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# Introduction

Adoption is the social, emotional, and legal process through which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another family while maintaining genetic and psychological connections to their birth family.

Adoption has long been a vital service for children who need families, bringing children whose birth parents cannot or will not be able to provide for them together with nurturing adults who seek to build or add to their families. Although relatively limited statistically (only 2% to 3% of the U.S. population is adopted), adoption nonetheless touches the lives of many people. One national survey revealed that 60% of all Americans have personal experience with adoption in some way [Evan B. Donaldson Institute 1997]—an indicator of how pivotal a child welfare service adoption is in the U.S.

## Historical Highlights

Historically, adoption has been available in some form for the last 2,000 years. Originally, adoption developed as a mechanism to meet the needs of adults—for example, to provide an heir for a family unable to produce one biologically or to form a political alliance between families.

English Common Law, from which much of U.S. law evolved, did not address adoption. As a result, adoption as a legal institution did not begin to develop in this country until the mid- to late 1800s. Early legal adoptions, usually requiring special state legis-

lative acts, were arranged almost exclusively for Caucasian families, while parentless children of other backgrounds continued to be indentured, apprenticed, or informally adopted. The first professional standards to guide adoption agencies were published by the Child Welfare League of America in 1938.

Until the late 1950s and early 1960s, adoption services in the United States consisted mainly of the placement of healthy Caucasian infants with middle-class Caucasian couples who were unable to have children biologically. Over the last few decades, professional adoption has evolved into a service primarily focused on meeting the needs of children rather than those of adults.

## Changes in Adoption Practice and Policy

### **Changes in the Population of Children in Need of Adoption**

Since the 1970s, the number of Caucasian infants available for adoption has sharply declined in the U.S. Although U.S. agencies continue to provide adoption services for infants, this group now constitutes but a small part of the population of children in need of adoption planning and services. By contrast, the number of children in out-of-home care who need adoption has grown tremendously. As the result of a range of social conditions and policy changes, an increasing proportion of children in care have the goal of adoption. At the same time, these children typically have a range of challenging needs, including prenatal exposure to alcohol and other drugs, medical fragility, a history of physical or sexual abuse, or membership in a sibling group. Thousands of older children, for whom agencies traditionally have had difficulty finding placements, also await adoptive families. Additionally, children of color continue to be disproportionately represented in out-of-home care as well as among the children waiting for adoptive families.

The past decade also has seen a dramatic twofold increase in the number of children adopted from other countries, with untold numbers of additional children identified in other countries who could benefit from adoption. Nearly a decade ago, international adoption began expanding to countries that were not previously seen as sources of adoptable children. Many of the children being

adopted from those countries have had experiences in orphanages and other institutions that may significantly affect their physical and emotional development.

### **Changes in Adoptive Families**

Over the past decades, families choosing to build or expand their families through adoption have become increasingly diverse. A growing number of foster families, families of color, older individuals and families with children, two-parent working families, single parents (both male and female), gay and lesbian couples, families with modest incomes, individuals with physical disabilities, and families from all education levels, all religious persuasions, and all parts of the country now adopt children. These individuals and families, however, all have one thing in common: they are willing and able to make a lifelong commitment to protect and nurture a child not born to them and to provide a safe, loving family for that child.

### **Changes in Society**

Societal changes as a whole are also serving to reshape adoption, including the globalization of economies and communication, changes in the larger family policy environment, and changes within the child welfare system itself. Broadly, the environment of adoption has been impacted by the legalization of abortion, improved birth control alternatives, and changing social mores related to unmarried parenting. In contrast to the stigma and shame once associated with unmarried pregnancy, an increasing number of single women are choosing to have and rear children. Far fewer women are making the decision to place their children for adoption, opting instead to parent their children themselves.

Advances in reproductive technology have likewise broadened parenting options. As many “baby boomers” delay childbearing and infertility rates rise, the demand for reproductive technologies is growing, with concomitant developments ranging from artificial insemination to sperm and egg donation. Although pregnancy rates from these procedures have improved over time, there

nonetheless remain a large number of infertile individuals who seek to parent through adoption. These individuals typically look to adopt newborns in this country or very young, healthy children from other countries. Combined, these factors have created an environment in which many more families are seeking healthy infants than there are healthy infants available for adoption.

Communications technology and the growing presence of the media are also reshaping the larger social environment. The Internet provides immediate access to information and opportunities to debate and discuss a range of issues, including those related to adoption. The role of the media in everyday life has dramatically expanded by virtue of cable systems, 24-hour-a-day news coverage, and the proliferation of magazines and other publications. Increasingly, the media are shaping public opinion and attitudes as they are looked to as a key source of information on topics such as adoption.

### **Changes in Family Policy**

Changes in family policy have likewise impacted adoption. The long-term effects of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (welfare reform) are yet to be fully realized. Nevertheless, its increased emphasis on personal responsibility and decreased emphasis on government support for poor families with children can be expected to impact the child welfare system, including out-of-home care and adoption services. Policy changes designed to control government expenditures on social programming and health care are already affecting the design and delivery of services to children and their families. The use of managed care principles to contain social services spending and efforts to privatize child welfare services, including adoption, are creating a new environment for the adoption of children in care. Ironically, as efforts are made to contain costs in the area of special needs adoption, the costs associated with the adoption of newborns and very young children in this country and with international adoption are escalating significantly.

Finally, changes in the child welfare system itself are reshaping the practice of adoption. With the passage of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997, renewed emphasis has been brought

to adoption, with federal requirements related to expedited termination of parental rights, reasonable efforts to secure adoptive families for children for whom adoption is the plan, and adoption incentive payments to states that significantly increase the number of legalized adoptions for children in their out-of-home care systems. In response, strategies to promote more timely permanency planning for children in out-of-home care have developed, including concurrent planning, family group conferencing, mediation, support for birth parents' decisions to voluntarily place their children for adoption, greater openness in adoption, and dual licensing of individuals as foster parents and adoptive parents.

## Adoption as a Child Welfare Service

Adoption practice has changed significantly since CWLA's previous adoption standards were published in 1988; today, it is marked by increased openness in infant adoption, heightened awareness of the need to protect children adopted across national boundaries, and an emphasis on promptly finding adoptive families for children in care who cannot return to their birth families.

As a child welfare service, adoption is the permanency option of choice for children who are unable to grow up within their family of origin. The goal of all adoption programs is the timely adoption by an appropriate family for each child in need of a family.

In adoption practice, the child is the primary client, and the best interest of the child is paramount in decisions concerning his or her adoption. Families are viewed as potential resources for children needing adoption, rather than as an agency's primary clients. The agency's responsibility has also shifted from investigating families to educating and preparing families to meet the needs of children placed with them.

Building a family by adoption is now understood to be fundamentally different than building a family biologically, with lifelong implications for the adopted individual, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents. Increasingly, agencies have accepted the responsibility to provide continuing education, support, and counseling for all the members of the adoption triad as needed throughout their lives.

## **Core Values and Assumptions Underlying Adoption Services**

Given the complexity of the broader societal context in which adoption practice now occurs, it is especially important to reaffirm the fundamental values that provide a framework for professional adoption services. The core values listed below form the foundation for the ethical development and delivery of adoption services.

- All children have a right to receive care, protection, and love.
- The family is the primary means by which children are provided with the essentials for their well-being.
- The birth family constitutes the preferred means of providing family life for children.
- When adoption is the plan for a child, the extended family should be supported as the first option for adoptive placement, if appropriate.
- Adoption as a child welfare service should be focused on meeting the needs of children to become full and permanent members of families.
- All children are adoptable.
- Siblings should be placed together in adoption unless serious reasons necessitate their separation.
- Adoption is a lifelong experience that has a unique impact on all the parties involved.
- Adoption should validate and assist children in developing their individual, cultural, ethnic, and racial identity, and should enhance their self-esteem.
- All adoption services should be based on principles of respect, honesty, self-determination, informed decision-making, and open communication.
- All applicants for services should be treated in a fair and nondiscriminatory manner.
- Changes in adoption practice, policy, and law demand professional expertise to assist birth families, adoptive families, and adopted individuals.

- The knowledge, skill, and experience of professional social workers should be used in developing and providing all aspects of adoption services.
- The practice of adoption, currently and in the future, will require collaboration if all parties in an adoption are to be served effectively.

The environment in which adoption practice takes place is far from settled, and unresolved issues remain for the future. What is the proper role of race and culture in adoption—and how do such considerations fit within federal policy that prohibits any routine consideration of race, culture, or ethnicity in making adoptive placements? How does the increased use of kinship care relate to the increased needs of children for permanency through adoption? What is the ongoing obligation of government and agencies to all adoptive families following adoption, especially those who adopt children with special needs? With the increased pressures to legalize more adoptions, will needed postlegalization services be in place to support families and help them with the changes that adoption brings?

## About This Volume

This 2000 edition of CWLA's *Standards for Excellence in Adoption Service* reflects a significant departure from previous adoption standards in at least two respects. First, much greater emphasis has been placed on making these standards equally applicable to both public and private, nonprofit agencies and to domestic infant, intercountry, and special-needs adoption. Second, attention has been given to not only updating the standards to reflect where the field of adoption has come in the last decade, but also to developing standards that can guide the field over the coming decade.

Chapter One articulates the values underlying adoption as a child welfare service, as well as the components of an effective adoption delivery system. Chapters Two through Six examine all aspects of excellence in direct practice with children needing adoption, birth parents, adoptive applicants and adoptive parents, and

adopted adults. Chapter Seven examines the administrative and organizational aspects of an adoption program, and Chapter Eight addresses the important role of the community in adoption. The volume concludes with an appendix of adoption terminology, a bibliography, and an index.

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