

## The Right to a Family

by

Logan Holzman

The images of the emaciated Jackson boys continue to haunt the people of Camden County, New Jersey, several years after the incident has passed. The Jackson abuse scandal is one of the worst cases of child neglect ever reported. The Jackson children were discovered when a neighbor found the oldest boy searching through his garbage for something to eat. When police arrived at the Jackson home, their skillfully hidden secret was exposed. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson had been starving their four adopted sons for the seven years that they were in their custody. When asked why the adolescent boys were so small, Mrs. Jackson told people that they suffered from eating disorders. In reality the starving boys reported being locked out of the kitchen and served small amounts of raw pancake batter, while the biological Jackson children were fed full meals. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson were using these innocent children to collect a fee from the state. Neighbors even reported seeing the malnourished children performing grueling tasks for their adoptive parents, such as “cutting the lawn with a pair of scissors” (Livio 1). The Department of Children and Families failed these children by allowing them to be put in the care of such unfit people who were incapable of providing their children with the most basic necessity of food. What happens too often is that the government allows these sorts of parents the right to raise needy children. Disturbing cases like these make it seem as if there is a dearth of qualified parents. Although adoption is a complicated process

that must be carefully monitored, one solution to such neglect and abuse of unwanted children is gay adoption.

In the twenty-first century, many same sex couples are adopting children, but not all states allow same sex adoption to occur. Even though many gay couples are willing to put in the effort to raise children together, there have still been “efforts in at least 16 states to put into law the view that children should be cared for only by a mother and a father or by heterosexual singles” (Stone 1). Some people may not agree with same sex relationships, yet same sex parents have the same ability to love, nurture and provide for children just as straight couples do. People who are willing to put in the effort to raise a child, and raise that child well, should be given the right, regardless of the person’s sexual orientation.

A worry that many people have about gay adoption is the effect that it has on the development of the child. These people worry that being raised by gay parents will alienate the child from social situations and may even cause the child to become gay. Children of gay parents may be set apart from their peers, but in most cases this does not negatively impact their development. A study by Charlotte J. Patterson, Ph.D. explores the developmental health of children adopted by gay parents versus children with heterosexual parents. Patterson’s study discusses the influence that gay parents have for their children in regard to gender identity, gender-role behavior and sexual orientation. In regards to gender identity, Patterson’s study concludes that children of gay parents follow the same pattern of gender identity as children with heterosexual parents. Gender-role behavior for children of gay parents was noted as being typical with the gender-role behavior of children of heterosexual parents in the same age bracket. Children of gay

parents were no more likely to be homosexual than children of heterosexual parents (Patterson 1). Patterson's study dispels many of the fears that people have for children of homosexual parents. People generally feel that children of homosexual parents will grow up to be homosexual themselves. The study concludes that the fear that homosexual parents raise homosexual children is unwarranted. These children are just as likely to have healthy and happy relationships with people of the opposite sex as children raised in a heterosexual household. The American Psychiatric Association also supports a positive stance on homosexual adoption stating, "Children raised by gay or lesbian parents exhibit the same level of emotional, cognitive, social and sexual functioning as children raised by heterosexual parents"(Fogel 1). Although people who stand against the adoption of children by homosexuals believe that they are protecting children from being different, many qualified sources support gay people in adopting children because children raised in homosexual households are just as likely as their counterparts that were raised in heterosexual homes to be healthy and happy kids, and they are no more likely to experience any negative difference once they reach adulthood.

Studies conducted by The American Psychiatric Association and The Child Welfare League prove that same-sex couples are highly capable of raising well-adjusted children, but laws still make it difficult for these couples to adopt children as easily as heterosexual couples. Currently, only Vermont, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Minnesota and California permit same sex couple adoption (Belge 2). Gay couples are often given children that heterosexual couples have passed over because of the age of the child or the problems they may experience. Homosexual couples like Harold Birtcher and Thom O'Reilly are willing to do the noble and difficult thing of adopting a child with a history

of abuse (Stone 1). Birtcher and O'Reilly's adopted son endured the horrible abuse that is prevalent in so many foster homes. O'Reilly says that when their son first came to live with them he was afraid to hug anyone because of the sexual abuse he experienced in foster care. People like Birtcher and O'Reilly are saving children from being further scarred by living in temporary and often unfit homes. O'Reilly says that "nobody is stepping up to adopt" yet "they don't want us to adopt [such hard to place children]" (Stone 1). People's problems with homosexuality should not stand in the way of a child's right to live in a loving home, especially when many homosexual people are willing and capable of providing such needy children with a stable home life.

It is difficult for children to experience the stable life that they deserve when they are in constant fear of being abused or told that their caseworker is going to move them to a new foster home. Lashing out in a violent way is often the only way that a foster child can get an adult figure to pay attention to the pain he/she is going through. Petty things like getting in trouble in school in order to get attention from a caregiver can escalate into a life of troubling behavior. Birtcher mentions the strong link between adult violence and the foster care system. Many foster care children are not given any positive guidance and will therefore commit acts of violence in the future. Birtcher says that these people were most likely placed in foster homes with straight guardians. The link between violence and foster care is strong in many instances; gay adoption may be a means to save unwanted children from a life of hardship.

Psychologists like John Bowlby study the attachment patterns of children and their relationships to later behaviors in adulthood. Bowlby concludes, "Disrupted attachments are associated with severe personality disturbances, antisocial behavior and

adjustment problems, and difficulty behaving appropriately as a parent” (Kowalski et.al 504). Bowlby’s assessment supports the idea that children need secure relationships in order to maintain appropriate behavior into adulthood. Children that are bounced around from foster homes and institutions cannot experience a secure relationship. Rather than allowing children to get lost in the foster care system and eventually be scarred by their lack of relationships and unstable home life, homosexual people could adopt these children and give them stability. Any adult that is willing can give a child security and help him/ her avoid personality disturbances. Children need role models on how to fit into society and relate to their own children in the future.

Denying homosexual people the right to adopt is detrimental to children because of the impact that foster homes have on the development of children. Chris Gibbs, a victim of foster care, shares his feelings about the foster care system in the United States. Chris reports feeling like he would never be part of a family. He remembers several Christmases that he had to watch his foster siblings unwrap presents while he received nothing. Christopher lived in “30 foster homes and 8 institutions” (D’angelo 2). One of his foster fathers was even abusive towards him. Christopher knew that most people were looking to adopt babies as opposed to older children and the chances of his finding a family were slim (D’angelo 2.) Eventually, Chris was adopted into a loving heterosexual family right before his eighteenth birthday, but his story shows that the foster care system is inferior to adoption, even when the adopting party is homosexual. Foster care left Chris feeling unwanted and abused. He was denied basic childhood rights like Christmas presents and the love of a family. He is just one of the many people bounced from home

to home when plenty of homosexual couples might be willing to adopt children, like Chris, but are denied of this right.

Rosie O'Donnell, an entertainer, as well as an activist for gay adoption brings up the point that oftentimes the only children for gay people to adopt are hard to place kids that heterosexual couples have passed over. She once cared for a child who was placed in and out of up to thirty foster homes. People often forget that in order to accept homosexuals adopting children, one has to think of the welfare of children over one's own issues with homosexuality. Clearly, in this case O'Donnell was a superior choice for this child over foster care, despite the fact, as some would say, that she is a lesbian. In order to raise a healthy child, love and stability are key factors, not the way a family looks. The Child Welfare League agrees that same-sex couples should be able to adopt because the foster care system is overcrowded, and it is not fair to deny a child of a home because of the parent's sexual orientation (Stone 2).

An interesting point that The Child Welfare League of America presents is how gay parents can help children with special needs because of the difficulty they may have experienced throughout their own childhoods. Kristen Kreishner, a representative of The CWLA, says that the qualifications that a person has for parenting should be based on "their capacity to understand and meet the needs of a particular available child at the point of adoption and in the future" (Kreisher 2). The CWLA says that adoption is meant to provide a service for children in need and many gay parents are qualified to do this. Many gay people are qualified to meet the needs of children that have been negatively affected by their time in foster care. The unwanted feeling that many foster children endure can be compared to the fear that gay people experience when coming out to their

families. Oftentimes gay people are afraid that their parents will disown them because they come out as being homosexual. Both parties have experienced what it means to be different and to experience uncertainty about their relationship with their family.

Gay adoption is a touchy subject in society, but it can be a positive thing for both children and the couples that choose to raise them. Foster homes should not be an option for a child when two people are willing to raise him or her in a stable environment. Despite people's prejudices against homosexuals there is plenty of evidence that gay couples are capable of creating a positive environment for children. Interestingly, some people that oppose gay adoption cite the need for a child to have two heterosexual parents in the home for a healthy childhood. This argument is difficult to support because of results from the 2000 census stating "only 24% of homes were composed of a married mother and father with children living at home." (Belge 2). Obviously, more than 24% percent of homes are able to raise healthy children, which means that the welfare of a child is not dependent on that child having two married, heterosexual parents. The American Association of Pediatrics also supports gay adoption because they believe that a child's relationship with his or her parents plays a more significant role in development than the parent's sexual orientation. (Belge 2). All of these findings support that a child needs a secure relationship with an adult for positive development, but a child does not need a home with two heterosexual parents to achieve secure attachments.

Society should begin to accept that the family dynamic is changing. Family is no longer defined as a husband and a wife and their children. Family can be found in any relationship involving people that love each other. Children who are put up for adoption are looking for love from an adult that will promise to care for them. If states begin to

pass laws to permit same-sex couples to adopt, then foster children will be able to experience what it means to be a family. By supporting same sex adoption children will be given the right to experience the love of a family and the horrible atrocities that occur in foster homes and unfit adoptions will be prevented.



## Works Cited

- D'Angelo, Laura. "Finding a Family." Scholastic Scope 50.10 (2002): 14
- Patterson, Charlotte. "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents." APA Online. 2 Dec. 2007.  
<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc>
- Stone, Andrea. "Both Sides on Gay Adoption Cite Concern for Children." USA Today. 20 Feb. 2006. <http://www.USAToday.com/news/nation>
- Kreishner, Kristen. "Gay Adoption." CWLA. Jan 2002. <http://www.cwla.org/articles>
- Belge, Kathy. "Both Sides of the Issue." About.com. Dec. 2006.
- Fogel, Hillarie. News Release. "New Position Adopted by the American Psychiatric Association (APA)." 13 Dec. 2002.
- Livio, Susan k. "DYFS Fails Four Starving Children." The Star Ledger. 26 Oct. 2003.  
<Http://www.nj.com/news>
- Kowalski, Robin, Drew Westen. Psychology. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 2005.