

**INDEPENDENT ADOPTION:
The Case Against: "Do It Yourself" Plans**

It's not unusual for people, especially in these times, to try to do things on their own. We prefer to avoid the middle man. People sell their homes without a realtor, handle their divorces without an attorney, or use a home pregnancy testing kit to avoid making a visit to the doctor. All of it may seem easier, quicker, and at times less expensive. This same trend is also carrying over into the field of adoption.

I. PAST PRACTICE: THE BUSINESS OF AGENCIES

Adoption agencies have been around for a long time; they have been in the business of bringing together children who need homes with couples who desire to be parents. Agencies exist to provide counseling for unwed parents who need to wrestle with the question of what is the best plan for their yet unborn child - to place the child for adoption or to keep the child. Agencies exist to help prospective adoptive couples sort through their feelings and desires about the adoption process.

All of this counseling is done with the best interests of the child in the forefront; after all, who else is there who can function as an objective "outsider" in the process; who else will speak for the child? Who will protect the best interests of the child, and assure the child in advance that he will end up in the best possible home and family situation? That is an agency's business - its function and responsibility.

It is true that agencies have long waiting lists, rules, and regulations. And some couples don't want to wait or go through a home study. After all, people say, couples who have children born to them don't need to undergo a social, psychological, or physical examination in order to be "approved for parenting".

II. A NEW ALTERNATIVE: PLAN YOUR OWN = DO IT YOURSELF

Some prospective adoptive couples are now choosing to bypass agencies altogether, and are making adoption arrangements on their own. They find that they are able to come in contact with a woman with a problem pregnancy - perhaps they find out about her and her situation through a doctor, or pastor, or their neighbor's cousin's friend. There are times when couples run an ad in the classifieds, advertising the fact that they are a fine, outstanding income, but no one to love. And yes, they add - they'd be happy to pay the medical expenses, court costs and any legal fees for any girl who will give them her baby. So the problem of the pregnancy will be solved, the couple will adopt the baby, the birthmother will go on with her life, and they'll all live happily ever after. But ----

III. THE RISKS OF INDEPENDENT ADOPTION: WHAT IF??

Independent adoptions are legal in many states and can be an attractive alternative for both adoptive parents and birthparents. Yet using that independent process presents many potential problems. Consider these "what ifs":

What if, after all the arrangements have been made, the baby is born with a handicap, something more serious than the prospective adoptive couple feels they can handle??? Who wants the child then?

What if the birthfather suddenly appears on the scene in the hospital nursery one hour after the birth of the child and announces that he plans to raise the child himself, thus blocking any plans or preparations which the birthmother and adoptive parents have already made??? Who will win the battle?

What if the birthmother has a complicated delivery, her medical bills soar, and the adoptive couple who promised to pay her bill realize they cannot afford to carry out their part of the bargain??? What do they do now?

What if the adoptive parents, who chose adoption as a "second best" plan because they thought they could not have children born to them, have a "surprise" pregnancy; they now have a biological child, "their own", and feel that the already adopted child is not as wonderful as their own??? How will the adopted child feel and be treated?

What if the birthmother, after months of promises to place her baby for adoption, and after accepting hundreds (and maybe thousands) of dollars from the adoptive couple, suddenly changes her mind on the way out of the delivery room and announces that she intends to keep the baby ??? How will the adoptive couple handle this disappointment, grief and maybe even anger?

What if the birthmother, who by law in independent adoptions knows the identity of the adoptive parents, becomes demanding and chooses to interfere with the adoptive family's life by requesting frequent visits, making plans for how the child should be reared, or even deciding that she wants the child back ??? And who then will the child call "Mom" or "Dad"??? (And has anyone thought about the possibility of child abduction???)

Certainly, there are some independent adoptions that go smoothly. But one needs to ask - is it worth the risk? What if one of the "what ifs" really happens to us? People's lives can indeed be torn apart by such circumstances. The above "what ifs" have happened. And then, finally, ultimately - the VX become victims of adults who planned only for themselves but not necessarily for them, when all along everyone thought and said that it was all being done to serve and love children.

IV. THE BENEFITS OF AGENCY ADOPTION: FOR ALL

How can adopting a child through an agency process offer safeguards against the problems cited above?

There are, first of all, benefits for all of those involved in the adoption process by using the services of an agency. The birthparents, the adoptive parents, but above all, the child comes out ahead in the long run. An agency puts the best interests of the child as the number one concern in all planning. The birthparents are offered in-depth counseling. They learn of community resources available to them - financial, medical, legal, educational, housing. They are counseled in an objective setting where they are free to share their thoughts about how the pregnancy affects them, their feelings about themselves and their relationship to others. At WLCFS, the counselor points out to them the God-given responsibility they have to plan, not just for themselves, but also for the child. Birthparents need to be prepared for emotional lows which they may experience in separating from the baby, and the conflict they may feel in entrusting the baby into the care of other parents. In counseling they are encouraged to share the wishes and dreams they have for the child's future, so that the agency can select a home compatible with those requests. Birthparents will receive the assurance that the child will be placed in a home where the couple has participated in a thorough home study to assess and prepare them for parenthood by adoption. The home study is a tool which WLCFS uses to be guaranteed, as much as is humanly possible, that the adoptive couple has a strong, stable Christian marriage, that they sincerely desire to become parents and have a Christian philosophy of child-rearing, and that they have a healthy, positive feeling about adoption, not seeing it as second best. What a benefit for birthparents to know that their child will be reared in a home which meets certain qualifications, and not just in one which was "convenient"!

Then too, through counseling, both birthparents and adoptive parents come to understand and appreciate that God has given them separate but none-the-less important roles in the life of the child: the birthparents were able to give the gift of life, the adoptive parents the gift of an established, secure two-parent home. When the birthparents terminate their rights to the child, they can do so with the understanding that the agency will place the child permanently in an adoptive home. If the birthparents desire information about the child's well-being, they may request it via the agency. WLCFS is willing to arrange for pictures and gifts to be anonymously shared between birthparents and adoptive parents.

Agency adoptions also provide alternatives to meet many different circumstances. Agencies are there to fall back on when the unexpected happens. For example, in an agency adoption, the birthfather is invited to be part of the counseling and decision-making process. If he chooses not to be involved then, but later expresses a desire to have the child, the agency can advise everyone of their legal rights and prepare them for the options. The agency will advocate a position based on the child's best interests. If the child comes into the world with a birth defect, the agency can still assure a good home for the child. Agencies prepare families especially suited for children born with special needs, whether it be a physical handicap, a developmental

delay, a child of mixed race, a high risk background due to drug or alcohol abuse during pregnancy, or hereditary health factors.

If a prospective adoptive family experiences a crisis (such as serious illness, job lay-off) around the time of the baby's birth, the agency can put that couple "on hold" until things in their life are resolved. Agencies have many other couples prepared and ready for the arrival of a child. If, after the birth of the child, the birthmother changes her mind and feels she cannot go ahead with the plan for adoption, she will receive objective counseling to help her review her plan. If indeed she ultimately keeps the baby, the adoptive couple is spared the pain of loss as they never even know about that baby, and their home will be selected for another baby in the near future.

Agencies can also supply a much needed continuing support system for adoptive parents, birthparents and adoptees. Agencies offer educational and social programs for those interested in what's happening in the world of adoption (legal issues, book lists), or those who wish to talk with someone who shares a similar experience and can understand what they may be feeling. Also, agencies keep complete and permanent records on adoption, so that there is no chance of important information (physical, biological, health-related) being lost or forgotten. Finally, agencies lend fairness and an atmosphere of honesty and uprightness to the system. Adoption through an agency is not a privilege of the wealthy, as independent adoption can be, since the later system carries with it an air of "what you know, who you know, and how much you have."

V. YOU BE THE JUDGE: LOOK AT THE WHOLE PICTURE

Independent adoption arrangements are a fact of life; the practice is likely to continue as long as there is such a high demand for healthy infants coupled with such a low supply of babies available for adoption.

Independent adoption is much more than a social matter or legal issue, however. It is highly emotional, and this is what makes it at one and the same time so appealing and upsetting.

Independent adoption is far better than the horror of black market (baby-selling) adoption.

Independent adoption, however, does have some very real problems attached.

Why not go for the best? The best for the Baby? The best for the birthparents? The best for the adoptive parents? Why not rely on the professional counselors who are specifically trained and experienced to offer guidance both to the birthparents who are facing a complicated and stressful time in their lives and the prospective adoptive couple who needs to be fully prepared for what lies ahead for them?

Why go independent? Why go it alone?

Make use of your agency.