adoptions can cause pain to those who could have benefitted from it. Not understanding the complexity of the issues can lead to a superficial decision-making process by birth parents and adoptive parents. People in the pro-life community can be of great service by educating themselves about adoption, educating the larger community and advocating quality services for all participants. If adoption is to survive as a viable option, it will need the acceptance and support of the entire community.

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