

# welcome home

Back in the day, being adopted meant not knowing where you came from. Not so now. **Melinda Williams** takes a snapshot of a system that has moved with the times

**Anna and David's daughter** is a plump-cheeked, curly-haired sprite of 16 months, with a mischievous smile that says she'll have much to tell her parents when she figures out a few more words. As she wobbles around the backyard on recently discovered legs, pursuing the cat, her mum and dad watch with the mix of indulgence and alertness common to all parents.

Only a year and a half ago, having a child seemed an unlikely dream for Anna and David. The couple met and married later in life, and were already in their 40s when they started trying for children. Although Anna got pregnant quickly, she miscarried at week 10. "Over the next three years I had three more miscarriages," she remembers, with a matter-of-factness that belies the heartbreak of each. "After the third time I thought, 'If I get pregnant again... things come in threes and then something good will happen.' So when it happened again, the fourth was a kind of closure for us."

They looked into adoption. "We knew we didn't want to go down the IVF track, because of the complications, and the money – the ethical minefield that it is in our minds," says Anna. "I'd been open to adoption from quite early on. In my early 20s I thought, 'If I couldn't have children, adoption would be something I'd consider.'"

In March 2007 they started the Child, Youth and Family-run course that all prospective adoptive parents go through. "What really helped us was the training," says

David. "You see videos of adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents talking about open adoption, and how it worked for them. A lot of people have ideas about CYF that can be quite negative. But for us, the whole process was really positive. I think of the open adoptions that they showed, some of them weren't working perfectly, but most of them were working well – much better than closed adoption."

The way adoption works in New Zealand has changed dramatically over the past 40 years, both in nature and scale. Although adoption was first established in New Zealand in the late 19th century as a protective measure for children, through the first half of the 20th century it was fairly uncommon, says Eileen Preston, senior advisor on adoptions for Child, Youth and Family. Through the second half of the century adoptions increased, and in 1968 they reached a peak of 2617, three-quarters of which were to adoptive parents who didn't know the birth parents. Over the next 20 years, however, the number declined precipitously, falling to a low of 62 non-kin adoptions last year, less than the average of 88 a year for the past decade.

By comparison, 278 couples are currently approved by CYF as potential adoptive parents, and are waiting in hope of a child. Another 93 couples have been approved for overseas adoption from one of the six countries with whom New Zealand has an international adoption agreement. >>

PHOTOGRAPHS: TRANZ



The reasons for the decline in adoptions are manifold, says Preston. The introduction of new contraceptive options, particularly the Pill, has had a major effect. Abortion is a factor – according to Statistics New Zealand, there were 5945 abortions in 1980 (three years after the legalisation of abortion) and 17,940 in 2008. The revocation of the status of ‘illegitimate’ children in 1969 and the introduction of the Domestic Purposes Benefit in 1973 also had an impact, says Preston, although the number of adoptions was already falling by then. “There are much greater choices for women in New Zealand in terms of work, too,” she says. “People are also much more able to make choices in terms of keeping their own children.”

It’s also worth looking at the decline from the other side, says Preston. “People tend to ask, ‘Why do we have so few adoptions now?’ rather than, ‘Why did we have so many adoptions then?’ The 1960s were a time of rock and roll and the emancipation of teenage culture. There was a great explosion of teen culture, and of young women getting pregnant unexpectedly.”

Over the past 20 years the approach to adoption has also changed. Until the end of the 1980s, most adoptions were ‘closed’, where the birth parents had no access to or relationship with the child after adoption. In 1985, the new Adult Adoption Information Act enabled adopted people over the age of 20 who had closed adoptions to receive information about their birth parents. Since then, more than 35,000 people who’d spent a lifetime wondering about their biological heritage have accessed those records.

Their stories are filled with both relief and further pain: the birth father who opened his front door to see himself in the face of the adult son he never knew he had; the daughter who finally got to know her birth mother six months before she passed away from cancer; the son who slipped quietly into a back row of the funeral for the mother who’d never acknowledged him; the daughter who was refused a reunion with the words, “That part of my life is over.”

Today, almost all adoptions in New Zealand are ‘open’. By a process of negotiation between the adoptive and birth parents, the child grows up with

knowledge of, and access to, their birth mother or parents. Debbie Sturmfels, manager of Care and Protection at CYF, says the feedback of the adopted people who searched for their birth parents was instrumental in the changes made to today’s system. “We’ve listened to their stories and used them extensively as part of our preparation programme. The changes to the process haven’t been explicit; there wasn’t a piece of legislation that said, ‘We will now do it this way.’ The new way of doing it is based on the principle of children’s rights. People have a right to know where they came from.”

Preston says most adoptive and birth parents prefer it too. “Once people come on board, they realise it’s a very natural way for a child to be cared for, and they’re not a threat to each other.”

**Teresa and Joshua\*** are another couple who didn’t rush into having a family. They married young, and in their late 20s emigrated from their home country to New Zealand with a plan for a safer, better life for themselves and, eventually, their children. During their 30s they worked hard, both making names for themselves in their respective careers, and by their late 30s they were successful, financially secure, and ready for parenthood.

But, as for an increasing number of couples, it didn’t come easy. Months went by with no

pregnancy. Although they knew it might take a while, as the months turned into years they underwent a barrage of medical tests. Nothing conclusive emerged. “We started to realise it didn’t look like it was going to happen,”

says Teresa. “We couldn’t prove that we were incapable, but there was a chance that we were.”

While Joshua says adoption had always been in the back of his mind, Teresa had reservations. “I think it had to do with knowing quite a few adopted teenagers when I was a teenager. It had a lot of negative publicity when I was growing up in the ‘70s and ‘80s,” she admits. “There was a stigma about unhappy children being placed elsewhere after being abandoned, and not having any contact with their birth parents – having a lack of identity. The old style of adoption was what I had in my mind.”

Through a friend they found out about the Introduction to Adoption courses run by Child, Youth



and Family. “When we first walked in the door we weren’t sure what we were letting ourselves in for,” says Joshua. He remembers a surprisingly large number of people in the room. Suddenly he realised how many other people might be in the same position as they were. “I was sitting there thinking, ‘This is not good.’” Teresa was nervous too. “You’re thrown in a room with all these other people who you might have nothing in common with, except this one huge reason that you’re there.”

Whatever doubts they had, however, evaporated during the evening. “My first feeling was that an open adoption didn’t do it for me because I felt threatened by the fact that the birth parents might have contact with the baby,” Teresa admits. “But they really showed us the positive side of it, to the point that we could no longer see any other way you would do it.”

From there, they moved forward quickly. They assembled their portfolio, the document birth parents are shown to help them choose an adoptive family. More challenging was deciding what biological restrictions they would place on prospective children. “It starts off with ‘male or female’, and it gets more and more difficult. Health issues. Blindness. Questions of drug or alcohol abuse by the mother. You start off thinking, ‘I could love any child’ and, ‘How could I play God by saying no to that?’ No parent who gives birth gets to decide. It’s an unnatural situation and we really struggled with that.”

With those decisions made, the wait began. They told their friends and Joshua’s employer what was happening, that a baby might appear at short notice. They set up their spare room so it could be turned into a nursery quickly. They set aside plans for major overseas trips. And waited.

After a period with no responses they made changes to their portfolio, included more information and photos. But they were feeling around in the dark, says Joshua. “You don’t really know what people are looking for.” Some people prefer families who already have children, they were told. Some prefer families who remind them of themselves. Another year passed. Eventually, when it became time to renew their application for another two years, they made the hard decision to remove themselves from the waiting pool.

“I think we’ve given adoption our best shot,” says Teresa. “We’re not getting any younger, and I think there’s a responsibility there. There are other things that you can look into, like fostering. We’ve got a godchild, and other children in our lives that we play roles for. But it’s very hard. We enjoy having children around us very much.” She gives an uncomfortable little laugh, and exchanges a look with Joshua. “But that decision will free us in the end.” He nods. “Letting go finally is forever,” he says.

There’s no requirement for prospective adoptive parents to tell CYF why they’re removing themselves from the waiting pool. Anecdotally, CYF hears that

some have been successful with IVF or surrogacy. Others look into fostering or the permanent placement of foster children. And some simply decide hope is getting in the way of them making other plans for their lives.

“I think it’s a real pity that more people don’t know about the way adoption is run now, about the positivity of the process,” says Teresa. “Even without a positive outcome, we’ve gotten a lot out of the experience. It would be good if that could get out to people, if there could be more emphasis on that – less on easy abortions and more about positive adoptions.”

Anyone considering adoption should go on one of the courses, says Joshua. “They really do an incredible job. I wonder, if people did know the experience was a positive one, whether mothers who have to make a hard choice would choose that.”

**Diana is one of those mothers.** In late 2008, in her 40s and with two teenage children, she unexpectedly discovered she was pregnant – 36 weeks. “It was a bit of a fright,” she remembers, with some understatement. As she was no longer in contact with the father and struggled to see room for a new baby in her life, she immediately considered adoption. “I didn’t want this child growing up without a father. I thought that was very important,” she says.

There was no pressure put on her to adopt, she recalls, but her social worker moved quickly to outline the options. Diana was shown a selection of profiles of waiting couples. “They said that if I didn’t like any of them there were a lot more.” She wasn’t sure what she was looking for, but Anna and David’s profile jumped out. “There was a photo of them standing on the beach on the West Coast, and there was just something very special about that photo.”

At home in Auckland, Anna and David were readying to go on a camping trip when the phone rang. After 15 months of waiting, they’d stopped jumping at the phone in the hope it would be their social worker. “Don’t answer it,” said David, keen to get on the road. But Anna did.

“At that point, we didn’t fully think it [adoption] was going to happen,” she says. “Our hope had started to wane. We’d made other plans, actually,

to go overseas, just as a short-term thing, but it was something that could lead on to more.”

It was their social worker on the line. A baby had been born, and the mother had selected them as the parents she wanted to meet. Nothing would happen for at least 12 days (the minimum required waiting period after birth), she said, but they should be prepared, just in case. A little shocked, they went on holiday, and returned to Auckland, where a meeting with Diana was arranged.

“We were nervous, wondering what would she think of us,” says David. “But we found out she was equally nervous. We talked for about two hours. She was very open, very honest, very friendly.” Diana agrees that there was “an instant click”, and at the end of the meeting she offered for Anna and David to meet the baby.

At that second meeting, with David holding the baby, Diana asked what they might call her. When they replied with a name that included her own – one she’d considered for her first daughter – she knew she wanted to go through with the adoption. “When I told them... words can’t express what it was like. It was hard for me, but in a good way. It was the right decision for me, it was the right decision for my children and it was the right decision for the baby. They’ve accepted my family into their lives and, to me, that’s pretty darn special.

It’s amazing to have someone feel about you the way they feel about me.”

Today, almost a year and a half later, they visit each other every month or so. Anna says the relationship continues to grow. “She’s totally open.

She enjoys seeing the baby and spending time with us, and we enjoy spending time with her.”

Diana says that although she initially struggled with returning to her regular life and work, the open process has made her decision to adopt much easier. “I really didn’t hold any assumptions about how things would work out. But things have. I feel so lucky. You wish that you could make more very good decisions in your life like the one I made with them,” she laughs. “If I could have the opportunity to go back and do it again for someone else, I probably would. That warm fuzzy feeling – you would do it over and over. It’s a very special relationship.” ■

**\*Names have been changed.**