

# The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

## Adopting A New Attitude

Posted: November 23, 2009 03:00 PM

They used to tell adopted children that they were special because they'd been chosen. I've told my adopted child that I don't believe that. Neither adoption nor birth conveys status to a child. What makes any child special is the love developed in the act of caring for -- and being cared for by -- someone. It's not the process of adoption, but the process of living together that matters, that establishes a special bond with mother and child, or with child and anyone else who adopts a mothering role.

Even so, for many, adoption continues to carry a stigma. People either assume a child's very lucky, or that their "real family" is the woman who gave birth to them. As one mother\*, who adopted three children said, "the idea that adoption is somehow a less legitimate way to become a parent is absurd. "I've got news for you," she told me in her straightforward style. "The first moment that kid is in your arms and they say you're the grown-up attached to it, you sign your name on his soul. That's what you do. Indelibly. Forever. That is what makes a parent. I signed my name to the soul of this child for eternity. I don't understand how what canal it came out of is relevant."

Although thousands of adoptive parents would disagree, adoption in this culture is still seen as second best. Deborah Iverson\* would probably argue the reverse. She is a quick witted, vivacious forty-seven year old, "totally present," blond, fair-skinned, green-eyed woman who looks like she was a high school cheerleader. She is now an adoptive single mother by choice to three beautiful brown skinned boys she adopted from Guatemala ages four, four and a half, and seven. When she adopted Tim, her first, her mother died very unexpectedly during the adoption process. So she returned to the home where she'd grown up and where her mother had continued to live. "Not only did I have the opportunity to move back into the house I was raised in, which has a killer yard and a layout perfect for children," she said, "but the woman who had raised me and my sister, that had been working for my family at that point for like forty-five years, she was going to be available to work for me to help me with Tim."

When her son turned two-and-a-half, Deborah started thinking about adopting not just one more child, but two. "When [the person handling the placement] called and said, 'I have two boys that are three weeks apart, or I have a boy and a girl that are six months apart,' She said, 'No, I think I'll be living my life with dirty socks and dirty underwear. I'll take those boys.' My oldest son Tim had been so easy and so fun and brought such joy that the thought of two...that old Wrigley's Gum commercial, 'Double the pleasure, double the fun' just appealed to me. And I knew I'd have a lot of help and support. I'm not out there by myself trying to do all this."

Mike McMahon of The Gladney Center for Adoption in Fort Worth Texas sees adoption as the ultimate positive occasion, not a failure to reproduce in the biological way. "People just assume that you really wanted to have a biological child and you didn't, so 'Gee, that's sad.' It's like using the term natural child versus adopted child. Yet there are families with whom we work who have had biological children and who subsequently want to adopt a child. [Other] people think they are heroes, because they'll adopt an older child or a child from another country. They'll regard them as wonderful people. Yet if you do this as a first child and adopt a newborn, then it's 'did you take this child away from the mother? How does the mother feel about it?' We separate it [notions about adoption] among adopting older children, adopting children from other countries, and then adopting newborns in the United States."

To the people who persist in assuming that adopted kids are somehow flawed, "Sure, adopted kids are over-represented in counseling," he tells me. "But they are also over-represented at the orthodontist, the dermatologist, all those things, because we [adoptive parents] want to give them everything we can."

Single moms are no different. They want to do everything they can for their child. So we think it's not a bad thing." People who adopt tend to "put together support systems. They're usually very well educated people. Usually they have an undergraduate degree, at least. Usually they're in some kind of position where they have good insurance, and the basic needs are taken care of. They're usually very interested in trying to do what's right. If you knew these people and saw them individually you'd see they are great parents."

New family structures are becoming more common, and that's a positive thing for everybody. Little by little, we are changing the way children and families are perceived in the schools and in the world, and even the way adopted children perceive themselves.

My own child's curiosity about her adoption status doesn't threaten me. I know I'm her mom -- her true mom. To be a bona fide mother is so much more than giving birth to a child. It's about protecting, taking care of, feeling, struggling and sharing. It's being there at 2:00 a.m. when your child wakes up from a bad dream or is sick. It's going to the soiree at the school and hearing your child sing, no matter how bad their sweet voice. It's having your child tell you about so-and-so who wasn't nice, and feeling that rejection as if it were your own. It's feeling joy at their accomplishments like learning to ride a bike, and pinning up all those colorful scrawls on your fridge and in your office. Mothering at its best is a day-in and day-out process that builds and connects and bonds you and your child to one another.

Myth has it that adopted kids will feel different and estranged. But it doesn't have to work that way.

\*The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed for my book "Raising Boys Without Men" are presented as collective experiences. I have honored promises of confidentiality by changing names and disguising identities.