

People Are Lining up to Adopt Down Syndrome Babies

' The stigma isn't there anymore '

By ERIC ADLER

The Kansas City Star

Kansas City, Mo. – Diane and David Petersohn, of Liberty, Mo want to adopt a baby.

They don't care about eye color or hair color. They don't care about race. They would prefer a little girl, but if a boy comes along, fine.

Their one condition is the same as that of an increasing number of parents. They want a baby with Down syndrome.

"Talk about the prayer of my heart," said the stay-at-home mom, 36. "That would be a dream."

These days it also might be a dream deferred. As part of what surely is a sign of changing attitudes about Down syndrome and its medical realities, parents asking to adopt children with the chromosomal disorder are being told there's a waiting list.

"A baby with Down syndrome was once thought to be unadoptable," said Gloria Hochman, director of the National Adoption Centre in Philadelphia. "Now people are eager."

In Stilwell, Kan., the Special Additions adoption agency, which facilitates overseas adoptions and domestic adoptions of children with special needs, said that whenever the agency is presented a child with Down syndrome, parents practically compete to adopt.

"I was working on trying to place a baby in the last couple of weeks," said the agency's social work supervisor, Katie, Sharp. "I have had 10 to 15 families that want the baby."

Couples are Waiting Years

Parents who want these children almost invariably have had experience with children with Down syndrome. Or they are professionals who have cared for children with the disorder.

In Ohio, the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati keep a list of parents nationwide waiting to adopt. The waiting list is 150 names long. Couples are waiting months to up to two years.

"It averages five to six calls per week. It has probably doubled from five years ago," said

Robin Steele, who started the list and the organization's adoption awareness program 23 years ago. Several years earlier, she and her husband had adopted their first child 4-year old Martha, who had Down syndrome, out of foster care. Martha now is 33.

The Steeles have eight children, from toddlers to adults. One, Ben, 18 is their biological son. The rest – from Martha to 9-year old Cody – were adopted out of foster care. "The agency believed she was unadoptable," Robin Steele said. "It was love at first sight. We met Martha and thought she was meant to be in our family."

Many feel likewise.

To Know Them is To Love Them

Thirty years ago, and certainly even today, the birth of a baby with Down syndrome often devastated parents. Information about the chromosomal disorder was limited. Schools, doctors, and the community offered little to no help. Many couples, envisioning a lifetime of care with no respite, relinquished their children to group foster homes or state care.

Today, vastly more is known about Down syndrome Society's view of the disorder has changed dramatically.

"The stigma isn't there any more," said Amy Allison, director of the Down Syndrome Guild of Greater Kansas City.

Children with Down syndrome, now attend public schools, join sports teams, and graduate from high school. More adults with Down syndrome live on their own, in group homes, and even marry. They work and live semi-independent lives.

The disorder poses significant challenges, but fewer parents see them as insurmountable.

"The outlook for a baby with Down syndrome is much better than it was even 10 years ago," said physician and geneticist Merlin Butler, director of the Pediatric Down Syndrome Clinic at Kansas City's Children's Mercy Hospital.

A result of these changes is an adoption waiting list.

On one hand, you get people willing to adopt because they don't see Down syndrome as a burden. They see it as a manageable difference. With the variety of adoptive parents growing to include gay couples, single people, mixed-race and older couples, there are more people willing to adopt.

On the other hand, you have more biological parents feeling the same way.

"People are keeping their kids. A lot of people with Down syndrome kids just don't give up their children anymore." Said Andrea Schneider, family coordinator for Adopt-A-Special-Kid, an agency in Oakland, Calif., that arranges special needs adoptions.

Many Down Babies aborted

Even if you want to adopt, there are fewer children with Down syndrome available. Early prenatal screening is a factor. Tests can detect Down syndrome as early as nine to 11 weeks into a pregnancy.

"We hear there is a 90 percent termination rate," said Allison, of Kansas City's Down Syndrome Guild. "There are just fewer children being born with Down syndrome."

It is clear who adopts and why, experts say.

More than 90 percent are people such as the Petersohns who have some experience with Down syndrome.

Sometimes they have had brothers or sisters, uncles, aunts, friends, neighbors or children with the disorder. Others tend to be nurses, doctors, therapists, and special educators.

Diane Petersohn is a stay-at-home mom. Dave Petersohn is a binder for Rapid Solutions Group. They have four biological children and three children they have adopted out of foster care.

One of those children is Darcie, 4, whom they adopted in 2001. She has Down syndrome. Their desire to adopt again extends from their experience with Darcie.

"We fell in love with her very quickly when we got her," Diane Petersohn said. "You find that the love starts to outweigh the fear."

March 11, 2005