

Many gay and lesbian individuals are deciding to become parents. Some bring children with them from previous relationships, while some use artificial insemination. However, many look towards adoption as the best way to bring a child into their lives. Adoption professionals confirm that agencies nationwide are continually placing children with homosexual parents. Ada White, CWLA Director of Adoption Services states, "Many agencies are making these placements, but not necessarily talking about them. These agencies are not tracking it and don't intend to track it." While federal and state laws govern adoption, practices within states vary from region to region and even from agency to agency. Until the 1960s adoption was predominately used to place white babies in the homes of middle class, married couples. In recent years, adoption standards have dramatically changed and have become a way to create significantly diverse families. Yet, the majority of society still objects to gay and lesbian adoption and perpetuate the attitudes that have kept homosexual adoption from becoming socially acceptable. A limited number of states explicitly prohibit gay and lesbian individuals and couples from adopting. Most have neither laws prohibiting or allowing it. To complicate matters further, select states that prohibit adoption allow gays and lesbians to become foster parents. Arguments in favor of banning homosexual adoption have been consistent through the years. Individuals seem to believe that the traditional nuclear family is still an ideal to strive for and anything different is insufficient for a child to develop to their full potential. Along with such an argument is the commonly heard opinion that children raised by homosexual parents are much more likely to be homosexual themselves. They justify this opinion by pointing out that homophobic language and behavior is still

common in our society and placing a child in the middle is just irresponsible. The simple truth, however, is that there are thousands of children out there who desperately need stable, loving homes. When fighting restrictions on lesbian and gay parenting, we're fighting for all of them.

Steve Lofton and Roger Croteau currently reside in Oregon, after relocating from Florida, with their five foster children. Three of their five children have been with them since birth, the two oldest now being fourteen. While living in Florida, Steve and Roger were eager to begin a family of their own and quickly turned towards adoption. However, due to Florida's strict laws prohibiting the couple from adopting, their dreams were immediately put on hold. After some research into various adoption agencies in the area, they found out that although they were not permitted to adopt, they were legally, under state law, allowed to become foster parents. The couple immediately put their name on the foster parent list and eagerly awaited the arrival of their newest family member. The children flourished in school and into healthy, normal children. While raising their children, they were bound to run into individuals who were unable to comprehend their right to have a family. Both Steve and Roger realized the fact that there are a lot of children that desperately need a loving and caring family is much more important than worrying about the homophobia. To deny these children of the experience of a family based on ignorant views is heart wrenching. These children are lost in a world that many people do not want to know exists in the United States. All children deserve a loving and secure environment to live in, an environment that Steve and Roger were ready to provide. Typically, when Americans seek to adopt a child, they prefer healthy, white babies. Steve and Roger, however, dared to venture into the unknown and

reach out to the children nobody wanted, specifically the children who were HIV positive. Another couple similar to Steve and Roger, Harold Birtcher and Thom O'Reilly, were denied adoption rights in their home state of Ohio. They, as well, moved to Oregon in order to adopt their son. "Nobody's stepping up to adopt such hard-to-place children," says O'Reilly, "but they don't want us to adopt them either." Actress and comedian Rosie O'Donnell agrees, stating, "Gays and lesbians are often willing to take children that straight couples won't. Steve and Roger are regularly reminded of Florida's law banning gay adoption which constantly reminds them that their family could be torn apart at any time. Several years later, in order to be closer to their extended family, they made the move to Oregon, all while being under the constant watch of the state of Florida. Every few weeks, a letter comes from the state, giving an update on the status of finding another family to adopt their younger children. Due to the fact that three of them are under the age of 14, they are deemed adoptable. Concerned with developmental problems and ridicule from peers due to the "unnatural" lifestyle of their parents, the state is hesitant to allow an adoption to occur. However, the fact that these children have been living with the couple for a significant portion of their childhood with no difficulties proves the safety of homosexual adoption. The state continues in its effort to find the children another home, despite the fact that this is the only family they have ever known—even though they are already home.

According to the Child Welfare League of America, "On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999, 127,000 children in the public child welfare system were waiting to be adopted. That same year, only 46,000 of those children were adopted." Although many believe that our society must hold tight and uphold the traditional nuclear family as the ideal, this clearly

is not the best solution. With each passing year, the children of the welfare system lose precious time they could have spent with a family. Statistics show that couples seeking to adopt generally prefer babies and infants, while the older age group are forced to witness this statistic. Many agencies place the age limit at fourteen and once a child passes the limit he/she is no longer deemed “adoptable”. These children who are no longer favored by adoptive families are forced to patiently wait until they “age out” of the welfare system by turning eighteen. For these children, the world they enter will be especially tough and unforgiving. Unlike the majority of eighteen year olds, they won’t have loving parents or an extended family to fall back on for support and understanding. As the debate over the full legalization of homosexual adoption continues, both sides willingly acknowledge the evidence concerning how well children develop and mature with gay parents as opposed to the traditional nuclear family is still very much incomplete at this point. Conservatives tend to use this to their advantage by suggesting current laws should be upheld until gay parenting is proved to be safe. They even take a step further to discourage gay adoption and argue that homosexuals should not be allowed to raise children because children are not guinea pigs and should not be used as test subject in a grand social experiment. Ken Connor, President of the Family Research Council, states, “Legalizing gay adoptions would ‘deprive’ children of having a loving mom and dad.” Connor continues, sadly, by arguing that it would be much more beneficial to get straight couples to adopt these children. “However,” says Howard Saletan, “until he recruits enough volunteers, he’ll have to explain why living in an orphanage or with a drug-addicted mom is better than having two dads.” Saletan brings Connor’s main flaw to the forefront and proves that however ideal his theories may be,

Connor is not thinking realistically. As the debate continues, Connor explains that our society prohibits both gay adoption, as well as gay marriage, due to the fact that typically homosexuals are more likely to act promiscuously, experience depression, drug abuse, and thoughts of suicide. In addition, gays are less likely to form lasting relationships than straight individuals. In response, Saletan suggests that society's verdict that homosexuals are somehow unfit to marry and raise families lead them toward the lifestyles described above. "Those who oppose the legalization of gay marriage and adoption thereby perpetuate the instability they cite as grounds for denying gays the right to marry and adopt," explains Saletan. The first step in helping to create loving families is to realize and accept that to continue to uphold the archaic vision of the traditional nuclear family and expect everyone to conform is unreasonable and irresponsible.

Homophobia is unfortunately still prevalent in most parts of society. Many insist that placing a child into the care of a homosexual couple exposes them to this prejudice, and causes them to experience ridicule and violence. Looking closely, however, it is clear that although these individuals say they are looking out for the child's psychological and physical welfare, they are as well playing into the homophobia that exists. Couples of ethnic minorities are in no way discouraged from adopting in even the most racist areas of our nation. Nonetheless, these children face the same ridicule and violence and are subject to the same prejudice. Yet, conservatives are not so quick to exclude these couples and revoke their adoption rights. Only when society embraces homosexuals in all of its institutions can we hope to defeat prejudice and succeed in creating a loving environment for each and every child. Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's and an adopted child, explains, "People ask me. 'What about gay adoptions?"

Interracial? Single Parent?’ I say. ‘Hey fine, as long as it works for the child and the family is responsible.’ My big stand is this: Every child deserves a home and love. Period.” We, as a society, need to understand and realize that finding a loving home for the hundreds of thousands of orphaned children around the world is so much more important than debating about whether the sexual preference of a parent adversely affects a child’s development and individual sexual preference. It is deeply saddening to witness the reality that our society is more comfortable with seeing a sixteen year old couple struggling to complete high school while having a baby, rather than a well established homosexual couple seeking to complete their family through adoption. There are constantly horror stories being told about drug-addicted mothers, abusive fathers, dysfunctional families, and the typical response is compassion and sympathy. Although, the most disturbing part is that our society is still judging a parent’s quality and ability to raise a child based on the dream of a traditional nuclear family. If governing officials actually cared about the child’s welfare, instead of giving in to the homophobia present in our society, they would be judging individuals based on the qualities that they possess that are most important for a successful parent, rather than their sexual preference. As children, we are instilled with the beliefs and ideas of what a full and complete life looks like, with children being portrayed quite vividly. For homosexual individuals, this vision becomes blurred and out of focus. Choosing children is something gay and lesbian individuals must pursue in spite of judgment, misinformation, and the lack of legal recognition of their family. According to an African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”; this raises countless concerns and fears in the hearts of gay and lesbian prospective parents. As one lesbian mother expresses, “I thought, well, where is my

village?” Without the support and understanding of the majority of society, many gay and lesbian parents feel like it is them against the world. Along with homophobia, religion is the source of much of the resistance against gay and lesbian adoption. Rev. Russell Johnson, chairman of the Ohio Restoration Project, a conservative Christian group, states, “These people cannot reproduce. Experimenting on children through gay adoption is a problem.” Religious individuals seem to cling to the argument that God made it impossible for homosexuals to conceive or create a child and in turn, allowing them to adopt would betray God’s wishes. Similar to all aspects of life, religion is subject to interpretation and can be taken to mean something entirely different. It could be said that God did indeed prohibit homosexuals from producing children, but not to punish them for the lifestyle in which they lead. Instead, to help clean up the mess the heterosexual community has made in their careless attitude towards the gift of conceiving a child. In an attempt to prepare for the thousands of children in desperate need of a loving family each year, God answered their prayers with an entire community who, in order to experience the unprecedented joys of parenthood, must seek adoption to complete their family.

Since the early 1960s, adoption agencies throughout the nation have been discreetly placing children with homosexual couples. Although the statistics concerning the number of children being raised by such couples are incomplete, estimates show that approximately two million American children under the age of 18 are being raised by gay and lesbian parents. In order to reach a time in which all children are able to experience a loving, stable home, our society must continue to work together. It is clear that although the traditional nuclear family is still considered the ideal, it is irresponsible and unethical

to force innocent children to wait in an orphanage for a family that might only exist in an idealistic world. Unlike many heterosexual parents, Gay parents have unique strengths that allow them to help troubled children. As parents, they are more likely to be understanding, because they realize what it is like to be in the minority and to be the “odd” one. Studies have shown that people with homosexual parents are noticeably more open-minded than individuals with heterosexual parents. Our society should be focused on an individual’s ability to raise a child, rather than their sexual preference. A more important predictor of a teenager’s physical and psychological development is the quality of the relationships they have with their parents. It can be argued that the push against homosexual adoption has been more about gay discrimination than child welfare. In recent years, Americans have become much more tolerant of same-sex relations, and the adoption rights battle may strike them as unnecessarily cruel. At this point, legislation of adoption rights is left to the individual state’s discretion. Only a handful of states currently prohibit homosexual adoption, while most are undecided about the issue. Generally, younger people remain the most open to the idea of gay adoption and with each passing generation, gay adoption is becoming more and more socially acceptable. Witnessing a child’s first smile, hearing her first words, or witnessing his first steps really is a life-changing experience. Parenthood is an experience that can provide one with an incredible sense of purpose and fulfillment and should be available to individuals who can prove their ability to raise a child effectively, regardless of their sexual orientation. When examining our nation’s situation, it is evident that there are thousands of children out there who desperately need stable, loving homes. When fighting restrictions on

lesbian and gay parenting, we're fighting for all the innocent children who are unable to find permanent homes each year.

