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The Gaybe Boom

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As we careen into full blown campaign season, gay marriage will likely move from a simmer to a boil. Declarations will be forced, answers will be parsed, fine lines will be tiptoed.

But as both sides of the cultural divide argue about the rights to a happy and legal union, there is another issue that is moving steadily, if quietly toward acceptance.

That is gay and lesbian couples - and increasingly singles - adopting, having and raising children. According to The FamilyNet project at the Human Rights Campaign says that a review of American Academy of Pediatrics research indicates that there are between one million and nine million American children under 18 living with gay parents. Other studies put the figure much lower.

The fact is, nobody really knows. But most sociologists agree that the growth is enough to warrant its own snappy trend label: "The Gayby Boom."

Whatever the number, it is increasing despite some formidable obstacles. As a gay couple I know who have been through the gauntlet twice (and have two amazing little girls for their effort) told me: "Think how hard it is for hetero parents to adopt a child - all the background checks, all the Social Services visits, all the bureaucracy. When you're a gay couple, you have all that to a power of 10. I can't even imagine what it's like if you're single - especially a single man."

This drive for family, then, must be very powerful indeed.

The amount of drive required depends, to various degrees, on where you live. The Urban Institute reports that 11 states and Washington DC explicitly state that sexual orientation cannot be the basis for adoption denial. Mississippi and Utah have limitations. Florida is all alone with an outright ban. In the rest of the states, it's mainly up to the judges and adoption and foster agencies.

The gay and lesbian adoption bans that many feared would be used to muster conservative turnouts the way gay marriage did in 2004 never materialized.

One reason is that America is changing.

Among those not playing to the fearful prejudices of narrow constituencies, gay and lesbian adoption is gaining wide acceptance. Ohio was the only state in November 2006 to actually introduce a ban. It failed when the backers couldn't even get Republican backing. It was an admission, political observers say, that orientation-based divisiveness just isn't what it used to be.

In fact, some 62 percent of Ohio respondents to a Pew study said they would allow gay and lesbian adoptions with conditions. Only 33 percent said the state should never allow it under any circumstances.

Nationwide, the Pew study showed a significant shift in sentiment. In 1999, 57 percent of Americans opposed gay and lesbian adoption and only 38 percent favored it. By 2006, it was 46 percent for and 48 percent opposed.

A 2007 CNN/Opinion Research Poll shows the shift continues. Some 57 percent of the respondents said gay and lesbian couples should have the right to adopt children. Forty percent said they should not.

So the good news - especially for the hundreds of thousands of kids in foster care - is that as wedge issues go, gay adoption does not have the same resonance as gay marriage. The big question, of course, is about demand. How many of those high-income, free-to-travel gays and lesbians really want to take on the expense and response of a family? Actually, more than ever.

A 2006 OpusComm-Syracuse University S.I Newhouse School of Public Communications study found two thirds of lesbians and a third of gay men plan to add children to their families over the next three years. Striking in their annual study of gay and lesbian attitudes and lifestyles is the fact that just four years ago, the figure was 18 percent for lesbians and just 5 percent for gay men.

What's going on here? Is it the ticking of the clock for a generation of aging gays and lesbians? Is it a growing acceptance that makes the idea of family actually within the reach of a new generation?

As someone who has dedicated a good part of my career to studying families, I would love to hear from those who have made the choice, and what that choice has meant to your lives.