

# A CURRENT ISSUE IN ADOPTION: THE SINGLE ADOPTIVE PARENT

Dr. Juliet Harper, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Macquarie University, North Ryde, N.S.W.

## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses itself to the topic of the single adoptive parent, a relatively new phenomenon in the adoptive process in Australia. It presents a review of the available research and a critical discussion of some of the pertinent issues raised by a consideration of this area. Brief comment is made about the current Australian scene and it is concluded that with caution, placement of children with single adoptive parents could be made on a routine basis.

## INTRODUCTION

Adoption by single persons is a relatively new phenomenon in the field of social sciences in Australia although they have been a regular part of the American scene since 1965. "Placement with single persons has in general met with community acceptance", state Shirman and Johnson<sup>1</sup> and in a recent urban Australian survey on community attitudes and adoption in which a question on the topic of single persons being permitted to adopt was included the results indicated that 60 per cent approved, 30 per cent were against and 10 per cent were uncertain.<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted in large shopping malls, in the four geographic suburban areas of Sydney and a total of 233 persons (96 male and 137 female) co-operated.

Comments made by respondents were varied; some stated emphatically that "children deserve two parents", others qualified positive responses by stating "single women only" or "if they are carefully screened". The question of homosexuality was raised and many of those who fell into the "don't know" category did so because they were uncertain about this issue although they were generally in favour of single persons being allowed to adopt. Several stated, "single persons yes, but no homosexuals" as though homosexuality was somehow contagious. One response was "yes, most definitely single people as well as gay couples."

By far the largest number of comments were made by positive respondents along the lines of, "yes, why not, so long as they are emotionally mature and financially secure." Many were keen to discuss the subject in relation to the increasing number of single biological families, most drawing the supporting parent benefit, and the consequent illogicality of denying single persons the right to parent by adoption. A few carried this further by stating that "this just encourages immorality", that is, the State will pay a

single person who gets pregnant to keep and raise their child but will not let a single person who wishes to parent a child without conceiving it adopt one.

In Australia the issue of single adoptive parents is only just arising but the survey presented here suggests that community attitudes are accepting of it and with caution such placements could be made on a routine basis.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The first major review was that by Kadushin<sup>3</sup> in 1970 and this still remains the standard and most quoted reference in the area. Kadushin looked not only at single parent adoptions as such but also at the single parent family as a consequence of loss, desertion, divorce and separation as well as illegitimacy and came to the conclusion that the single parent family is "merely a variant child-rearing context and not inherently or necessarily pathogenic", it being a common supposition that single parenthood is pathological. Kadushin further stated that the single adoptive family is likely to be the least pathogenic of all kinds of single parent families. Herzog and Sudia<sup>4</sup> in a review of literature on fatherless homes, came to the same general conclusions and suggested that society needs to be more flexible in thinking about alternatives which can be productively employed for children needing substitute families. More recently the *New Statesman* for 11 January, 1985<sup>5</sup> in its editorial on 'Questions of Motherhood' stated the following:

"... an unacceptable standard is that only married couples should have and bring up children and that any other arrangement is 'unnatural' and should be prevented, or at least strongly discouraged by society . . . The existence of a marital relationship is in itself no guarantee that a child will be well or lovingly brought up: and millions of children clearly thrive under the care of one or more adults living outside any conventional marital relationship."

The earliest published study was one which followed up eight single adoptive placements by the Los Angeles Department of Adoption<sup>6</sup> and found the outcome very promising with "steady progress in the development of the child as a person . . . in several instances the development has been truly dramatic." A later study<sup>7</sup> also conducted under the auspices of the same department was based on 36 placements, 35 women and one man and the findings were again very positive. A more comprehensive follow-up of 28 single women and 3 single men who adopted

black infants in the Chicago area was undertaken by Shireman and Johnson.<sup>8</sup> Parents were interviewed in the first weeks of the placement after two months and three to four years later and it was found that while parents reported many problems right after placement, a function of anxiety at having to cope alone, by two months only three were seen by the researchers as being problematic and good progress was maintained at the follow-up at age of four.

A study comparing single adoptive parents and adoptive couples on a more national basis was that of Feigleman and Silverman<sup>9</sup> and their sample consisted of 58 single parents (43 females and 15 males) and 679 couples, which in the follow-up six years later in 1981 was reduced to 35 single parents and 337 adoptive couples.<sup>10</sup> Their findings indicated that single adoptive parents:

- were more likely to live in urban areas and couples in the suburbs;
- tended to be more highly educated than their adoptive couple counterparts and engaged in two main professional occupations, education and social welfare work;
- incomes were on average lower than couples, due to couples possessing dual earning power and the overrepresentation of women in the single parent group, i.e. "it is widely known that women in nearly every occupational category earn less than men performing similar functions. Also women are more likely to pursue their occupations on a part-time basis".<sup>11</sup>
- were more closely affiliated with their extended families than couples;
- the women but not the men, were older than most adoptive couples;
- tended to adopt children of their own sex;
- were more flexible and more willing to adopt hard-to-place and handicapped children;
- tended to adopt older children.

In comparing experiences of the single adopters and the couples, substantially similar problems and outcomes were found with respect to raising adopted children. The results of their research, Feigleman and Silverman<sup>12</sup> state:

"Offer positive support for the new and growing practice of single parent adoption . . . These findings confirm earlier studies on the success of the overwhelming majority of single parent placements and suggest that single parents are as viable a resource for adoptive placements as couples. In fact, given the present discrimination against single parents in the adoption process, the absence of spouse

supports and their more limited economic resources, these positive findings suggest that single adoptive parents possess unusually high commitments to parenting”.

### CRITICAL DISCUSSION ON SOME PERTINENT ISSUES

The studies reviewed above are the major ones in the area of single parent adoption, although there are numerous mentions in studies of adopted children of single adoptive parents. For example, Jepson's<sup>13</sup> report on the specialist British adoption agency, "Parents for Children" which finds homes for children with special needs, cites four of the first 38 children placed as being placements with single women. (Amongst the adopting couples, one mother who adopted had had a sex change operation and subsequently married.) In addition, in a recent Newsweek<sup>14</sup> article on adoption, of the four cases mentioned of intercountry adoption of babies from war-torn E1 Salvador, one was a baby boy placed with a single woman.

While the limited research published to date indicates very positive results for children adopted by single parents, there is an obvious need for continued longterm follow-up through the adolescent years and into adulthood. However, there is, it is suggested, enough accumulated evidence to support the practice of allowing single persons to adopt.

The arguments against single parent adoption have, as their basis, outmoded 19th century Victorian attitudes towards the family and especially towards women and their role in society. As their starting point they begin "... every child has a right to a family" and by family is meant two persons joined in wedlock, in which the male works and the female stays at home. In conjunction with this is the often repeated statement that the unmarried mother "gave up her baby for adoption so that it could have a real family, a mother and a father".

As a 20th century starting point in keeping with Demause's<sup>15</sup> concept of child care, it is suggested that every child has a right to be loved and nurtured in a consistent, caring parent-child relationship." Indeed, Goldstein, Freud and Solnit<sup>16</sup> in their study of children's needs, "Beyond the Best Interests of the Child" take the view that the child requires a consistent "psychological parent" who may be biological, adoptive or a caring adult who is stable and loving and an interacting part of the child's experience of the world. If two such persons in a mutually giving and harmonious relationship are available, so much the better; but one married person and a non-participating partner does not constitute "psychological parents" merely a married couple, and a marriage certificate does not automatically confer parenting skills on both

or either person.

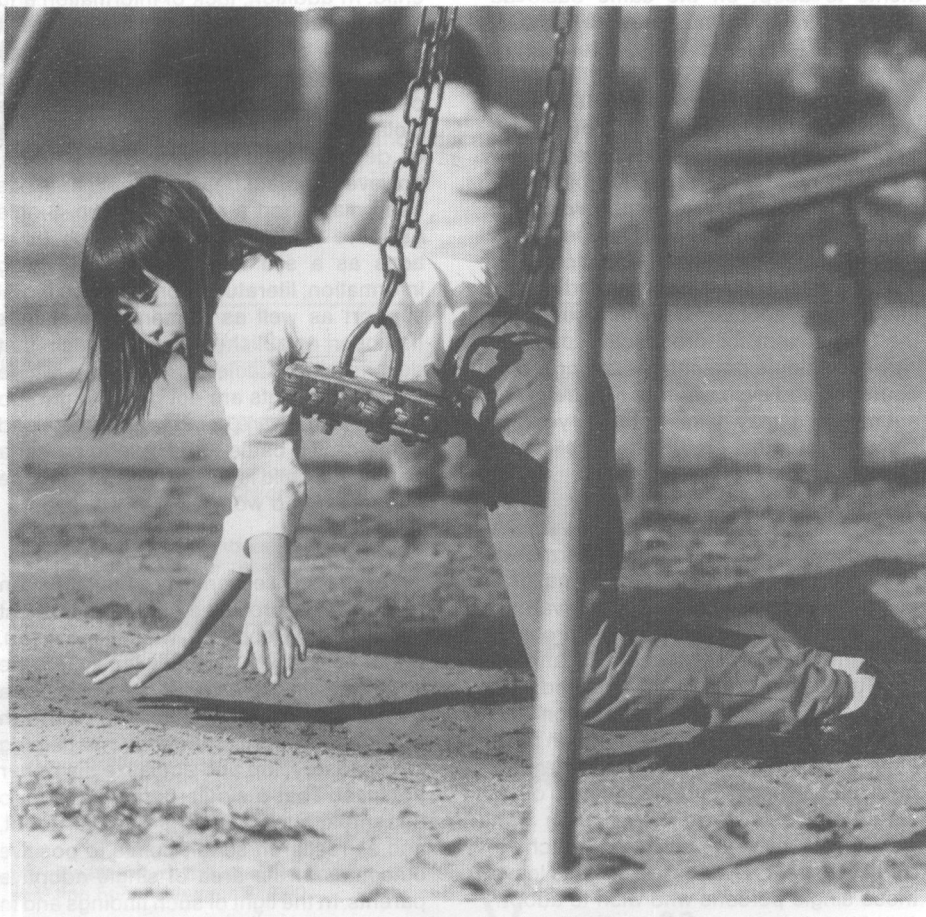
A similar but more specifically stated view is espoused by Donley<sup>17</sup> who argues that the true basis for single parent placements is not the absence of two parent options, but the fact that children need the nurture and stability resulting from a healthy parent-child relationship. To make such a relationship what is required is a capable and caring adult who makes a longterm commitment to the child — one person is all that is required provided they have the necessary psychosocial attributes.

An argument which is seen as liberal and sensible is that which states that where a married couple is not available to adopt a child, a single person should be considered, thus only if there is no other option should a single person wanting to parent be permitted to do so. This is not saying "no single person adoptions", it is a sanctimonious appeasement view which in essence really states that single persons should be given only what married couples do not want, that is, the unacceptable given the unplaceable. The latter are of course "children with special needs", being older aged, minority or mixed race, emotionally disturbed, physically or intellectually handicapped, or those with serious medical problems.

While probably as many single persons as married or de facto couples are capable, loving and willing to parent a special needs child as a policy statement, this is both discriminatory and illogical. To quote Feigleman and Silverman<sup>18</sup>:

"These placements appear paradoxical: those who are felt to possess the least resources to parent have been assigned the children who would seem to require the most demanding kinds of care".

However, it is suggested that among special needs children there are those for whom psychologically the first choice for placement is with a single person where there will be not competition with other children or with an adult. For some children relating to one person committed to them is as much as they can manage, two persons committed first to each other and then to them is too threatening, too much to cope with. The child may end up in competition with an adult and become the identified cause of a rift or actual separation which further contributes to feelings of rejection, poor self esteem and unlovableness. This applies particularly to children who are emotionally impoverished, always demanding, never it seems able to be satisfied — the bottomless pit syndrome. They need a committed one-to-one relationship in which they are contained and the fear that if they give the little they have, they will be empty is slowly worked through by the constant availability of a loving adult who provides a model of non-threatening giving and receiving as well as good objects and experiences to be integrated and internalized. Each case is of course an individual one and the needs of the child are paramount but there is no doubt that



single persons have special skills to offer and this needs to be recognised and acted upon.

The issue of intercountry adoption is a somewhat different one because of the greater number of abandoned infants and children who, if an intercountry placement is not possible face life in an orphanage. No one who has visited such institutions would agree that they are preferable to an overseas adoption. The question then becomes — is it better to allow a single person to parent an infant or leave it in an orphanage and hope a married couple happens along? The longer the infant is left without a parent, the harder it becomes to find parents. So, in effect, by the time five or six years have passed and the child comes into the special needs category, viz, "an older aged adoption", we can then consent to allowing a single person to adopt the child. In whose best interests is this situation? Children should not be subjected to such a fate when there are individuals willing and able to parent but who are prevented from so doing. After all, if the donor country approves allocation to single persons, and many do, then is it fair that the receiving country over-rides it? Are we more moral or immoral for doing so? It is their children we are offering to parent and by taking such a limited view we are condemning many children to institutional life who would otherwise find a home and family.

The issue raised above is essentially that of competition which is highlighted by the fact that while the numbers of babies available for adoption has steadily decreased, the demand for them has increased. The perfect white Anglo-Saxon newborn waiting to be adopted is a thing of the past and in consequence the situation has become much more emotional. The long period of waiting is stressful to the individuals and often a strain on their marital relationship. In some instances a compromise solution is to adopt a special needs child or make an intercountry adoption, and as incountry adoptions have decreased so intercountry ones have increased. The hidden fear that allowing single persons to adopt will open the floodgates is groundless and has not been found to be an issue in the past 20 years in America. The single person who wishes to adopt is not the popular stereotype of the young irresponsible carefree single person, it is an older minority group who have come to the decision that they wish to parent a child after long and careful consideration and preparation for such an event.

An even more emotive topic is that of homosexual individuals who wish to adopt. Here moral outrage is complete and the fact that what is really at stake is a parent for a parentless child is lost sight of. There is no evidence to suggest that a stable, caring, emotionally and financially secure homosexual person has less to offer in parenting a child than a similar heterosexual person. Being homosexual does not qualitatively alter the individual's

capacity to nurture, love and protect a child and their own sexuality is not transmitted by proximity. After all, most homosexuals are the products of conventional family backgrounds — their parents are married couples.

The case for single parent adoption is made against a world of rapidly changing attitudes and values a world in which the concept of the nuclear family has radically altered and conscious decisions by individuals not to have biological children but to adopt or to extend their family by adoption are not uncommon. The single adoptive parent may or may not be fertile but this is not relevant, a conscious decision has been made to parent a child already born and without parents and it is this fact that should be given priority over all others. Single adoptive parents are by virtue of their own decision very highly motivated and committed to parenting a child, perhaps more so than the conventional adoptive couple.

### THE AUSTRALIAN SCENE

The single adoptive parent in Australia is as yet an isolated phenomenon, although provision is made in most states for particular or unusual circumstances, that is, placement of a child usually older or with special needs, with a single person, if, as the law requires, a suitable married couple cannot be found. It is only recently that single persons have begun to apply to their relevant state government departments to adopt on the same basis as couples, however, most have been particularly interested in intercountry adoption.

Over the past three years in New South Wales, the department of Youth and Community Services has received an increasing number of enquiries by single persons, predominantly women, who wish to adopt. Most of these enquiries have related to intercountry adoption and single persons have been attending the intercountry adoption seminars set up by the Department for prospective parents. However, single persons are strongly discouraged and even when applications are submitted it may take up to a year or eighteen months, as in one applicant's case, to obtain a home visit by the District Officer. A home visit provides the basis for the "Home Study" sent to the overseas country and is essential in terms of whether or not the District Officer makes a positive recommendation for approval and so permits the application to proceed through the normal bureaucratic channels.

Success to date has been limited, one completed adoption, one allocation and three recommendations, all of which have as at April 1985 been waiting over a year for a final decision. Information from other states suggests a similar situation with perhaps a more positive approach in South Australia. So where does this leave those single persons who wish to adopt? As with married couples, alternative solutions will inevitably be sought and for them this means acting without Departmental

approval and arranging their own adoption through agencies in those countries which permit single persons to adopt. While such action is not recommended, it is seen as a final resort by those who have been denied legitimate approval and feel that they have no other option. This is a hazardous course to undertake and more so for single persons who, because they are acting without their own country's official sanction, are vulnerable to exploitation and harrassment since there is no turning back, no second chance should anything go wrong.

Determination and perseverance are needed to remain hopeful, human and productive, but as the war of nerves proceeds so the individual's limit of endurance is reached and it is then that the decision to act without approval is taken.

The situation is in every way a very stressful one, it is not only the endless waiting but also the continual deferral of decisions which may be dragged out to such an extent that the age barrier can finally be used as the reason to refuse the application. This has occurred in one instance already and is likely in more cases especially if the age limit for prospective adoptive applicants is lowered as appears to be a recommendation of the New South Wales review on adoption. Delay is for this group of individuals of particular concern since most are well into their thirties by the time they feel that they have the necessary resources and background to parent a child. In addition, lack of information and support such as that provided by parent consumer groups (A.S.I.A.C., I.C.A., etc.) for prospective intercountry adoptive couples, their small numbers and relative isolation has contributed to their feelings of despondency. In New South Wales, however, contact between applicants has been made and a support group, Single Adoptive Parents Support, which functions as a self help network providing information, literature, contacts and moral support as well as bi-monthly meetings has been established. It would seem that despite all obstacles, prospective single adoptive parents are not going to give up or give in, they are going to persevere and battle on. To battle to be able to parent a parentless child is a battle that needs to be supported and won.

### CONCLUSION

Adoption is essentially a humanitarian endeavour to provide a child who has lost his or her parents, for whatever reason, with a new family. The new family may be large or small, what is essential is a consistent loving relationship with an adult committed to caring for and helping the child develop and actualize his or her potential. That a single person is able to undertake such a task is beyond doubt, and all research so far, points to positive outcomes in the area of single adoptive parents. In the light of such findings and in view of the high level of dedication to parenting associated with the single adoptive parent, it seems illogical and

inhumane to deny them the opportunity to parent a child and, more importantly, a child to have a parent.

**REFERENCES**

1. Shireman, J.F. & Johnson, P.R. (1976). Single persons as adoptive parents. *Social Service Review*, 50, 103-116.
2. Harper, J.F. (1985). Australia's newest imports. *Australian Society*, Feb. 4 (2), 18-19.
3. Kadushin, A. (1970). Single-parent adoptions: An overview and some relevant research. *Social Service Review*, 44 263-274.
4. Herzog, E. & Sudia, C.E. (1968). Fatherless homes

- A review of research. *Children*, 15, Sept./ Oct., 179-181.

5. Editorial, (1985). Questions of motherhood. *New Statesman*, 109, 11 January.
6. Jordan, V., & Little, W. (1966). Early comments on single parent adoptive homes. *Child Welfare*, 45, Nov., 536-538.
7. Branham, E. (1970). One parent adoptions. *Children*, 17, May/June, 103-107.
8. Shireman, J.F., & Johnson, P.R. (1976), op. cit.
9. Feigleman, W., & Silverman, A.R. (1977). Single parent adoptions. *Social Casework*, 58, July, 418-425.
10. Feigleman, W., & Silverman, A.R. (1983). *Chosen children: New patterns of adoptive relationships*. Praeger, New York.

11. Feigleman, W., & Silverman, A.R. (1977). op. cit., p. 421.
12. Ibid., p. 425.
13. Jepson A.M. (1981). Parents for children. *British Medical Journal*, 282, 27 June, 2112-3.
14. Adoption: New frustration, new hope (1984). *Newsweek*, February 13, 51-52.
15. Demause, L. (1976). *The history of childhood*. Souvenir Press, London.
16. Goldstein, J., Freud, A., & Solnit, A.J. (1973). *Beyond the best interests of the child*. Free Press, New York.
17. Donley, K. (1983). *Why place children with single parents?* CAP, New York.
18. Feigleman, W., & Silverman, A.R. (1983). op. cit., p. 178.

# A GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN HEALTH EDUCATION

A COMMUNITY EDUCATION OFFICER PRODUCES A CURRICULUM UNIT ON EPILEPSY FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

A PHARMACIST ENGAGES IN A PEER REVIEW OF PHARMACY SERVICES.

A CLASS DOES RELAXATION EXERCISES WHILE LEARNING SKILLS IN STRESS MANAGEMENT.

A TRAINING OFFICER DEVELOPS A FIRST AID TRAINING PACKAGE FOR ETHNIC WORKERS.

A DIETITIAN LEADS A GROUP THROUGH A GUIDED FANTASY RELATED TO WELLBEING.

A SMALL GROUP PREPARE A SUBMISSION ON REGIONALISATION AND HEALTH PROMOTION.

The link between all these activities is the Graduate Diploma in Health Education at Lincoln Institute of Health Sciences. The Graduate Diploma has been developed for people working in the health services area and attracts people from diverse backgrounds: speech pathology, community education, dietetics, medical librarianship, occupational therapy, journalism, dentistry, nursing to name some.

The personal lifestyle of individuals is only one aspect of the problem of promoting positive health attitudes and behaviour in the community. The promotion of a healthy social and physical environment is another.

The course is based on an assumption that responsibility for developing positive health attitudes, behaviour and practices falls on individuals, families, community groups, health professionals, and government authorities.

People working in the health services area should not only be concerned with intervention which aims at changing individual behaviour, as important as this is. It is appropriate that they also contribute to social, economic and political action on matters which prevent people improving their health.

People taking the two year part-time course will generally already hold a recognised degree or diploma. Some others may be regarded as having equivalent qualifications by completing a preliminary studies program in the term prior to commencement of the graduate diploma course.

**FOR INFORMATION CONTACT:**

Rae Walker,  
 School of Health Administration and Education,  
 Lincoln Institute of Health Sciences,  
 625 Swanston Street,  
 CARLTON, 3053.  
 Phone: 342 0345

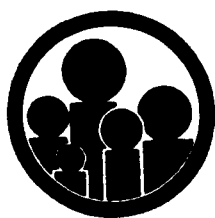
**AN INVITATION . . .**

. . . to join a National organisation concerned about Children, established in 1971.

For a \$30.00 Membership Fee, the individual Member receives:

1. *The quarterly Journal, 'Australian Child and Family Welfare'.*
2. *The quarterly Newsletter.*
3. *Copies of Research material at reduced prices.*
4. *Information about Seminars, Conferences and Luncheons the Bureau sponsors.*
5. *The opportunity to be part of a National lobby group for Children.*

Please return the attached Application Form with your \$30.00.



**THE  
 CHILDREN'S  
 BUREAU  
 OF  
 AUSTRALIA**

P.O. Box 13  
 Black Rock  
 Vic. 3193

22



**APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP  
 (INDIVIDUAL)**

Dr./Mr./Mrs./Ms./Miss

SURNAME .....

CHRISTIAN OR GIVEN NAMES .....

ADDRESS .....

..... POSTCODE .....

PHONE NUMBER..... (BUS.)..... (HOME)

OCCUPATION .....

BUSINESS ADDRESS .....

.....

..... CHEQUE FOR \$30.00 ENCLOSED

SIGNATURE..... DATE