

RECRUITING, ASSESSING AND SUPPORTING LESBIAN AND GAY CARERS AND ADOPTERS

Gerald Mallon and Bridget Betts

British Association of Adoption and Fostering, 2005

In Australia, State governments tend to be silent on the issue of gay and lesbian foster and adoptive families. There are inconsistencies in the way individual states and community service organisations respond to gay and lesbian applications, and there is also a dearth of literature and policy in this area.

In Victoria, gays and lesbians are precluded by law from adoption. However, they are permitted to foster, if the agency is accepting of gay and lesbian applicants. Gays and lesbians are eligible to become permanent carers (within the provisions of the Victorian Children and Young Persons Act 1989), but only if the relinquishing birth parents agree. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of home based care programs are auspiced by religious organisations and current Victorian anti-discrimination legislation exempts religious community service organisations engaged in the care and education of children.

Very few Australian agencies publicly advertise for gay and lesbian carers for fear of a homophobic backlash from the general community. It is also of concern that some social workers may have personal biases or prejudices which could impede their ability to make non-judgmental assessments of gay and lesbian applicants.

Share Care (based in inner-city Melbourne) has had considerable success in specific recruitment within the Victorian gay and lesbian community. The majority of respondents are professional couples aged 35–40 years (equal males and females), who have been in stable relationships for 5–10 years. They may be interested in having their own family; considering long term and/or permanent foster care; or wanting to provide regular planned respite care one weekend a month.

Between 3% and 5% of the UK community identify as gay, representing a significant minority of the population. *Recruiting, assessing and supporting lesbian and gay carers and adopters* reviews the research and UK legislation and policy, as well as providing guidelines for conducting assessments of gay and lesbian people, and practical advice regarding working with gay and lesbian foster and adoptive families.

The authors express concern about the lack of policy to guide social workers in their recruitment, assessment and supervision of gay and lesbian foster carers and adoptive parents. They emphasise that, for most heterosexual people, fostering is their 'second choice' (after having their own children or accessing IVF treatment). However, for many

gay and lesbian people, fostering may be their 'first choice'. Social workers need to be sensitive to this fact.

This very useful resource also alerts social workers to beware of inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes and to avoid identifying sexual orientation as the sole aspect of identity. It also provides practical advice about appropriate use of language when working with and/or referring to members of the gay and lesbian community.

The UK appears to be much more progressive than Australia in recognising the rights of gays and lesbians to foster, adopt or create their own families. This publication is timely, given the fact that the UK government recently passed ground breaking legislation allowing gay marriage, adoption and access to fertility treatment.

In summary, this is a clearly written and very practical summary of the issues facing gay and lesbian foster and adoptive families and the agencies which recruit and support them. It is recommended reading.

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A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FAMILY PLACEMENT LITERATURE

Edited by John Sudbery, Stephen Hicks, Sheila Thompson, Hugh McLaughlin and Carole Bramley with Katrina Wilson

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This is an excellent resource for material published in the UK on out-of-home care between 1989 and 2004. The authors state clearly that 'literature from outside the UK has only been included where there are specific reasons to do so' (p. 2) – for example, where the international literature would provide a broader context for the UK or when there is a dearth of research on the topic in the UK. I only found one reference to Australian research (there are significantly more references to research undertaken in the USA).

The authors have compiled this bibliography in a variety of ways – through their own professional knowledge and networks; through other bibliographies; and through well known databases. However, they caution that any bibliography can never be exhaustive and that web addresses for on-line resources may well have changed.

The book is divided into broad subject chapters:

- Family placement – the current UK context
- Family placement in general
- Adoption and permanent foster care
- Different kinds of care arrangements