

Barriers & Success Factors in Adoption From Foster Care: Perspectives of Lesbian and Gay Families

**2010 Policy to Practice Dialogue,
“Making Connections in Child Welfare”**

October 5, 2010

Background and Funding

This project was requested and funded by the Children's Bureau for the primary purpose of using the findings to shape the services that AdoptUsKids provides across the AdoptUsKids project, either directly to LGBT families, or through a complex and multi-faceted set of technical assistance to States, Tribes, and Territories.

AdoptUsKids developed a temporary, time-limited advisory group of experts in the area of LGBT adoptions that met telephonically three times in July and August. The AdoptUsKids Partners are meeting to discuss that group's recommendations and will make a plan for the delivery of the recommended services.

AdoptUsKids: Barriers and Success Factors Research

- Nationwide longitudinal study (2002-2007) to assess:
 - Barriers faced by families in the process of adopting a child from foster care (300 families, 382 adoption staff)
 - Success Factors study involved interviews with families who completed an adoption of a child from foster care (161 families)
- Families were interviewed and surveyed over time to understand their process and experience.
- Adoption staff were interviewed or surveyed to gain staff perspectives on barriers and success factors.

Children's Bureau (2008). *Barriers and success factors in adoptions from foster care: Perspectives of families and staff*. A report to the U.S. Congress, supported by The Adoption Opportunities Program. Also available at: www.adoptuskids.org

Perspectives of Lesbian and Gay Families: Family follow-up interviews

Follow-up Interviews with Families from Original Study

- 10 families* participated in interviews (6 lesbian couples, 3 gay couples, 1 single gay man)
- 8 (80%) families had previously fostered
- 67% were general adopters; 14% were foster parent adopters

Families were from nine states: California, Colorado, Minnesota, New York (n=2 families), Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont and Washington, DC

*There were 16 families in the Barriers and Success Factors study, 10 consented to a follow-up interview specifically about barriers related to their sexual orientation.

Perspectives of Lesbian and Gay Families: Focus groups

Focus Groups were conducted to further understand barriers gay and lesbian families faced while adopting from foster care.

- Six focus groups were conducted.
- 43 total participants (25 females, 18 males)
- Participants were from Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Washington, DC.

Adoption Process Status

- Family Follow-up Interviews
 - 8 (80%) finalized an adoption of a child from foster care (total of 20 children adopted by these 8 families)
 - 2 (20%) discontinued the process of adopting a child from foster care (1 of which did complete a private adoption)
- Focus Groups
 - 25 (57%) finalized as foster parent adopters
 - 9 (20%) were general adopters
 - 6 (14%) were waiting for adoption
 - 2 (5%) are fostering only (no intent to adopt)

Demographics of Follow-up Families

Race/Ethnicity

- 7 Caucasian couples
- 2 Interracial couples
- 1 Unknown (one partner Caucasian, second partner unknown)

Age

- Males –avg. age 50
- Females—avg. age 47

Education

- 26% High school diploma
- 11% Some college
- 21% College degree
- 37% Graduate school
- 5% Missing

State of Residence

CA, CO, DC, MN, NY,
OK, PN, TX, VT

Demographics of Follow-up Families continued

Family Income

- Range \$30,000 - \$100,000

Foster Parent Experience

- 42% (8) had been foster parents

Legal Partnership

- 3 Domestic Partnerships
- 3 in committed relationship
- 1 Civil Union
- 1 married
- 1 not applicable
- 1 missing

Demographics of Participants in 6 Focus Groups

Race/Ethnicity

- 33 Caucasian
- 4 African American
- 4 multi-racial
- 2 Unknown (preferred not to answer)

Legal Partnership (n=35)

- 14 Married
- 8 Domestic Partnerships
- 4 reciprocal benefits
- 4 not legally partnered
- 2 Civil Union
- 2 “other”
- 1 missing

Findings from Family Follow-up Interviews

- LG families experienced similar barriers and success factors as in the full sample of the original study.
- LG families also experienced barriers and success factors not shared with their heterosexual peers.
- LG families offer unique strengths to adoption.
- Both the interview and focus group studies had similar findings.

Positive Adoption Experiences (from Family Follow-up Interviews)

- The importance of agency affirmation for LGBT families
- Agency employment of gay or lesbian staff
 - The most important characteristic is being “competent”, NOT whether they are gay/lesbian
- Both members of the couple felt treated equally
- Paperwork that was gender neutral
- Gay affirming training including language and appropriate content
 - Not necessarily separate training – families wanted to feel included
- Having other gay or lesbians going through the process at the same time

Positive Adoption Experiences (from Family Follow-up Interviews)

- Home study worker well educated on gay and lesbian adoptions
 - Or willing to ask questions when unclear
- Opportunity to assess partner relationship during HS process like heterosexual couples often do during pre-marital counseling
- Support group with other LG families

Barriers Experienced by Successful Adopters (from Family Follow-up Interviews)

Even successful adopters identified barriers/issues they experienced during the process of adoption:

- Often need to deal with various state laws regarding adoption when not legally partnered
- Working with the schools can be difficult
- Can't find a judge or attorney to do the second parent adoption
- Long waits for placement
- Told that the child's agency wouldn't place because they were lesbian (even though family agency was supportive)

Barriers Experienced by Successful Adopters (from Family Follow-up Interviews)

- Never told why turned down
- Told we were turned down because we were gay and white
- Not all social workers will consider you an okay family for adoption
- Some agencies feel that LGBT families should only be matched with hard to place children because those families will take any kind of child
- Harder for gay men to get matched with a child than lesbians

Focus Groups: Thematic Analysis Findings

Strengths of LGBT Families

- LGBT parents can relate to adopted children's feelings of differentness
- Adoption decision is very intentional by LGBT parents
- For LGBT families, adoption is their first choice
- LGBT parents are more resourceful/know where to find help
- Are more aware of support systems
- Can expose children to a diverse world and unique people

Focus Groups:

Thematic Analysis Findings

Misperceptions about the LGBT community

- Adopting to either “make more gay people” or abuse their children (n=5; 83%)
- LG parents can’t make up for children “needing” a mother or father. (n=4; 67%)
- LGBT parents are promiscuous or may have sex in front of children (n=2; 33%)
- LGBT families will accept any type of child they are offered regardless of severity or ability to care for child (n=2; 33%)
- LGBT relationships are unstable (n=1, 17%)

Focus Groups

Thematic Analysis Findings

Participants were asked to discuss when staff had treated them insensitively.

- A single worker can make decisions based solely on homophobia, not best interests of the child (n=4; 67%)
- Forms and applications are not sensitive (n=3; 50%)
- General feeling of discrimination / delaying process (n=3; 50%)
- Insensitive judge / legal process (n=2; 33%)

Focus Groups

Thematic Analysis Findings

What should workers know about LGBT families?

- Staff should feel comfortable asking questions if they don't understand something about the family (n=4; 67%)
- LGBT concepts should be embedded into standard trainings, not separate (n=3; 50%)
- More funding to train workers appropriately/more education (n=3; 50%)
- May be “extra sensitive” to personal questions due to life experiences (n=3; 50%)
- Just want to feel included – acknowledged but not treated differently (n=3; 50%)
- Be honest about the difficulties in the process (n=2; 33%)

Focus Groups

Thematic Analysis Findings

Legal and policy requirements dictate what staff can/can't do. What are some things staff can do to more effectively assist LGBT families?

- Create a network of information to prospective LGBT parents about their laws and policies and friendly professional organizations (n=3; 50%)
- Practice open recruitment practices that target LGBT families specifically (n=3; 50%)
- Know the facts and train staff to understand the exact laws in their state (n=3; 50%)
- Agency staff must put their own prejudices aside (n=3; 50%)
- Legal protections for LGBT families don't exist in some states so agency staff can exercise their prejudices (n=2; 33%)

Focus Groups

Thematic Analysis Findings

Importance of staff sexual orientation

- Participants want experienced staff – being Gay or Lesbian is not first priority (n=4; 67%)
- LGBT staff may understand specific concerns better (n=3; 50%)
- More important to have a strong referral / support network (n=3; 50%)

Focus Groups

Thematic Analysis Findings

Advice to LGBT peers interested in fostering/adopting

- Take stock of your support network because it is very important (n=4; 67%)
- Clearly advocate for yourself and know the laws in your state (n=4; 67%)
- Find an agency you are comfortable with and will work closely with you (n=4; 67%)
- Parenting is a “selfless choice” (n=2; 33%)
- Talk with someone who has adopted before talking with the agency (n=3; 50%)

Emergent Themes across Interviews and Focus Groups

- Increased discrimination towards gay men
- Barriers are cumulative (i.e., being single and gay)
- Self Advocacy
- Importance of openness in communication from workers to families
- Parenting is a positive experience
- Ability to offer children diverse experiences

Examples of Family

Recommendations for Agencies

- Every family is different and the needs of families (gay or straight) should be evaluated individually.
- Agencies must re-evaluate their entire approach to recruitment/retention of LGBT adopters. It is not enough just to do a single campaign.
- LGBT families should be integrated throughout the process, not given “special preference”.
- Agency staff need to be educated about LGBT parenting and adoption so that LGBT families don't have to fight against prejudice or work to overcome the stereotypes about the LGBT community.
- Agencies should be honest with LGBT families about the challenges that they will face in the adoption process as an LGBT prospective parent.

Examples of Family Recommendations for Prospective Families

- Advocate for yourself – be clear that you are an LGBT family and make sure the agency is willing to work with you
- Find an agency that you are comfortable with and know that there are other options.
- Be realistic about your expectations – the process is difficult for all families.
- Learn the laws in your state, and in any state you consider adopting from – It is important to know your rights.

Further research requested by the Children's Bureau

- Research project: Perspectives of youth adopted by LGBT headed families
- Development of T&TA services provided NRCRRFAP at AdoptUsKids to assist States, Tribes, and Territories to build capacity in their ability to recruit and retain LGBT families

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