

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

**2011 National Child Welfare
Evaluation Summit**

August 31, 2011

Presenters

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Overview of Presentation

- Introduction to AdoptUSKids
- Overview of research on LGBT adoptions from U.S. foster care
- Findings from AdoptUSKids research on LGBT families adopting from foster care
- Implications for practice and research

What is AdoptUSKids?

- A federally funded project operated through a *cooperative agreement* with the Children's Bureau
- Mission of AdoptUSKids
- A member of the Children's Bureau's Training and Technical Assistance Network

AdoptUSKids: Who we are and what we do



State Laws and Policies

- State laws and policies regarding LGBT persons becoming foster and adoptive parents have changed dramatically in the past decade.
- There are currently no standard practices across states with regards to gay and lesbian adoptions (Ryan, Pearlmutter & Groza, 2004).

Adoption and Foster Care by Gay and Lesbian Parents in the United States

Reviewed data from several sources, including the 2000 U.S. Census, the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, and the 2004 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System.

- 65,500 adopted children are living with a gay or lesbian parent
- 14,100 foster children (approximately 3% of children in care) are living with gay or lesbian foster parents
- more than half of gay men and 41% of lesbians want to have a child
- estimated two million lesbians and gays may be interested in adopting

Gates, Badgett, Macomber and Chambers, 2007

Evan B. Donaldson Institute report

EXPANDING RESOURCES FOR WAITING CHILDREN II: Eliminating Legal and Practice Barriers to Gay and Lesbian Adoption from Foster Care (2008)

This report is a follow-up to the Institute's 2006 report looking at policy and practices related to gay and lesbian adoptions.

Findings:

Highlights from Executive Summary

- Agencies vary in the extent to which they are welcoming and sensitive to all prospective adoptive families. To meet the needs of waiting children, they need to actively welcome all types of qualified families.
- Agency policies and practices for assessing / preparing families may not appropriately assess / prepare gay and lesbian prospective adoptive families.
- Much more needs to be learned to provide agencies with clear guidance on quality policy and practice in recruiting, assessing, preparing and supporting gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parents.

Working With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families in Adoption (2011)

Research highlights taken from Bulletins for Professionals: Child Welfare Information Gateway

- Children raised by LGBT parents do not differ in areas of adjustment or functioning (Goldberg, 2009).
- Quality of parenting / family functioning are not related to parent sexual orientation (Erich, Leung, Kindle, & Carter, 2005).
- Adults who have been raised by LGBT parents report feeling more tolerant of diversity (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).
- Sexual orientation of youth does not correlate with the sexual orientation of their parents (Golombok & Tasker, 1996).

Working With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families in Adoption (2011)

Advantages of Including LGBT Adoptive Families

- They are highly motivated to adopt.
- They have a deep understanding of how it feels to be “different.”
- They are able to advocate for fairness and equality for their family.
- Many have overcome oppression, discrimination, and other obstacles in their own lives.

Working With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families in Adoption (2011)

Challenges Faced by LGBT Adoptive Families

- Historically, LGBT parents were considered as a resource for “certain children.”
- Many agencies apply a “hierarchy” that gives priority to heterosexual parents.

Research Project Background and Funding

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

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Capacity Building Activities

- TTA through the National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids (NRCRRFAP) is AUSK's primary capacity building activity.
- Movement from major publications to more accessible & digestible tip sheets in response to identified professional “personae” needs.

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Capacity Building Activities

2009: Added “capacity building for specialized communities”

- African American
- Latino/Hispanic
- Native American
- Military/Global
- LGBT

Evaluate what is learned & convert to capacity-building TTA.

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 the 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 LG 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%) were 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 relationships
- 1 Civil Union
- 1 Married
- 1 not applicable (single)
- 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 in 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 is needed 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 for prospective LGBT parents about their states' 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 the 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 an agency (n=3; 50%)

Emergent Themes across Interviews and Focus Groups

- Greater discrimination towards gay men
- Barriers are cumulative (i.e., being single and gay)
- Importance of 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.

Next Steps: Research

Perspectives of Youth Adopted from Foster Care by Parents who are LGBT

- Youth aged 13 or older adopted from foster care by parents who are LGBT
- Focus groups and interviews with youth
- Survey of adoptive parent(s)
- Data collection is complete and data analysis is currently underway
- Report is expected to be complete early fall 2011

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Capacity Building Products

With the National Resource Center for
Permanency and Family Connections:

- June 16, 2010 webinar
- <http://www.adoptuskids.org/images/resourceCenter/LGBT-foster-and-adoptive-parenting.pdf>

More in process to be based on findings of
LGBT parent follow-up and focus groups and
youth adopted by LGBT parents focus
groups/interviews

Next steps

- Finish youth study
- Incorporate both LGBT parent study findings and youth study findings into Barriers & Success Factors
- Work with TTA Network partners to create additional shared TTA products and opportunities to support capacity of STTCs with regard to LGBT-inclusiveness as foster, adoptive, and kin care families

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