

Adoptive Parents Invest More than Biological Parents in Kids

Newswise — Adoptive parents invest more time and financial resources in their children compared with biological parents, according to the results of a national study that challenges the more conventional view -- emphasized in legal and scholarly debates -- that children are better off with their biological parents. The study, by sociologists at Indiana University Bloomington and the University of Connecticut, found that two-parent adoptive parents not only spend more money on their children, but they invest more time, such as reading to them, talking with their children about their problems or eating meals together. "Society often tells people that adoption isn't normal," said IUB Professor Brian Powell, who focuses on the sociology of the family. "When people make the decision that they want to have children and then use unusual means to have them, they compensate for the barriers."

The findings of the study, funded in part by the National Science Foundation, were published in the February issue of the *American Sociological Review*. Coauthors include Laura Hamilton, a doctoral student in IUB's Department of Sociology; and Simon Cheng, an assistant professor at UConn. The study which is titled: [Adoptive Parents, Adaptive Parents: Evaluating the Importance of Biological Ties for Parental Investment](http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Feb07ASRAoption.pdf) is available at: <http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Feb07ASRAoption.pdf> IAC Center Note: **If reading the entire article is too much for you, below you will find some salient points made in the full article's DISCUSSION section.**

In the United States, 2 percent to 4 percent of households include adopted children, and researchers expect this number to grow. Instead of looking at two-parent adoptive parent households, most research that has examined parental expenditure on children has compared biological parents with stepparent households, single parents or clinical populations that are not nationally representative. This omission is notable, Powell said, because many of the assumptions used in contemporary legal and scholarly discussions -- some of which translate into legal rulings and public policy -- about the importance of biological parents to the well-being of children rely on these older studies. The authors wrote that "recent court cases regarding same-sex marriage cite this body of research as evidence of the superiority of biological parenthood and, in turn, as a compelling rationale for the current legal definitions of marriage."

In academia, the new findings contradict claims by evolutionary psychologists that parents are born to dote on their biological children more than their adoptive children. "It really calls into question that people's motivations are really about just passing on their own genes," Powell said.

For this study, the researchers examined data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten-First Grade Waves, which involves a nationally representative sample of U.S. families. Because of the strong impact parental resources can have on children during their early years of schooling, the researchers examined data involving around 13,000 households that included first-graders.

Two-parent adoptive parents, in general, were older and wealthier than biological parents, single parents and stepparents. When financial resources were taken into consideration, the investments by two-parent adoptive parents appeared more similar to two-parent biological parents but still showed an advantage.

The research was supported by the NSF, Spencer Foundation and the American Educational Research Association. The American Sociological Review is the flagship journal of the 101-year-old American Sociological Association. "Adoptive parents, adoptive parents: Evaluating the importance of biological ties for parental investment," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 72 (Feb.: 95-116). <http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Feb07ASRAAdoption.pdf>

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Our analyses indicate that adoptive parents allocate more economic, cultural, social, and interactional resources to their children than do parents in all other family types. Their high levels of investment are due, in part, to their greater levels of income, education, and older maternal age. When these sociodemographic characteristics are controlled for, an adoptive advantage still remains.

There is one exception to the (positive) pattern described above. Models that include sociodemographic controls indicate that adoptive parents are significantly less likely than biological parents to talk regularly with the parents of other children. This finding supports prior research that highlights the cultural importance assigned to a particular parenthood experience: adoptive parents may lack experiences with their children's birth and early months/years that make bonding with other parents difficult.

Compensation theory suggests that a social context favoring biological parenthood will disadvantage adoptive parents but they will overcome this obstacle as they work toward becoming ideal parents. Compensation theory reveals an interesting paradox. **Individuals who are not granted the title of "parent" via biology may actually fulfill (and even exceed) the accompanying expectations better than those who have been accorded this title. Research on adoption suggests that three potential factors may combine to create this effect.** First, the primacy of genetic ties in American society may create a social climate in which adoptive family structures are devalued. The stigma surrounding their family form may cause many adoptive parents to struggle with presenting themselves as "real" parents. Second, adoptive parents are likely to encounter and incorporate the belief that adoptive children will face intellectual, social, and emotional difficulties growing up. Sensitivity to their children's real or perceived needs may lead adoptive parents to allocate resources to allay such difficulties. Finally, adoptive parents may enter into parenthood with greater levels of commitment than do other parents. The lengthy adoptive process itself may facilitate parental investment in children.

Our research indicates that alternative family structures do not necessarily result in a disadvantage for children, and, in certain cases, alternative family structures may contribute to greater parental allocation of resources to children. This finding is part of a growing recognition of the strengths demonstrated by alternative family structures. In addition, adopted adults—like adults from two-biological-parent families—show advantages in terms of educational achievement, employment

success, and asset accumulation over adults raised in all other alternative family configurations.

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