

SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR ADOPTION IN CANADA

Preliminary Findings of a Canada-Wide Survey

Conducted by

Charlene E. Miall, Ph.D
Associate Professor
Department of Sociology
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario,
Canada L8S 4M4

Karen March, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor
Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario,
Canada K1S 5B6

The following summary contains information collected from a Canada-wide telephone survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research, York University, between May and July, 2000. This data was collected under the auspices of a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Research Grant (#410-97-1195) - *Social support for adoption: Examining the community's role as a stakeholder in the adoption process.*

SUMMARY:

Adoption as an institution is in a process of change. There have been increases in single parent and gay adoption. International adoption of children born outside of Canada is widespread. Open adoption and the unsealing of confidential adoption records are under consideration or have been enacted in many provinces. The community has been identified as a major stakeholder in adoption and a focus for research to inform policy development on changes to adoption. Yet little is known about how Canadians in general view these issues. This survey provides the first in-depth report on Canadian assessments of adoption as an alternate family form and the changes in adoption currently underway. It explores how the general public assesses (1) adoption in general; (2) biological versus adoptive parenthood; (3) who should be allowed to adopt; (4) international adoption (5) birth parents who make an adoption plan; (6) revelation of adoption to children; (7) whether adopted children are more likely to be a problem; (8) open versus confidential (closed) adoption; (9) birth reunions and (10) the rights of birth parents, adoptive parents and adoptees to confidential information about one another with or without permission of each other.

Traditional non-relative adoption, as a parenting option, separates the biological from the social nurturing part of parenting. As such, it shares features with step-parent families formed through divorce and remarriage and same-sex couples where only one parent may be biologically related to the children. In particular, families formed through reproductive technologies employing donors share many features with adoptive families, particularly in the areas of donor confidentiality and the release of identifying information to the parties concerned. Research on community attitudes toward adoption can also guide social policy recommendations for and social work practice with such families.

METHODOLOGY:

The research study was made up of two phases. In the first phase, 82 respondents in two Ontario cities (41 males and 41 females) were interviewed in their homes using a semi-structured interview schedule which enabled respondents to provide explanations for their responses. Interviews were taped and transcribed and on-going analysis is underway of the meanings underlying responses to questions asked about adoption. In the second phase, a sample of 706 respondents 18 and older were randomly selected from across Canada using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) methods (N = 287 males and 419 females). A standardized questionnaire was constructed, pre-tested to review question wording and ordering effects, and modified accordingly. All telephone interviews were conducted from the centralized facilities of The Institute for Social Research at York University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada between May and June, 2000. The questionnaire itself contained 45 questions and it took approximately 15 minutes to complete a telephone interview. Interviews were conducted in either English or French, Canada's two official languages. Given disparities in population sizes in each of the regions, weights were provided to compensate for unequal probabilities of selection at both the provincial and household levels using the 1991 Canadian Census, the one most recently available. For results based on the total sample and with a confidence level of 95%, the error attributable to sampling and other random effects was plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. Percentages reflect those respondents expressing an opinion.

KEY FINDINGS:

(1) APPROVAL OF ADOPTION

Over three-quarters of Canadians surveyed strongly approve of adoption as a family form.

(2) ASSESSMENT OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Over three-quarters of Canadians surveyed think that mothers basically feel the same way about their children, whether adopted or not. Women were more likely to express this view than men (83% versus 68%).

Approximately 70% of Canadians surveyed think that fathers also basically feel the same way about their children, whether adopted or not.

(3) ASSESSMENT OF WHO SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ADOPT

In terms of who should be allowed to adopt, over ninety percent of Canadians considered married couples very acceptable.

Approximately two-thirds of Canadians surveyed also considered mixed-race couples and couples where one partner had a physical disability as very acceptable to adopt.

Common law couples were considered very acceptable to adopt by only forty percent of respondents.

Twenty five percent of Canadians surveyed considered single women very acceptable to adopt and another forty percent considered them somewhat acceptable. Approximately one-third did not consider them very acceptable to adopt.

Less than twenty percent considered single men living on their own as very acceptable to adopt although one-third of respondents found them somewhat acceptable. Forty five percent did not consider them very acceptable to adopt.

Although the majority of Canadians surveyed did not consider lesbian couples very acceptable to adopt, nearly half (48%) considered them very acceptable or somewhat acceptable. Males expressed more negative responses than females (58% versus 47%) and Canadians were nearly evenly divided on this question.

The majority of Canadians surveyed did not consider gay male couples very acceptable to adopt either although Canadians were also nearly evenly divided on this question. Fifty-four percent considered gay male couples not very or not at all acceptable. Forty-six percent considered them very acceptable or somewhat acceptable. Males again expressed more negative responses than females (61% versus 51%).

Single women living on their own and lesbian couples were assessed more positively as potential adopters than single men and gay male couples although the differences weren't large between lesbian and gay couples.

(4) ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

Canadians surveyed expressed overwhelming support for international adoption, that is, the adoption by Canadians of children from countries outside of Canada (94%).

(5) ASSESSMENT OF BIRTH PARENTS WHO MAKE AN ADOPTION PLAN

One third of Canadians surveyed strongly approved of birth mothers making an adoption plan and another third somewhat approved. Females were more likely to strongly support the birth mother's decision than males (38% versus 22%).

Slightly less than one-third of Canadians surveyed strongly approved of birth fathers making an adoption plan although over one third somewhat approved. Males were less likely than females to strongly approve (18% versus 33%) but more likely to somewhat approve (43% versus 32%).

The majority of Canadians surveyed (over two-thirds or more in all cases) considered birth mothers and birth fathers responsible, caring and unselfish when they made an adoption plan for their children. Birth mothers were consistently rated higher on these qualities than birth fathers. Male respondents consistently ranked both birth mothers and birth fathers lower on these qualities than female respondents.

(6) ASSESSMENT OF REVELATION OF ADOPTION TO CHILDREN

Nearly eighty percent of respondents felt that adopted children should always be told of their adoptive status and another twenty percent said sometimes. Only two percent felt that adopted children should never be told. Females expressed stronger support for always telling than males (83% versus 70%).

(7) ASSESSMENT OF WHETHER ADOPTED CHILDREN ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE A PROBLEM

Over two-thirds of Canadians surveyed felt that adopted children were no more likely to be a problem than non-adopted children and nearly twenty percent felt they were likely to be less of a problem.

(8) ASSESSMENT OF LEVELS OF OPEN ADOPTION

Until recently, most adoptions in Canada have been confidential, so that adoptive parents and biological parents could not identify each other. Now it is possible for adoptive and biological parents to maintain some sort of contact throughout the adopted child's life. Canadians were asked to assess three levels of openness in adoption.

Approximately one third of Canadians surveyed strongly approved of the exchange of cards and letters through a mediator between adoptive parents and biological or birth parents after adoption had taken place. The majority of respondents, forty three percent, somewhat approved of this level of open adoption. Nearly one quarter of respondents somewhat or strongly disapproved of this level of openness. Females were more likely to strongly approve than males.

Approximately one third of Canadians surveyed strongly approved of adoptive parents and biological parents meeting before the adoption and exchanging cards and letters through a mediator after adoption had taken place. The majority of respondents, forty four percent, somewhat approved of this level of open adoption. This level of openness in adoption was most strongly approved of by Canadians surveyed. Females were more likely to strongly approve than males.

Only twenty one percent of Canadians surveyed strongly approved of ongoing face-to-face contact between adoptive parents and biological parents after adoption had taken place. There was a drop in strong support for this level of openness. While forty one percent somewhat approved of it, there was an increase in those somewhat or strongly disapproving to nearly forty percent. There was little difference between female and male respondents indicating strong approval of this option.

Despite conditional support for some level of openness in adoption, eighty five percent of Canadians surveyed indicated that confidential adoption, where adoptive parents and birth parents have no contact with one another, should continue to be available to those who wanted it.

(9) ASSESSMENT OF BIRTH REUNIONS

Forty six percent of Canadians surveyed strongly approved of birth reunions taking place between adults who had been placed for adoption and their biological or birth parents. Forty-five percent of Canadians surveyed somewhat approved. Females were more likely to strongly approve of birth reunions than males (52% versus 38%). Less than ten percent somewhat or strongly disapproved.

(10) ASSESSMENT OF RELEASE OF CONFIDENTIAL IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

Canadian legislators are considering releasing confidential identifying information about biological and adoptive parents when adopted children become adults. Some people think this information should remain confidential unless all parties to the adoption (adoptive parents, adult adoptees, and biological or birth parents) agree to its release. Canadians were asked to assess when and under what circumstances this identifying information should be released to adult adoptees and/or birth parents.

The majority of Canadians surveyed (eighty four percent) expressed support for the release of confidential identifying information to adult adoptees without the permission of their adoptive parents.

The majority of Canadians surveyed (seventy seven percent) expressed support for the release of confidential identifying information to adult adoptees without the permission of their biological or birth parents.

Approximately half of Canadians surveyed (fifty five percent) expressed support for the release of confidential identifying information to biological or birth parents without the permission of the adoptive parents. Nearly forty-five percent did not support this option.

Approximately half of Canadians surveyed (fifty five percent) did not support the release of confidential identifying information to biological or birth parents without the permission of the adult adopted child. Nearly forty-five percent did support this option.

BREAKDOWN OF SURVEY RESULTS BY GENDER

(1) APPROVAL OF ADOPTION

In general, how do you feel about adoption. Would you say that you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of adoption

Strongly Approve	Total 77%	Males 73%	Females 79%
Somewhat Approve	Total 21%	Males 25%	Females 19%
Somewhat Disapprove/Total Strongly Disapprove	2%	Males 2%	Females 2%

(2) ASSESSMENT OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Do you think a mother's feelings for an adopted child would be basically the same, or basically different, from her feelings for a child born to her?

Basically the same	Total 77%	Males 68%	Females 83%
Basically different	Total 23%	Males 32%	Females 17%

Do you think a father's feelings for an adopted child would be basically the same, or basically different, from his feelings for a child he might biologically father?

Basically the same	Total 70%	Males 67%	Females 71%
Basically different	Total 30%	Males 33%	Females 29%

(3) ASSESSMENT OF WHO SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ADOPT

How acceptable is it to you that the following groups of people be allowed to adopt children? Is it very acceptable, somewhat acceptable, not very acceptable, or not at all acceptable?

MARRIED COUPLES

Very acceptable	Total 92%	Males 90%	Females 93%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 7%	Males 9%	Females 6%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 1%	Males 1%	Females 1%

COUPLES IN COMMON LAW RELATIONSHIPS

Very acceptable	Total 40%	Males 41%	Females 41%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 37%	Males 39%	Females 35%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 23%	Males 20%	Females 24%

MIXED RACE COUPLES

Very acceptable	Total 74%	Males 71%	Females 75%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 21%	Males 24%	Females 20%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 5%	Males 5%	Females 5%

COUPLES IN WHICH ONE PARTNER HAS A PHYSICAL DISABILITY

Very acceptable	Total 63%	Males 60%	Females 65%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 29%	Males 35%	Females 25%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 8%	Males 5%	Females 10%

SINGLE WOMEN LIVING ON THEIR OWN

Very acceptable	Total 25%	Males 22%	Females 27%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 41%	Males 43%	Females 41%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 34%	Males 35%	Females 32%

SINGLE MEN LIVING ON THEIR OWN

Very acceptable	Total 18%	Males 18%	Females 19%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 37%	Males 37%	Females 37%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 45%	Males 45%	Females 44%

LESBIAN COUPLES

Very acceptable	Total 20%	Males 17%	Females 23%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 28%	Males 25%	Females 30%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 52%	Males 58%	Females 47%

GAY MALE COUPLES

Very acceptable	Total 19%	Males 15%	Females 21%
Somewhat acceptable	Total 27%	Males 24%	Females 28%
Not very acceptable/ Not at all acceptable	Total 54%	Males 61%	Females 51%

(4) ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

Do you think Canadians should be allowed to adopt children from countries outside of Canada?

Yes	Total 94%	Males 92%	Females 95%
No	Total 6%	Males 8%	Females 5%

(5) ASSESSMENT OF BIRTH PARENTS WHO MAKE AN ADOPTION PLAN

*In general, how do you feel about it when biological mothers put their children up for adoption? Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the mother's decision? ('Biological mother' refers to the mother who gave birth to the child.)**

Strongly approve	Total 32%	Males 22%	Females 38%
Somewhat approve	Total 34%	Males 41%	Females 29%
Somewhat disapprove	Total 18%	Males 20%	Females 16%
Strongly disapprove	Total 16%	Males 17%	Females 17%

*In general, how do you feel about it when biological fathers put their children up for adoption? Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the father's decision? ('Biological father' refers to the man who fathered the child.)**

Strongly approve	Total 27%	Males 18%	Females 33%
Somewhat approve	Total 35%	Males 43%	Females 32%
Somewhat disapprove	Total 19%	Males 23%	Females 15%
Strongly disapprove	Total 19%	Male 16%	Female 20%

*In general, when a mother puts her child up for adoption, is she being responsible or irresponsible?**

Responsible	Total 77%	Males 72%	Females 80%
Irresponsible	Total 23%	Males 28%	Females 20%

*In general, when a father puts his child up for adoption, is he being responsible or irresponsible?**

Responsible	Total 71%	Males 62%	Females 76%
Irresponsible	Total 29%	Males 38%	Females 24%

In general, when a mother puts her child up for adoption, do you think she is being caring or uncaring?*

Caring	Total	78%	Males	70%	Females	83%
Uncaring	Total	22%	Males	30%	Females	17%

In general, when a father puts his child up for adoption, do you think he is being caring or uncaring?*

Caring	Total	72%	Males	64%	Females	78%
Uncaring	Total	28%	Males	36%	Females	22%

In general, when a mother puts her child up for adoption, do you think she is being unselfish or selfish?*

Unselfish	Total	71%	Males	64%	Females	76%
Selfish	Total	29%	Males	36%	Females	24%

In general, when a father puts his child up for adoption, do you think he is being unselfish or selfish?*

Unselfish	Total	68%	Males	55%	Females	76%
Selfish	Total	32%	Males	45%	Females	24%

(6) ASSESSMENT OF REVELATION OF ADOPTION TO CHILDREN

While some people think it best for adopted children to be told that they are adopted, other people do not necessarily agree. In your opinion, should children always, sometimes, or never be told that they were adopted?

Always	Total	78%	Males	70%	Females	83%
Sometimes	Total	20%	Males	27%	Females	16%
Never	Total	2%	Males	3%	Females	1%

(7) ASSESSMENT OF WHETHER ADOPTED CHILDREN ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE A PROBLEM

In your opinion, are adopted children more likely, just as likely, or less likely to turn out to be problem children than those who are not adopted?

More Likely	Total	11%	Males	16%	Females	8%
Just as Likely	Total	71%	Males	66%	Females	74%
Less Likely	Total	18%	Males	18%	Females	18%

(8) ASSESSMENT OF LEVELS OF OPEN ADOPTION

Until recently, most adoptions have been confidential so that biological parents and adoptive parents could not identify each other. Now it is possible for biological parents and adoptive parents to maintain some type of contact throughout the adopted child's life. Which of the following types of contact do you approve or disapprove of?

First, some biological parents exchange cards and letters with adoptive parents through a social worker or other mediator, but do not meet. Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of this practice?

Strongly Approve	Total	34%	Males	28%	Females	38%
Somewhat Approve	Total	43%	Males	41%	Females	45%
Somewhat Disapprove	Total	13%	Males	16%	Females	10%
Strongly Disapprove	Total	10%	Males	15%	Females	7%

Some adoptive parents and biological parents actually meet one or more times BEFORE the adoption, but AFTER the adoption they exchange cards and letters through a social worker or other mediator. Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of this practice?

Strongly Approve	Total	35%	Males	28%	Females	40%
Somewhat Approve	Total	44%	Males	44%	Females	44%
Somewhat Disapprove	Total	13%	Males	17%	Females	10%
Strongly Disapprove	Total	8%	Males	11%	Females	6%

In the most open forms of adoption, adoptive parents and biological parents maintain face-to-face contact with each other from the birth of the child until the child is of legal age. Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of this practice?

Strongly Approve	Total	21%	Males	19%	Females	22%
Somewhat Approve	Total	41%	Males	39%	Females	43%
Somewhat Disapprove	Total	23%	Males	23%	Females	23%
Strongly Disapprove	Total	15%	Males	19%	Females	12%

Do you think that confidential adoptions should continue to be available to those who do not wish to have contact with biological parents?

Yes	Total	85%	Males	87%	Females	83%
No	Total	15%	Males	13%	Females	17%

(9) ASSESSMENT OF BIRTH REUNIONS

In recent years, reunions have been taking place between adults who had been placed for adoption and their biological parents. In general, do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of these reunions?

Strongly Approve	Total 46%	Males 38%	Females 52%
Somewhat Approve	Total 45%	Males 50%	Females 42%
Somewhat Disapprove/Total	9%	Males 12%	Females 6%
Strongly Disapprove			

(10) ASSESSMENT OF RELEASE OF CONFIDENTIAL IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

Once adopted children reach adulthood, do you think they should be allowed to find out who their biological parents are without the permission of their adoptive parents?

Yes	Total 84%	Males 83%	Females 85%
No	Total 16%	Males 17%	Females 15%

Once adopted children reach adulthood, do you think they should be allowed to find out who their biological parents are without the permission of their biological parents?

Yes	Total 77%	Males 75%	Females 79%
No	Total 23%	Males 25%	Females 21%

Should biological parents be allowed to learn the identity of their adult adopted children without the permission of their children's adoptive parents?

Yes	Total 55%	Males 50%	Females 59%
No	Total 45%	Males 50%	Females 41%

Should biological parents be allowed to learn the identity of their adult adopted children without their adopted children's permission?

Yes	Total 45%	Males 44%	Females 46%
No	Total 55%	Males 56%	Females 54%

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Dr. Charlene Miall
 Email: miallce@mcmaster.ca
 Office Number: 905-525-9140 Ext. 23601

Dr. Karen March,
 kmarch@ccs.carleton.ca
 613-520-2600 Ext. 2618