

Adoption of Foster Care Children Takes a Back Seat to Adoption From Foreign Countries

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While the number of children adopted from foreign countries by Americans tripled from 6,472 in 1992 to 22,728 in 2005, the number of children adopted from foster homes in the United States has dwindled, leaving many children without a permanent home nearly their whole life.

“Americans chose to adopt from overseas for different reasons but many do it because they feel that children born in the U.S. have a decent chance by birth,” said Dr. Asma Afzal, who has practiced family medicine in several countries, including underdeveloped ones such as Pakistan. “These prospective adoptive parents want to help those children who they feel were not born so lucky but do not see that children from all countries suffer equally.”

According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services 187 cases of children in the North Carolina foster care program are waiting to be adopted, ranging from 3 to 17 years of age.

“The number of children eligible to be adopted in North Carolina seems low because many children in foster care, for one reason or another are not eligible to be adopted,” Afzal said. “Some are still awaiting guardianship rulings, and others have conditions that require a great deal of attention and are hard to confidently place. These numerous factors leave many children in the foster care system for years with no relief.”

Afzal said that while many social disorders are common in children orphaned at an early age, a big problem also encountered in these children is depression, since many foster children harbor feelings of abandonment and betrayal for their biological parents.

“Children can be born anywhere in the world and have these feelings; they are not found in just certain places around the globe,” Afzal said. “Each child looking for a home will struggle but it usually helps as they are slowly introduced to both stability and consistency throughout their daily routines.”

While the number of overseas adoptions has tripled over the past decade, 2006 saw a record low in foreign adoptions by United States citizens, with only 20,679 overseas adoptions, falling from the 22,728 overseas adoptions reported by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in 2005.

Changes in the rate of foreign adoptions are attributed by many to recent changes in international adoption policies as countries tighten their standards for granting foreign adoptions.

“In May 2007 China begun requiring couples to have been married for at least two years and be between the ages of 30 and 50,” Afzal said. “In addition to that eligible couples must have a net worth of \$80,000 or more and may not be obese or have mental health issues.”

Strict policies have also been implemented by both Russia and Guatemala, countries that before the policy changes yielded the majority of foreign adoptions by Americans.

To avoid some complications and make the process of adopting from overseas smoother, many couples have chosen to seek children from countries with reputations for easier adoption policies, including Nepal, Ethiopia and Bulgaria.

“When people decide they want to adopt from overseas they already know it is going to be both a costly and sluggish process,” Afzal, the physician, said. “Most would rather just choose children from a different region than deal with the hassles of overly strict, and in some cases, overly needless policies.”

While policies across the world tighten, the trend of adopting from overseas still outnumbers local adoptions, as many believe it is the answer to what they feel is a flawed system of adopting inside the United States.

“In the United States the mother still has rights to the child for a short period after birth, meaning that they can change their mind and take their baby back after they give it up,” Afzal said. “This is frightening to parents who fear getting emotionally attached to a child then losing it and having to start all over.”

Beth Broderick, an in-patient social work case manager for Pitt County, said that while there are several dynamics to the process, the key elements to successful adoptions are attachment and perception.

“Children are less likely to get adopted as they get older, but it depends a great deal on the child,” Broderick said. “The best thing we can do is provide structure and consistency and hope everything else falls into place.”

There is no cost to adopt a child from foster care in the United States and such proceedings may only take a few months while overseas adoptions can cost over \$30,000 and can take anywhere from a six months to a year to finalize, leaving some to question the logic behind the extra expense and hassle.

“Adopting from overseas may be more expensive but most people want to adopt babies and that is where they are,” licensed North Carolina nurse Donna Turner said. “It is hard to undo what a 4-year-old has learned and people want to teach their children themselves, not allow someone else to do it for them.”

According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services 1,203 children were adopted by North Carolina residents in 2005, only 3 percent of them adopted from inside the United States.

“The top countries people seem to adopt from are China and then Russia,” Afzal said. “China is popular because baby girls are not favorable over there and Russia is a great choice for Caucasian parents who want their child to appear to have the same racial background as them.”

However, with celebrities traveling overseas and adopting children from underdeveloped countries, the idea that children and parents must look the same is fading, making multi-cultural families more common in the United States.

“It used to be that people panicked when they saw children with parents of a different race, and overseas adoption has really raised awareness for the issue,” Turner said. “Learning tolerance in a country where the word was initially ignored makes these kids’ lives a lot easier.”

While celebrities make adoption and child raising look like a cinch, the real world knows that large families come with a price, making potential foster parents nervous about supporting a large number of children at once.

Monthly stipends are given to foster parents based on the age of each child placed with them. Caregivers with children up to five years of age are paid \$390 a month per child and foster parents with children 6-12 years of age are awarded \$440 a month per child. The caregivers of children 13 and over are given \$490 a month per child.

“Stipends allow the foster families to buy food, clothing and other basic necessities for the children placed with them,” Broderick said. “Each residence is monitored carefully by random visits and meetings to ensure that each child is getting the care they need and that any problems that need to be addressed are done so in a timely fashion.”

While the majority of Americans who are considering adoption will get their child from overseas the foster program continues to provide for the children who need it the most. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, over 2,000 new children enter foster care each year and less than half of them are adopted, a statistic that could be lowered by the numerous parents looking to open their homes to a child in need.

“Children who grow up in foster care learn a great deal about how to take care of themselves very early in life, including how to cook, do laundry and even managing finances,” Broderick said. “While they can manage on their own everyone needs the physical and emotional support a family brings, though for the majority of these kids, the family never comes.”

Bruce Midgette and Sara Jenkins contributed to this story.