



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in *Pact's Point of View* © 1993
Do not reprint without permission.

Promoting Understanding of Adoption Issues

by Patricia Irwin Johnston

Those whose lives have not been directly touched by adoption don't understand this process which you and I live. The thinking of the general public about adoption is full of myth-filled stereotypes reflecting a general belief that adoption is a second-best alternative for everyone involved. To most outsiders, adoption means that birth parents don't live up to their REAL responsibilities, children don't live in REAL families, and adopters aren't REAL parents (because they have no children of their OWN).

When considering this stereotyping and our feelings about it, there is first the broad philosophical question: should any minority group (and we are a minority group) have to "live with" the by-products of others' ignorance of its issues? Certainly the most vocal minority groups - people of color, women, gays - would argue that sensitivity is mandatory and that the only way to produce change is to demand it.

There's also the more personal question: is there a reason to become politically active rather than to work around the myths? During the ten years that I have been working to promote understanding of adoption issues, I've run into a number of adults who say, "You're overreacting. Why do you care what others think when you know the truth?" It's true that most adults learn to shrug off insensitivity. After all, we are abstract thinkers, able to analyze what we hear and depersonalize it.

More important is how the children feel. During the formative years when both intellect and self-esteem are developing, children think concretely and take everything personally. Children exposed to insensitivity about adoption suffer at the hand of thoughtlessness and bigotry. Furthermore, children awaiting adoptive homes suffer as a group from a society that doesn't understand the need for better services.

If society truly understood adoption, kids would benefit, and that's enough of a reason for me to believe that the struggle for change is worth it! So, what can you and I do to create the changes that will help others understand?

We must begin by clarifying our own thinking about what makes a family, because if WE don't believe that adoption is a positive way to build families, how can we expect others to?

Dorothy DeBolt speaks of a "worship of the womb" and the

effect this kind of thinking has on children when it prevents the legal system from severing parental rights in a chronically abusive relationship. Others have noted that the near mystical status given to the concept of bonding through "perfect birth" has created tremendous guilt and fear in those who are unable to participate in this experience.

What is a family? We, as a society, acknowledge that families are linked by more than blood. In fact, families are linked by law, by social custom, by love. For example, my husband and I are linked by love and law and social custom as a family, but we share no blood ties. Society has become more and more accepting of the idea that two unmarried people who have a strong commitment to one another are a family, with or without children, despite the fact that their link is not one of blood or law, but of love and custom. Why, then, do people have such a difficult time considering a family built by adoption as "real"?

We need to deal with a tendency toward absolutism - looking at all birth parents, all adoptive parents, all adopted people as if they were identical.

The truth is that some adopted people were taken against the will of birth mothers who wanted to parent them but felt hopeless and unsupported. Other adopted people were removed from abusive birth parents who didn't want to be parents but were pressured into the role by others. The birth parents of still other children made careful, fully informed choices about adoption, and, while acknowledging the depth of loss tied to this choice, have managed to deal effectively with those losses and to feel comfortable that their choices were good ones.

Some adoptive parents fit the traditional pattern: they are infertile couples whose only road to parenthood is adoption. Increasing numbers of adopters, however, are fertile people who chose to adopt waiting children rather than give birth to more children. Despite the "aren't you people wonderful" thinking of outsiders and the fact that a home study seems to supply a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, not all adoptive parents are good guys. Like families built by birth, some adoptive families are dysfunctional.

There are significant numbers of adopted people who wish to make contact with members of their birth families, and significant

numbers who don't. There are birth parents eager to meet and know their birth children and many who are not. There are adoptive parents who are afraid of contact from their children's birth relatives and some who are actively choosing open adoption or opening a previously confidential one.

Each adoption situation is unique, demanding customized attention rather than cookie-cutter services. Eliminating absolutist thinking means providing services which are rooted in the empowerment of clients to make their own informed choices. Making such a switch means acknowledging that people touched by adoption can't be grouped.

We must begin to routinely correct myths as we hear or see them.

How many of us have heard, "I don't understand how anyone could ever give up her very own flesh and blood?" One way to help such a person understand is to gently remind them that their own family situation has little in common with that of a high school sophomore from a dysfunctional family, or an Asian girl pregnant by an American soldier in a society dominated by purity of bloodlines, or an inner-city woman with five kids and an abusive husband. Promoting understanding requires telling the uninformed person that his feeling of not being able to adopt a sibling group with a physically challenged, racially mixed child has no relevance. What each of us could do depends upon the circumstances we might face at that moment, not upon who we are and where we are now.

We must insist that the media treat adoption respectfully.

Just as an editor would not consider it appropriate to write an obituary or a news story listing a survivor as a birth-control-failure daughter or a Cesarean-section-born son, the fact of adoption is irrelevant to most news stories.

We cannot allow the media to exploit adoption. The press has zoomed in on the Woody Allen/Mia Farrow story with particular relish and used it, inappropriately, to further their misconceptions about adoptive relationships. The made-for-TV movie "A Child Lost Forever" was a tragic story about a child killed by an abusive adoptive mother. It was a true story - we can't complain that it was fiction. But it was an anomaly! How outrageous that this and the movie "Problem Child" were the only network-offered programs mentioning adoption during Adoption Awareness Month in 1992!

Promote the use of Positive Adoption Language (PAL).

PAL is language chosen to reflect dignity, respect, responsibility, and objectivity about the decisions made by birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted people concerning their family planning. Which of the following sentences is more respectful of an individual's rights and a mother's responsibility:

"Maria gave her baby up for adoption," or "made an adoption plan for her child."

"Joan kept her baby," or "Joan decided to place her child."

The choice of words creates subtle differences in the thinking of those who hear or read them. Using PAL helps to eliminate emotional overcharging which often alienates members of the adoption triad from one another and perpetuates the myth-

filled thinking of those not touched by adoption.

Show how society's exploitation of concept of adoption can compromise the esteem of adopted children.

Ever since the Cabbage Patch marketing phenomena of the 1980s, non-profits and commercial enterprises have used the "Adopt-A" theme to raise money. These programs turn on a humorous "save rejects" image of reality when they're trying to build self-images. I call this Adopt-A Confusion.

In November I heard about a Denver program to wrap its building in colored lights for holidays. This year, in order to raise money, they designed a fundraising program. They named it "Adopt A Light Bulb," complete with adoption certificate! The TV and print ads featured little light bulbs with arms and legs, and to make matters worse the TV personality who does the local Wednesday's Child Waiting Child segment promoted the program!

Think I'm overly defensive about "Adopt-A" confusion? The crux of the issue is that children think concretely rather than abstractly. Let me share one example: A little friend of mine was "given" a live giraffe by her grandparents through an adopt-an-animal program. Imagine her distress when she learned, over the course of several months, that she couldn't take the animal home, couldn't care for it personally, couldn't even consider it "hers" unless the next year she "adopted" it again. "Mommy," she cried, "I thought you said adopted was forever!" It difficult for her to understand that the zoo program was different from her own adoption.

It is possible to effect change about these abuses. I've done it. After nine months of work with Indianapolis Zoo, they agreed to change the adopt-an-animal theme of their animal sponsorship program. The change has been successful for this zoo, and when other zoos learn of their success, I believe that they will change too. What is holding many "Adopt-A" fundraising programs back now is their fear that a substitute program won't be as successful.

Finally, if we care about adoption we owe it to ourselves to keep our minds open and continue to listen and to learn.

Before society at large can be expected to understand adoption, before we can stop finding newborns left in alleys to die, before we can expect to stem the tide of children parenting children and adults parenting children they aren't prepared to parent, before we can find homes for waiting children, before we can help those who feel pain about adoption issues, we ourselves must understand.

In the movement to eliminate negative thinking about adoption, some of us will be radical and others will work more quietly. Some will give their voice, some their time, some their dollars, some their moral support - some all four. Each of us must find his or her place in the movement, because the greatest beneficiaries of changed thinking will be the most important people in the world - our children.

Pat Johnston is an infertility and adoption educator and the author of several books, including her newest, *Adopting After Infertility*, from which this article was adapted. She can be reached at Perspectives Press, PO Box 90318, Indianapolis, Indiana 46290.