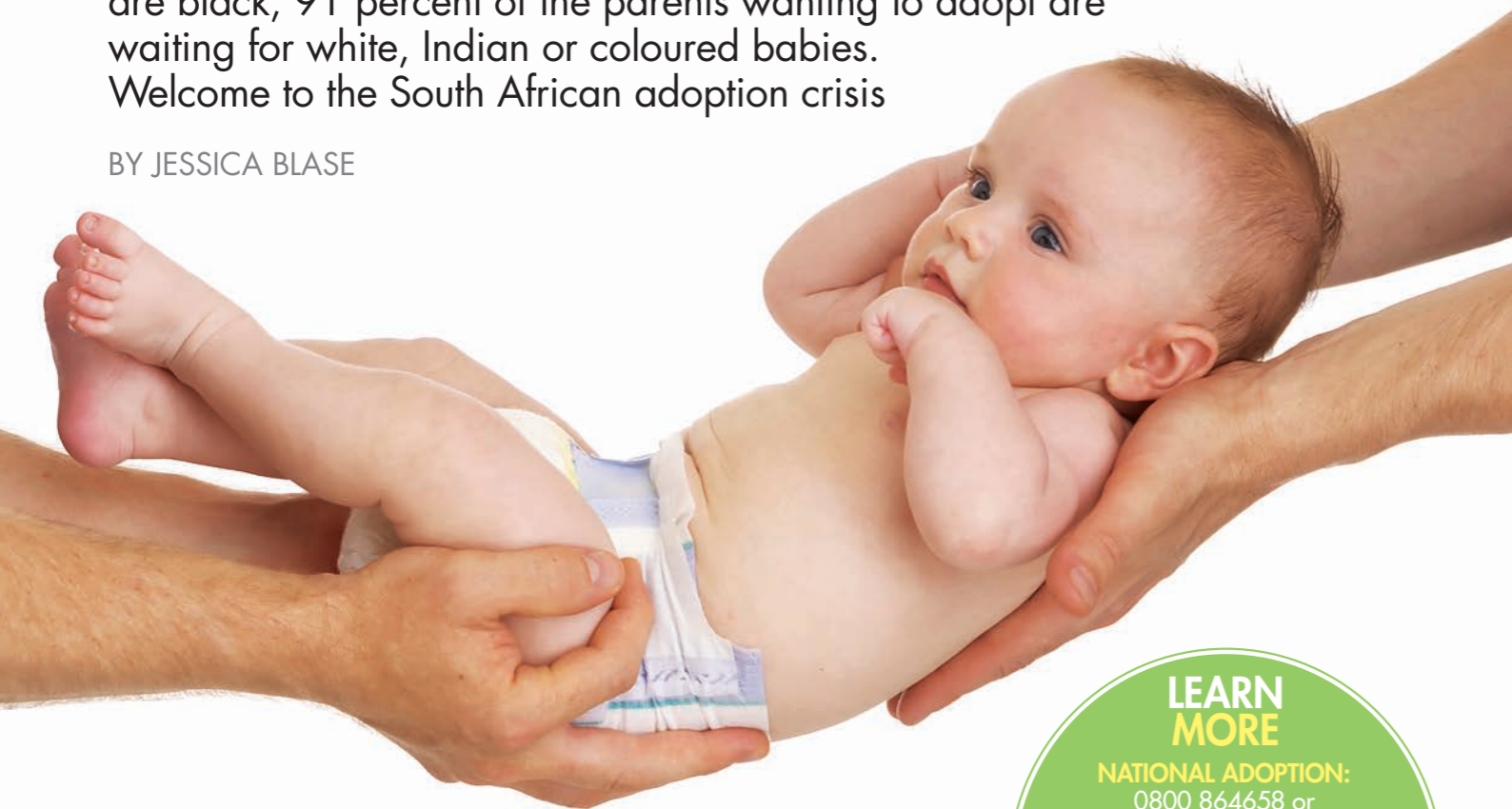


ARE WE FAILING OUR CHILDREN?

While 98 percent of children on the local adoption registry are black, 91 percent of the parents wanting to adopt are waiting for white, Indian or coloured babies. Welcome to the South African adoption crisis

BY JESSICA BLASE



Internationally, there are far more children waiting to be adopted than there are parents willing to adopt them. The situation in our country mirrors international trends. Approximately two million children in South Africa are orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable. And while abandonments rise each year, adoptions fall. Only 2013 adoptions took place from 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012, a decrease of 18 percent. With the implementation of the new Children's Act in April 2010, provision was made for a Register of

Adoptable Children and Adopting Parents (RACAP). There are currently close to 450 children on the register. This reflects the number of children that have legally been declared adoptable and are waiting to be matched with prospective adoptive parents, explains Katinka Pieterse of Abba Adoptions. And 98 percent of these children are black.

Yet, explains Katinka, these totals are not a true reflection of the actual number of children that might benefit from adoptions. There are countless procedural delays and many children are

not even placed on the RACAP. Children who have been in institutions for long periods of time (and are a bit older) are often not identified as being available for adoption and are therefore not placed on

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RACAP. Also, foster care remains a more attractive option because foster parents are assisted financially via a social grant. The disadvantage for the child, however, is that foster care doesn't offer a permanent home or sense of belonging.

Parents are placed on the registry when they have been screened and are ready for adoption. The number of parents on the list is roughly 330. So why are the 450 children not being placed with the 330 potential parents? Because only 30 of these parents want to adopt black children, says Sue Krawitz, director of Impilo Adoption Services. The other 300 are waiting to adopt white, coloured or Indian children. We have a clear imbalance between the number of children who are available for adoption and the number of prospective families available to adopt them. "The disproportion is glaring," says Sue.

RACY ISSUES

The fact remains that the demand for white babies is high. "White babies are extremely rare and it is very uncommon to adopt a white child in South Africa. Many people have been on the waiting list for years and adoption agencies are unable to take any more applications because of the long lists," says Terri Lailvaux, counsellor and founder of Adoptmom. As white babies become available they are adopted very quickly, as there are fewer cultural barriers to adoption among white families.

Having said that, interracial adoption is by no means unheard-of and has been happening in South Africa since 1991. Although there has been a steady increase in the number of interracial adoptions, the numbers remain low and go nowhere towards meeting the needs of the large numbers of children requiring permanent homes. "It might still take many years for these barriers to adopting a child of a different race to be less of an obstacle," explains Pam Wilson, adoption supervisor at Johannesburg Child Welfare.

When a child looks different from their parents people notice this. "Parents often want a child who looks similar to



Manie, Morne and Loïc

Knowing very well that gay couples are not all adoption agencies' first choice or even that of a biological mother, we decided to put the adoption process on ice. Almost four years went by and the yearning to become parents just became stronger. We turned to the internet in the hope that this would turn up agencies that would consider giving a gay couple a baby. This led us to Terri Lailvaux from Adoptmom. She understood our need to be parents better than anyone else. We were also blessed with the most incredible social worker, Letitia van den Berg. Only a few weeks after our final interview with Letitia, we received that all-important call from our social worker: we had been selected by a birth mom! Our baby boy was born earlier in the month and we would be meeting him in a short while. With very little sleep (our first night of many to follow) we met our social worker at the airport, beyond excited to meet our son. We arrived at the court and were in and out within 25 minutes. We then made our way to the house of safety where we would be meeting our son. The door swung open and in the social worker's arms was the cutest, most gorgeous boy – our son. He greeted us with the biggest smile and we greeted him with tears of joy accompanied with smiles, giggles and many kisses and hugs. The rest of the world passed by in a blur as we were returned home with our baby boy. We could not stop staring into each other's eyes, even as we settled in for our first night as a family.

them," says Dee Blackie, consultant to the National Adoption Coalition of South Africa. She says that many parents who have adopted transracially are frustrated by people who query whether the child is actually theirs. "Even when people are trying to be nice and make the point of coming up to a parent with a child of different race, telling them they are beautiful (but obviously noticing their difference), it can be hurtful to the child and the parents, who are just trying to be a family," she says.

CULTURAL CLASH

With the growing number of black children up for adoption, and the growing number of white parents wanting to adopt, the question is – where are the black families? And why are they not adopting? "Within the black community there are cultural barriers and beliefs which prevent people from adopting a child who is not related to them," explains Pam. While the informal adoption of family children has always been accepted within the black communities, formally adopting a child who is not related to you and who will carry the family name, if a boy, is still a resisted practice.

"When a child is adopted, there is a concern that their ancestors will be angered at being taken into a new family, and the new family's ancestors will be angered by the introduction of the child's ancestors," says Dee. However, there are rituals that can be undertaken when

talking point

a new child is brought into a family in order to placate tradition. The ancestors can be introduced to each other, and the child welcomed.

The greatest challenge, however, lies with a child who has been abandoned. With no knowledge of who the mother or father's ancestors are, these rituals cannot be undertaken on behalf of the child. This leaves many black couples shying away from adoption.

"The general perception is that adoption is anti-ubuntu," suggests Dee. The principle of ubuntu states that no child should be left without a family, but implies that a child is the responsibility of the extended family and tribe. This is a problem when there is no extended family or tribe, as with an abandoned child. "What we are seeing is a conflict between common law, which advocates adoption and legal responsibility, and customary law, which appears to support the primacy of blood line and the importance of ancestors," she says.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Will South Africa ever see an increase in interracial adoptions and, more importantly, black families adopting? Pam says that the Department of Social Development is working hard to make adoption a viable option for families suffering from infertility and those wanting to increase their family size. And it seems to be working. There has been a surge in the number of black adopters approaching adoption agencies. Many single black women and couples are now applying to adopt. "With a growing middle class, many couples are no longer prepared to raise family children as they would prefer to adopt a child who will belong to them forever and not return to their biological family when the child has completed their education," she says.

There has also been an increase in white couples adopting interracially. But Sue warns there are many things to consider before doing this. She suggests examining your and your family's attitudes towards race. Also look to the community in which you live, your personal relationships and lifestyle. "A child of a different race shouldn't feel isolated within the family.



Sharon, Walter, Ava-Grace and Hannah

Our adoption journey started in September 2009, after more than seven years of fertility treatments, multiple surgeries and seven first trimester miscarriages. With the last treatment and subsequent miscarriage, I knew I was done trying to have a baby via traditional means. So we decided to pursue adoption. We contacted a social worker who had been recommended to us and made an appointment to have an orientation session with her so we could start the assessment phase. We would never have imagined the rollercoaster ride we were about to embark on. Less than three weeks after beginning the process we got the call to say we'd been selected and a week later, our beautiful daughter, Ava-Grace, was born. When Ava was just over a year old, we decided to apply to adopt again. Adopting the second time around proved much harder as now we were not only looking for a suitable match for my husband and I, but also a match for our daughter. After almost 18 months of waiting, which included an adoption loss, we decided to try to increase our chances by getting another social worker involved and so towards the end of 2012 we started the process with Procure. In March Procure contacted us to inform us that we had been selected by birth parents. Our baby girl had been born in February and should her parents not retract consent, our placement would be in April 2013. On 24 April, after two years of waiting for our second placement, we met our social worker at the magistrate court to sign all our documentation and from there were taken to the place of safety to meet our daughter, Hannah. After ten years of family creation, we were finally complete.

The adoptive parents' role is to help the child form an identity, while embracing his culture and promoting a balanced integration of culture during identity formation," explains Sue.

While the focus is on developing local adoptions, inter-country adoptions have been allowed since 2000 – so long as all efforts to find a local family have been exhausted. Though the numbers are small, with foreigners adopting only around 200 children a year, these children would otherwise be put in temporary care indefinitely. "In my experience it becomes more difficult to find suitable adoptive parents when children become older. We therefore need to finalise the adoptability assessment process sooner than later, and consider placement soon thereafter," says Katinka. **YB**

HOW DO I ADOPT?

We've all watched couples on TV whose lives have been completed by adopting a child. Just look at Cam and Mitchell from *Modern Family* who adopted little Lily. In reality the process is a lot harder, says founder of Trinity Heart and mother to two adopted children, Sharon van Wyk.

- 1** Be absolutely committed to the process – it is tough.
- 2** Have a clear idea of the race and gender of the baby you want and consider all your options. The more you limit your choices, the more likely it is that you'll be in for a long wait.
- 3** Start researching online. Find a social worker that is the best match for you and ask for referrals from others who have adopted.
- 4** The assessment period is gruelling. Every aspect of your life is put under a microscope. There are medical tests, psychological assessments, psychometric testing. Even your finances are scrutinised.
- 5** The waiting periods vary and are dependent on whether one is doing a private or state adoption and also the gender and race preferences. The wait can be as short as a couple of weeks or as long as a few years.



Robyn, Anton, Jemma and Matthew

My husband and I were married in 2004 when I was 34. Because of my age, I thought we might struggle to conceive, so I came off the pill when we were engaged and naively hoped to create a honeymoon baby. I had three miscarriages from natural pregnancies, as well as four miscarriages (including the loss of twins at 23 weeks) from nine IVFs. In 2009 we made contact with our social worker to get the facts on adoption. We went away feeling a little despondent to say the least – the waiting list for a caucasian baby is long and we were advised to consider surrogacy. But mid-2010 saw us back at the social worker to start our screening process. The screening is really invasive, but I didn't mind it at all because I felt like we were doing something positive towards realising our dream. On 25 July 2011 we were in our car to meet friends for dinner when my phone rang. I didn't recognise the number, but when I heard our social worker's voice my hands started to shake. She had always said, "The only time I'll phone you, is if I have your baby." We met her the next morning and collected our beautiful little girl who was just eight days old. After a year, we really wanted a sibling for her, but resigned ourselves to the fact that the chances were nonexistent. But, by some miracle we got the call again. Our daughter's birth mom was pregnant and wanted her children to be raised together. We met at the hospital on 4 August 2012 and collected our baby boy. They have been our little blessings and have healed two very broken hearts just by coming into our lives. They are the children we were meant to raise and we are so grateful that we get to share their lives.



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