



My children are **DIFFERENT**

The thoughts of an adoptive father

Happily ever after?

The last time I wrote for *ACT Now* I did so as a psychologist. That is my profession. I shared the findings of my research and that of my colleagues. I hope what I said was thought-provoking. It certainly resulted in a few letters to the editor.

It's not the same this time. My wife and I are adoptive parents. I want to share my thoughts on adopted children and how they are different to others. What I know about this subject I learned at home, at my children's school, by talking with others and by reading the occasional magazine or report. So I write, not as a psychologist, but as a Christian, as a husband and as a father.

Adoption is sometimes thought of in rather fairy-tale like terms. A lost and unwanted child finds a home with a loving family and everyone lives happily ever after. The reality of course can be very different. In fact, about one third of adoptions in the UK currently fail before the child reaches adulthood. Another third 'struggle'¹. Behind these statistics is an untold amount of human suffering.

The financial implications are also huge. It has been estimated that it currently costs about £200,000 per annum to keep a child in the care of the state². When a child is adopted the taxpayer is relieved of most of this burden. When an adoption fails the child usually returns to state care and the taxpayer again foots the bill. This will inevitably mean either higher taxes or reduced government services.

This article is based on an item entitled 'Does adoption mean happily ever after?' by the same author, which appeared in the March 2008 edition of *Evangelicals Now*.

Christians and adoption

So how should Christians view adoption? As a Christian myself I do not believe that adoption was part of God's original plan for humanity. Children were to be cared for by those who gave them birth. In a fallen world, however, things can go badly wrong.

A classic moral dilemma asks what advice we should give to a 13 year-old who is pregnant. Most Christians I find would not advocate abortion, but what then? Try to get someone who is only a child herself to take care of a baby? Ask her parents to care for them both? In cases like this adoption outside of the family can offer a child the chance of a new life in a stable and secure environment. This can be by far the best option. The same can be true if the mother is mentally ill, has severe learning difficulties or is seriously drug dependent.

As the grim statistics indicate, adoption has its problems. It means separating a child from the mother who has cared for it during the first nine months of life and possibly longer. Such an emotional wrench is not easily healed. Added to this is the fact that adopted children are far more likely to suffer problems that are genetic, congenital or the product of changes in early life. These can include autism, Attachment Disorder, ADHD, learning difficulties and a host of others. These problems do not go away on the day that the child moves to his or her new family.

Schools and teachers

At this point the understanding and support of the child's school can be invaluable. Sadly, adoptive parents can easily be misjudged as a result of their child's behaviour or their own. 'Why don't you stop that child from talking all the time?' ('My child is actually terrified of losing me, like she lost her last four mothers. It is her way of hanging on to me.') 'Why don't you stop your child from rolling down the footpath?' ('My child is autistic and he is extremely stressed. It is the way he reduces his tension. He is in no danger and is not hurting anyone else.') 'Why are you spending all that time and money on therapy?' ('Because the trauma of being starved, moved through multiple foster placements or raped will not be cured by a hug and a kiss – as much as I would like to think otherwise.') 'Why do you do the same holiday with the same activities year after year after year?' ('Because children like ours have already had far too many changes in their lives. They need and enjoy repetition and predictability. It may be boring for us, but it helps them feel safe and secure.')

So what can teachers do to help? Maybe the first thing to do is to listen and hear what adoptive parents say. Adoptive parents are a mixed group. Some are clear and articulate in the points they want to make, others are not. All need to be heard and respected. Do not assume that because the child's behaviour is worse outside of school than it is inside that this is the result of poor parenting. It may simply be that the child is less afraid at home. Remember that adopted children's backgrounds often make them very, very fearful!

Be willing to work with other professionals. Psychologists, medical people and those from the various therapies all have their own way of approaching a problem. This can be a challenge. It is not always easy to see an issue from a totally different perspective. The interests of the child, however, require that we work together to respect and understand each other's approaches and insights. We may also have to accept that not all adopted children are best served by inclusion in mainstream education. Children with special needs sometimes need special schools.

Recognise that being adopted creates a special need in and of itself. This is true even if the adoption occurred very early in the child's life. As a speaker at a recent conference put it, 'Never let anybody say to you that it doesn't matter what you do with very young children because they won't remember. They do remember. Not in the way that we remember dates and events. But we have a sensory and emotional memory, which is laid down



John Steley was a Salvation Army Youth Worker in Australia before studying Psychology. He is a graduate of Queensland, Swinburne and London Universities.

John works in adult mental health for an NHS practice and a registered charity in London. He is a former school governor and a member of Central Baptist Church in Walthamstow. John and his wife have two adopted children.

John's interests include the relationship between psychology and theology, the needs of adopted children, the experience of people working in cross-cultural settings, the use and misuse of the Internet and moral reasoning.

at the very beginning. What we do to children matters. It is carried with them.'³

Adoptive parents work for the good of their children and many people kindly acknowledge this. Adoption, however, can have a beneficial effect for the whole community. (It certainly saves the taxpayer a lot of money by keeping children out of the care system.) Teachers can help by gently reminding people, especially those in authority, of this fact.

Christian teachers

Christian teachers in particular can have a vital role to play in showing God's love for the outcast and abused. The child who does not fit in, because she is angry, because he is mildly autistic or some other reason is special in the eyes of God. Remember how the Old Testament prophets like Amos stood on the side of the poor and oppressed. Remember also that the great news of the Incarnation was given first to shepherds, people at the bottom of the social heap⁴.

It may take time to get to know an adopted child and his/her needs. (Remember that they are usually more complex and fearful than most.) It also takes time to get to know the child's parents, read reports and consult with other professionals. Most professionals, including teachers, may feel that they are far too busy already. As Christians, however, we know that while going the extra mile does take time, and energy, it will not go unnoticed by our own Father.

Christian teachers can also help the church and the wider communities to understand that adopted children are different. When you hear a comment like 'He's all right now, he's adopted', a gentle word of correction can be very helpful. ('I think it's good that he has a new family, but adoption is the beginning of the healing process not the end.') Above all, teachers can set an example of patience, listening and prayer. I'm not a teacher by profession, but as far as I know, example is one of the best ways to teach anything.

■ John Steley

Footnotes

- 1 Pearce, J. (2008) 'Working for adopters: Director's view', *Adoption Today*, December 2008, p7.
- 2 Streeter, G. (2007) *You and Yours*, BBC Radio 4, 21 February 2007.
- 3 Robinson, M. (2008) speaking at the 2008 Adoption UK Annual Conference.
- 4 Luke 2:8-20.