

Chapter 9

SAME-SEX COUPLES

There has been a sea change in attitude towards lesbian and gay adopters in the adoption world in the last decade.

Fifteen years ago, lesbian and gay couples struggled to find an adoption agency that would assess them and then had to struggle again for selection. The 2005 Adoption and Children Act changed all that when it gave lesbian and gay couples the same rights as straight couples.

As a result, in the past ten years the number of children adopted annually by lesbian and gay couples has dramatically risen; there are now three times as many children being adopted by the lesbian and gay community. Social attitudes have also changed and social workers now generally recognize the special value of lesbian and gay adopters, significantly their 'openness to difference' which equips them for supporting a child with a sense of difference – something common to all adoptees.

One of the other major pluses is their empathy with anyone who has suffered wrongful rejection and their understanding of the social challenges faced by a member of any minority group. They also decide to adopt for very different reasons. For many gay and lesbian couples, adoption is a first choice as it enables couples to be equal partners in terms of their relationship to the child or children who become their forever family.

This is completely different to the majority of heterosexual couples who turn to adoption as a second choice after years of infertility treatment and who first need to come to terms with a personal sense of loss, a problem few lesbian and gay couples face.

A recent Cambridge University study looking at the effectiveness of parenting by different types of adopters studied 41 gay father

families, 40 lesbian mother families and 49 heterosexual parent families with an adopted child aged 3–9 years. The children’s teachers as well as the parents and the adoptee were interviewed. One of the most interesting findings was that the survey indicated more positive parental well-being and parenting in gay father families compared with heterosexual parent families. Gay couples generally were found to face fewer problems with their adopted children. ‘Parenting stress, rather than family type were found to be predictive of child externalizing problems,’ said the report, which was compiled under Professor Susan Golombok, director of the Family Research Centre at Cambridge University.¹

But despite this positive research, lesbian and gay adopters do still face criticism by society at large. ‘I know some people think we should not adopt,’ said one gay father. ‘Many also think that single people shouldn’t be allowed to adopt either. In a perfect world I might agree with those who claim that a child would be best placed with a mum and a dad. But many birth children nowadays live with a single parent, or with permutations of mummies and daddies from relationship break-ups. The concept of family has evolved. Most importantly, in an ideal world there wouldn’t be any children in care.’

Another adopter says that it is time for more effort to be put into countering homophobia in society. ‘To give us the same rights and then not back that up with both literature and training, particularly in schools, is wrong,’ said writer and adopter Carolyn Robertson, who has written two children’s books for children of lesbian and gay families, *Two Dads* and *Two Mums and a Menagerie*.

Interestingly, she says that it is adoption that now defines her as a parent rather than being a lesbian:

Adopters today of all types and genders face many problems that other parents cannot even begin to really understand. We are all caring for a child that has been rejected and often a child that has been deeply traumatized by his or her early life. There is little understanding in schools or the wider world of how emotionally complex these children are.

Adoptees are already a misunderstood minority, my biggest concern is that by being the children of lesbian or gay parents,

1 S. Golombok (2015) *Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

they are further misunderstood, isolated and ostracized because of ongoing homophobia within society.

The government has legislated in favour of giving LGBT parents the same rights in adoption as heterosexual adopters. It does not make sense to do that and not to back it up with legislation against homophobia in schools and within society generally.

Lesbian and gay adopters have set up their own self-help membership organization, New Family Social, which hosts an annual Adoption and Fostering Week to encourage more LGBT couples to consider adoption. It involves more than 60 adoption agencies with events held all over the UK. Their online forum discusses everything from being taken on as an adopter to the challenges of adoption itself. But the discussions ultimately resolve around the same problems that all adopters face. 'Our children are all hurt and require the same therapeutic parenting to help them understand their feelings and behaviour,' said Carolyn.

We both love motherhood

My wife and I got together 11 years ago and entered into a civil partnership four years ago. We always wanted to have children. We came to the decision that adoption was the best option. We approached a local authority in the North East and New Family Social (an LGBT adoption and fostering support charity). We've had friends who've approached local authorities and not had a good response, but our local authority was great.

We both love motherhood, it's fantastic. Our son will make a wonderful big brother so we want to adopt again.

There are a lot of misconceptions. Some people think, 'Because you're gay you'll only be able to adopt someone who's disabled', which is rubbish.

We knew when we were going into adoption that some people might have preconceived ideas. We knew we would have to break down some barriers – some with social workers – but we found the whole thing was fine. At panel we felt discrimination but not because we were a lesbian couple – it was against my wife's disability.

We found that difficult as we were fielding some questions that we thought were offensive.

Making the right match? – trust your instincts

My partner and I embarked on our adoption journey nine years ago. We had never wanted a baby as, quite honestly, nappies and sleepless nights are not something that I cared to even think about.

We went through our preparation course and assessment continually referring to our daughter, and in our heads we had a vision of a blonde-haired, petite mouse coming to live with us. If you asked me her age, I would have told you that she was between three and six years old.

After panel the hunt for our family began. Our local authority did not have anyone they considered a match so, unusually for 2006, we were immediately placed on the adoption register and advised to register for *Children Who Wait* – which of course we did.

The first edition of *Children Who Wait* arrived, and the strangest thing happened. We did not find ourselves drawn to any child that could resemble our daughter. It was a worry, as there were a number of girls we thought fitted the bill. We made no enquiries from the first edition, or the second. We found ourselves drawn to sibling groups, and we had never considered siblings before.

When we received profiles of children or *Children Who Wait*, we read them separately, so that we didn't influence each other and could give each child our own amount of time. Writing it now, it sounds clinical; however, given that we were trying to make a decision that would affect us for the rest of our lives, we wanted to ensure we had a connection as individuals before discussing it as a couple.

After reading our third copy of *Children Who Wait*, when we got together there were three profiles we were interested in finding out more about. Top was a pair of brothers, who were seven and eight years old. Our social worker was due the same day, so we thought we would ask her for her opinion. We were in shock when she arrived with exactly the same list. None of the profiles we had chosen matched our original plan of having that little girl.

Gut instinct is a wonderful thing sometimes; there was something about the two older brothers that we fell in love with straight away.