

Adoption at What Price?



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Nationwide, adoptions continue to rise and were up by 29 percent over the past two years. Particularly encouraging is the fact that almost half of adoptions are now special needs children who in the past had great difficulty finding homes. The increase in adoptions is attributed to tax credits established for adoptive parents in 1996 and adoption bonus awards to states that increase their number of adoptions. In spite of these incentives, it is estimated that there are still about 110,000 children in the foster care system who are awaiting adoption.

States have become much more aggressive in looking for potential adoptive parents utilizing tools such as the media and adoption picnics to match children with prospective parents. Of concern is the impact of such exposure on these children and whether it invades their privacy. Videos of children in need of adoptive homes now appear along with the evening news and their photos and bios are published in local newspapers. A colleague told me of a child she saw who was despondent because his peers had

seen him "advertised" on the evening news and were now teasing him in school over that and the fact that he didn't have parents. Sensitive material may also be disclosed about bed wetting or behavior or learning problems which could stigmatize the child. Adoption picnics, which to some are reminiscent of cattle auctions, may fuel false hopes in older children that finally someone will claim them, and they may return dispirited and feeling unwanted.

The issue of what constitutes acceptable means to getting a child adopted epitomizes the two major theories which underlie contemporary biomedical ethics. Ends-based utilitarian theory, put forth by John Stuart Mill in the 19th century, stresses the importance of a good outcome and what does the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Thus, if 10 children find adoptive homes as a result of an adoption picnic and only three are set back by the process, the picnic would be considered morally just. However, if more children are harmed than hurt by this practice it would be difficult to morally justify continuing to use this forum for pairing potential adoptees with new parents. This approach would also argue that even if a particular child was distressed by these picnics, they

were justified if they increased that child's chance of being adopted.

Rule-based theory, originated by Immanuel Kant in the 18th century, states that it is the moral principles and motives involved in the process not the outcome that is of greatest importance. This approach argues that we have a duty to uphold moral law in all situations and that we not use persons as a means to an end or commit acts that harm individuals. Regarding adoption picnics, this approach would focus on whether it is right to parade the children in public and the immediate impact of this upon them rather than looking to the end result.

Yet another issue to consider is the child's rights to privacy and to what extent, in spite of good intentions, these are violated by the use of the media to publicize a child's availability. One might argue that none of us have much privacy in this era of the government, insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, banks, licensing boards, and even Internet hackers having access to all sorts of personal information about us. However, as child and adolescent psychiatrists we need to be responsive to the developmental issues and needs of the child in foster care and encourage adoption agencies and the media to be sensitive regarding the publication of information that might embarrass or stigmatize a child. Potential adoptive parents have a right to know about particular problems or special needs that a child might have but this can be done in a less public forum. ■

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