

At-Birth Adoptions: Good Luck All Around

St. Patrick's Day is an occasion to think about what truly constitutes luck. One superb example is an adoption placement at the time of birth.

Why? Like winning a prize drawing -- it's so rare. Nationally, adoption is the least-used option for pregnant teens. Figures from the Children's Defense Fund show that approximately 52 percent of adolescent pregnancies end in abortion and miscarriage. Of the 48 percent who give birth, just 3 to 4 percent choose to place their children for adoption. Those are some slim odds.

"It's not very culturally acceptable in the U.S. at the moment for a pregnant teen to release her baby for adoption," says Brenda Donnelly, a research associates at the University of Dayton's Center for the Study of Family Development. "Most adolescents have never known anyone who has chosen adoption. It's not the normal thing to do."

That's precisely what makes an adoption placement at birth – and birthmother who relinquishes -- so extraordinary. But a placement is not only a matter of luck; it's an act of incredibly good fortune for the baby, the adoptive parents, and – yes – even the birthmother. You could call it the "Shamrock of Adoption".

A Bounty for the Babies

Babies placed for adoption with two parents are likely to have a brighter future than those raised by single parents. They will be much less likely to live in poverty, endure abuse, suffer emotional problems, fail in school, use harmful substances, commit crimes or get pregnant themselves as teens.

As for the notion that adopted children don't fare as well as biological ones – it's hogwash. Compared to general population, children placed with adoptive couples are better off economically; perhaps that's because adoptive parents are – statistically -- better educated and less likely to divorce. But standard of living aside, children adopted at birth may actually be *better* adjusted as teens than their non-adopted peers, according to a study titled "Growing Up Adopted," conducted by the Minneapolis-based Search Institute. About 55% of the adopted adolescents surveyed scored high on measurements of self-esteem, compared with 45% of all teenagers in a previous national study. They resolve their identity concerns "at rates as high or higher than their peers," show fewer signs of high-risk behavior (such as binge drinking or theft) and score better than the national sample on indicators of well being, including friendships and academic achievement. Additionally, the study also found that adolescent adoptees have "extremely high rates of strong attachment to adoptive parents"— debunking the notion that adoptive families have weaker bonds than those related by blood.

The Blessing of Bonding for Adoptive Parents

When people we encounter learn that my wife and I are adoptive parents, they often comment how fortunate our children are to be in a complete, traditional family. While that may be true, we feel like the lucky ones to be among the select few that are granted stewardship of the 1,300 babies relinquished for adoption each year in the U.S. (that's just 1% of all babies born to unmarried parents). Adoption lets us experience what

biological parents can -- a depth of love like no other, the pride of shaping a successful being, and a better understanding of the mind of God.

Getting a child as an infant gives us a much better chance of attaining the full measure of that experience. "We cannot overstate the power of early placement," commented the Search Institute researchers who conducted the 'Growing Up Adopted' study. "It is likely a key ingredient in the successful attachment of child to parent (and vice versa)."

In the study, adopted teens -- who were placed as infants -- rated themselves similar to their adoptive parents in interests, personality, and values almost as frequently as did their biological peers. What more could a mother or father want in terms of a rewarding parenting experience?

A Road to Redemption for Birthmothers

No one can argue that relinquishing a baby for adoption is an incredible act of selflessness for a young birthmother. But it's also an opportunity to regain her footing on a path where there's a greater chance for success. "Of all the options available to a pregnant teen, the one that gives her the best shot at continuing in school, gaining employment and staying off welfare is the one that adolescents rarely consider -- adoption," assert Brenda Donnelly and Patricia Voydanoff, co-authors of a University of Dayton study, *Parenting Versus Placing for Adoption: Consequences for Adolescent Mothers*.

At the university's Center for the Study of Family Development, the pair examined the lives of 113 pregnant teens, 23% of whom chose to relinquish for adoption while the rest opted to keep their babies. After two years, they found that the young women who chose adoption achieved a higher socioeconomic status, completed significantly higher grade levels of school, were less likely to be on welfare and were less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior.

Did the teens who placed their babies for adoption experience more emotional pain over their decision? You bet they did. And there are studies and personal anecdotes that suggest birthmothers never forget their babies. But when asked later if they would do it again, almost 70% said yes. They're still sorry they had to do it, but -- says Donnelly -- "they think they made the right decision and they'd recommend that decision."

And thousands of adoptive families today are extremely lucky there are other young women out there like them.

Ed Mauss, who lives in Trabuco Canyon, California, is a sr. editor for a New Century Financial Corp. in Irvine, Calif. and the adoptive father of two children, ages 8 and 10.