

# Laying the Foundation to Welcome Gay and Lesbian Families

by Jill Jacobs

*Everyone with the potential to successfully parent a child in foster care and adoption is entitled to fair and equal consideration regardless of sexual orientation or differing life style or physical appearance*  
—NACAC Policy Statement

With a rapidly growing number of children awaiting permanency, advocates have increasingly turned to families traditionally overlooked as prospective adoptive parents. Gay and lesbian families, in particular, are being looked to as valuable resources because they bring individual and collective strengths to the adoption of children with special needs. Without an “Ozzie and Harriet” fantasy of what a family should look like, many gay and lesbian individuals and couples are receptive to adopting older children, sibling groups, and children with special needs. Many gay and lesbian families have also experienced adversity in their own lives and bring strength to children who face challenges. While many agencies may welcome gay and lesbian families, gay and lesbian adoption remains controversial in many areas and should be considered carefully by both agencies and families.

Agencies embarking on gay and lesbian adoptions need to begin on the policy level, first obtaining support and acceptance at the highest level. For private agencies, this is with the board of directors; for public agencies, it is with the highest level of management practical. Agency staff should educate their leaders about the need for adoptive families and the value of gay and lesbian parents. A local gay and lesbian community center may be able to help demystify concerns about gay and lesbian families. Sharing the policy statements of well-known and respected organizations, such as NACAC, may also be useful. Agencies are also wise to plan for a negative response from their community. If the issue ever becomes a public controversy, you want to be sure your board/management will support you—both publicly and within the agency.

Simply changing policy is not enough, however. You also need to address some practice issues to actively welcome gay and lesbian families. A cultural competency framework will be of great value. While there are many differences between sexual orientation and culture and ethnicity, there are also some similarities.

The following questions can guide your work. If you answer “no,” you know what you need to do.

- Are gay and lesbian families visible anywhere within your agency? Are pictures of gay and lesbian families featured along with other families in agency materials, or in photographs displayed throughout the premises?
- Does your agency have a welcoming statement to all families? Is it inclusive? Do your forms say “applicant”

- or “parent” or do they still ask for “husband and wife?”
- Is your training inclusive? Are gay and lesbian families depicted in role-plays, in examples, or on parent panels?
- What support services are you able to offer families? Are other gay and lesbian parents available as mentors? Is a support group offered for non-traditional families? Are staff familiar with gay-friendly community resources?

Most importantly, staff members need to be comfortable working with gay and lesbian individuals—this includes the receptionist as well as the social workers. Training is crucial—just as it would be important for staff who were beginning to work with a new cultural group. A gay and lesbian community organization or an individual who conducts diversity training can help.

Staff also need to develop a comfort level and expertise in conducting home studies for gay and lesbian families. How do you evaluate commitment without a marriage certificate? Will the adoptive family’s support system be discounted if its members are not related to the couple by blood or marriage? Will staff be able to understand the infertility-related grief of both gay men and lesbians?

Another part of preparing for gay and lesbian adoptions will be learning and staying abreast of the legal options and barriers for families. Laws vary from state to state and change frequently.

The agency should prepare for complaints from other families who do not approve of gay and lesbian adoption. How will you handle this at trainings, support group meetings, and agency events? All families need to be welcomed into the agency community. If you embark on this journey, be prepared for some discourse.

Only after addressing policy and practice issues can you plan a recruitment strategy to welcome gay and lesbian families to your agency. Unless you are completely prepared for the potential ramifications, do not set up a booth to recruit at your local gay and lesbian pride parade—discretion is of the utmost importance!

The most common form of referral is other gay and lesbian families who have had a positive experience with your agency. In addition, gay and lesbian community organizations may have prospective parenting groups or forums that you can attend—become their adoption expert. Contact churches that have gay congregations. Ask a family who has adopted to host an information night for their friends. Most grassroots recruitment strategies will be effective.

Many gay and lesbian families do not know they can adopt and that the process is accessible and friendly to them. Getting the word out will bring permanence to waiting children in your community—and will enrich your agency.

*Ms Jacobs is executive director of Family Builders by Adoption. Contact her at 510-272-0204 or [jjacobs@familybuilders.org](mailto:jjacobs@familybuilders.org) to learn more* ✦