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**Barriers and Success Factors in Adoption from Foster Care:  
*Perspectives of Lesbian and Gay Families***

**Executive Summary**

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## **BACKGROUND**

In September 2009, the Children's Bureau approved and funded AdoptUsKids to conduct a follow-up study with self-identified lesbian and gay families who participated in an initial 2002-2007 research project examining barriers and success factors in adoption from foster care. Additionally, the Children's Bureau authorized AdoptUsKids to conduct focus groups composed of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) families in order to gain knowledge about barriers and success factors that may be uniquely, or more frequently, experienced by prospective LGBT foster or adoptive parents. The sole purpose of this project is to utilize the findings to shape services that AdoptUsKids provides across the AdoptUsKids project, either directly to LGBT families, or through a complex and multi-faceted set of technical assistance to States, Tribes and Territories. This report presents a synopsis of the findings of in-depth follow-up interviews with ten LGBT foster and adoptive parents who participated in the original 2002-2007 study. In addition, findings are presented from six recently completed focus groups with LGBT foster and adoptive parents.

## **INTERVIEWS**

### ***Methodology***

In 2009, the AdoptUsKids evaluation team was asked to re-contact and interview participants from the original Barriers and Success factors studies who had self-identified as gay or lesbian in order to explore their experiences of adopting from foster care. Ten families were successfully re-contacted and subsequently consented to participate in the follow-up project. Similar to the structure of the original study, questions pertaining to each step of the process were asked of participants; however, the interview questions and coding methods for the current study focused specifically on experiences related to being a gay or lesbian prospective adopter.

The families' experiences with the adoption process were coded to assess the child, family, and agency barriers that each group of families encountered. Barriers that families felt impacted their entire adoption process were identified.

### ***Demographics***

- Six couples (60%) identified as lesbian, three couples (30%) identified as gay men and one single participant self-identified as a gay man.
- At the time of the follow-up interviews with the ten families, eight had finalized an adoption of a child from foster care and two had discontinued the adoption process from foster care.
- Seven (37%) of the participants reported having a graduate degree, five (26%) reported having a high school diploma, four (21%) reported having a college degree and two (11%) reported having some college.
- Eight of the 19 participants (42%) reported having been a foster parent at one time.

### ***Findings***

- Overall, the ten families who participated in this follow-up project experienced similar barriers and success factors as the participants in the full sample of the original study. They reported

frustrations with the long waiting time to be matched with a child and challenges in dealing with the amount of paperwork required.

- Most of the families deliberately sought agencies that were willing to work with gay and lesbian families. Most experienced discrimination in the matching process when they had to work with other agencies. Some of these challenges included: worker bias, delays in getting matched with a child, lack of gender-neutral home study application forms, and non-inclusive training.
- Overall Barriers:
  - Five participants (50%) reported that although their agencies were supportive, they were concerned about how other agencies and staff would react when their home study was sent out for review.
  - Two participants (20%) reported being told specifically that an agency or state office would not place a child with them because of sexual orientation.
  - Two participants (20%) also reported that the language and overall “attitude” of the process was not inclusive or affirming.
- Overall Success Factors:
  - Eight participants (80%) reported that they were working with agencies that were supportive of gay and lesbian adoptions.
  - Two participants (20%) reported that their agency and community were gay friendly.

### ***Limitations***

This project was a follow-up of a sub-sample of gay and lesbian families who participated in the AdoptUsKids Barriers and Success Factors studies completed in 2007 (Children’s Bureau, 2008). Due to the small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this sample.

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

### ***Methodology***

Six focus groups with LGBT foster and adoptive parents were completed between April 30 and May 25, 2010 and included a total of 43 participants. Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their decision to pursue adoption, challenges they have faced in working with the child welfare system, and about aspects of LGBT culture that they believe some caseworkers should better understand. Thematic analysis was used to interpret findings from the six focus group sessions. Primary themes were developed based on the consistency of responses across groups.

### ***Demographics***

- Twenty-five (58%) participants identified themselves as female, eighteen (42%) identified themselves as male, and two (5%) participants identified their gender as genderqueer<sup>1</sup>.
- Twenty-three (54%) focus group participants identified themselves as lesbian, 17 (40%) identified as gay, five (12%) participants identified themselves as bisexual and four (9%)

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Coming Out Project document, published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2010) the term genderqueer is defined as “a word people use to describe their own nonstandard gender identity, or by those who do not conform to traditional gender norms”.

- participants identified themselves as queer<sup>2</sup>. One (2%) participant identified as straight.
- Thirty-five (81%) participants reported that they were involved in a committed relationship/partnership. Eight (19%) participants reported that they were not involved in a committed relationship/partnership.
  - Twenty seven (64%) were reported to have fostered youth from the child welfare system, while fifteen (36%) were reported to not have fostered.

### ***Findings***

- When asked, “what factors influenced your decision to pursue adoption or foster care,” the concept of altruism was discussed in all 6 (100%) focus groups. Other themes discussed included that adoption from foster care is less expensive than other options (N=5, 83%), and the desire to parent (n=5, 83%).
- When asked, “how important is your LGBT identity and community to you,” five of the six groups (83%) had participants who reported that since becoming parents their connection to the LGBT community has become second in importance.
- When asked, “what are some strengths of LGBT families and communities that you think are important for child welfare staff to know,” five groups (83%) each discussed the following concepts: LGBT parents can relate to adopted children’s feelings of differentness—being LGBT, they have dealt with adversity and as a result can be more compassionate; the adoption decision and parenting is very intentional; and the adoption process is harder for LGBT families so they are more committed.
- When asked, “are there some things that gay and lesbian adopters can offer children that are unique and that straight couples may not be able to offer,” five groups offered the following ideas: living in a LGBT family helps a child have an open mind, become more flexible, and develop less stereotypical notions of male and female roles; and it is easier for LGBT adults to be part of an adoptive family—they are used to being different than the societal norms and have developed resiliency as a result.
- When asked about misconceptions about the LGBT community, five groups (83%) reported LGBT parents are trying to either make more gay people or abuse children.

### **Emerging Themes from Interviews and Focus Groups**

- 1) Negative perceptions and stereotypes are stronger against gay men (as opposed to lesbian women)
- 2) Perceptions of discrimination
- 3) Parental characteristics as barriers to adoption
- 4) Need for self-advocacy
- 5) Lack of standardization in the adoption processes
- 6) Strong desire to be a parent
- 7) Benefits for children when they are raised in a diverse household
- 8) Importance of the equal treatment of both partners

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<sup>2</sup> According to the All Children-All Families training curriculum, published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2010), the term queer is defined as, “A term describing all people who are not heterosexual or who do not conform to rigid notions of gender and sexuality.” They further explain that “for many LGBT people this word has a negative connotation; however, many young LGBT people are comfortable using it.”

9) Need for trained, skilled, culturally competent staff

**Recommendations Made by LGBT Families**

- Tips For Agencies:
  - Every family is different, and the needs of families (gay or straight) should be evaluated individually.
  - Agencies must re-evaluate their entire approach to recruitment/retention of LGBT adopters.
  - LGBT families should be integrated throughout the process, not given “special preference”.
- Tips For Families:
  - Advocate for yourself – be clear that you are an LGBT family and make sure the agency is willing to work with you
  - Make sure you have a strong support network
  - Find an agency you are comfortable with