





WHY ADOPTION?

In placing their faith in the Lord as they make a truly selfless choice, many unwed birth mothers find that from the ashes of their deepest pain, He makes something beautiful—for her, the baby, and a loving family.

BY REBECCA M. TAYLOR

When Chuck and Rachael Sharp learned they would not be able to conceive a baby, Rachael thought her heart would break. She had yearned to be a mother, and she knew Chuck would be a wonderful father. For years the couple had dreamed of skiing and camping trips with their children, of noisy conversations around the dinner table, of music lessons and parties with cousins and picnics in the park. What would they do with all of those dreams?

That same year, in another city, Jessica Anderson (name has been changed) was struggling with heartbreak of her own. She had recently learned she was pregnant and the father didn't want to be involved. Her mind reeled with questions: With so little education, how would she financially support her child? How could she fill the roles of both a mother and a father? What kind of future could she provide?

Over the past several decades, societal attitudes about unwed pregnancy have changed dramatically. For most unwed mothers 30 years ago, the choice was clear: they would either marry and raise the baby, or they would

place the baby for adoption. Today, by contrast, most unwed mothers choose to either raise their babies on their own or get an abortion. In the United States, for example, only about 1 percent of unwed mothers place their babies for adoption.¹ In many other countries the percentage is almost negligible.

While Church members lag behind much of the rest of the world in the single-parent trend, more and more Latter-day Saint unwed mothers are choosing to become single parents. Yet the official position of the First Presidency remains consistent: when a successful marriage is not likely, unwed parents are encouraged to place their babies for adoption into a loving, two-parent, Latter-day Saint home (see sidebar).

Why does the Church support adoption?

What's Best for the Baby?

A popular modern catchphrase is "A family can be anything as long as there is love." Yet the proclamation on the family declares, "Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity."² Numerous studies have shown that children are better off when raised by both a mother and a father. These children are less likely to drop out of school, have behavioral problems, participate in delinquent behavior, become single mothers themselves, and live in poverty.³

In her book *For the Love of a Child*, social worker Monica L. Blume points out, "Almost every birth mother I have ever seen who is choosing to single parent believes she will be one of the very few who beat the odds."⁴ Many

FIRST PRESIDENCY STATEMENT ON ADOPTION

We . . . express our support of unwed parents who place their children for adoption in stable homes with a mother and a father. We also express our support of the married mothers and fathers who adopt these children.

“Children are entitled to the blessing of being reared in a stable family environment where father and mother honor marital vows. Having a secure, nurturing, and consistent relationship with both a father and a mother is essential to a child’s well-being. When choosing adoption, unwed parents grant their children this most important blessing. Adoption is an unselfish, loving decision that blesses the child, birth parents, and adoptive parents in this life and throughout the eternities. We commend all those who strengthen children and families by promoting adoption.”

First Presidency statement, Oct. 4, 2006

of these unwed mothers count on the father remaining fully involved or on having their own father help raise the child. And many Latter-day Saint single mothers hope to eventually get married and become sealed to their child in the temple.

Unfortunately, such hopes are not often realized. And many unwed mothers find that single parenthood is much more challenging than they expected. Studies have shown that single mothers have higher rates of illness, have less social involvement, and, if they are teenagers, are less likely to eventually marry than those who place their babies for adoption.⁵

But as Tammy Squires with LDS Family Services says, none of her clients wants to be labeled a “statistic.” These mothers feel great love toward their babies and may believe that others cannot offer the same love and care a biological parent can provide. “I try to help them see that it’s not about biology; it’s about stability and what is best for the baby,” Sister Squires explains. “Their decision will affect their child not only throughout this life but in eternity. They need to pray about it and feel peaceful about their decision, whatever that final decision may be.”

Chuck had already accepted the possibility that children would come to their family through adoption, but for Rachael, acceptance came less readily. She felt angry at God for denying her what she longed for most. One day, however, a friend spoke about adoption in a way that resonated with her. “Imagine having a baby placed



FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CHUCK AND RACHAEL SHARP

in your arms,” her friend said. “Think about looking down at that little face and knowing that child is yours. You can still be a mother!” Rachael felt the first stirrings of renewed hope in her heart.

Meanwhile, Jessica struggled with her decision. Her parents, especially her father, felt she should place the baby for adoption. Her friends encouraged her to raise the child herself. So many decisions, so many questions! Finally, she decided to get an abortion. That would make everything so much easier—wouldn’t it?

Latter-day Saint Theology and Adoption

A primary reason the Church supports adoption is that children who are adopted by temple-worthy Latter-day Saint couples can be sealed to their adoptive parents. The sealing ordinance is the capstone ordinance in the Church, and its blessings are present in this life as well as in the next. As President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) declared, children who are born in the covenant—and, by extension, those who are sealed to their parents in the temple—“have claims upon the blessings of the gospel beyond what those not so born are entitled to receive. They may receive a greater guidance, a greater protection, a greater inspiration from the Spirit of the Lord; and then there is no power that can take them away from their parents.”⁶

Fred Riley, commissioner of LDS Family Services, says that although adoption is rarely discussed in Church meetings, it is a profound gospel principle. He points out that



when the prophet Elijah restored the sealing keys, these keys encompassed adoption. And one of the ways in which Jesus Christ is our Father is through adoption, for we become His sons and His daughters when we are adopted into the family of Christ.

Additionally, Church members who are not direct descendants of Israel may be adopted into the house of Israel through their faith (see Romans 8:9; 9:4).

“From the time of Adam, adoption has been a priesthood ordinance,” says Brother Riley. “It’s a principle of the gospel that probably all of us will experience at some point as we’re literally adopted into our Heavenly Father’s kingdom.”

Rachael and Chuck started participating in the training LDS Family Services offers prospective adoptive parents. They listened to birth mothers tell their stories—birth mothers who were so different from the rebellious girls they had envisioned. Many of these young women, by contrast,

seemed wise beyond their years. Rachael and Chuck sensed some of the pain, as well as the peace, these young women had experienced. Maybe they too would one day be on the receiving end of such a sacrifice. Their excitement at the prospect of parenthood grew—as did their awe for these birth mothers.

On a warm day in late August, Jessica sat in silence as her friends drove her to a class at the abortion clinic two hours away. With every mile, her heart grew heavier and her dread increased. When they finally drew near the clinic, she told her friends, “I can’t do this.” She couldn’t take an innocent life. She would have to make a different decision.

Taking Care of Our Own?

One of the most powerful factors that influence an unwed expectant mother’s decision regarding her baby is the opinion of her parents. It can be heart-wrenching for grandparents to consider relinquishing an infant grandchild. Like their daughter, grandparents

Above: Chuck, Rachael, and Aliza Sharp on the day they were sealed in the temple. Opposite page: Aliza, alongside Rachael’s hand and the hand of her birth mother the day Aliza was placed with the Sharps. Below: Aliza’s sister, Katy, as an infant. Katy was also placed through LDS Family Services.



often bond with the baby even before birth, and they have hopes and dreams for the baby's future.

Many parents feel a grave sense of responsibility when their child becomes pregnant out of wedlock. They may feel that the most moral decision is to support their child in raising the baby rather than releasing the baby to the care of others. Church teachings about self-reliance and using family resources may seem to reinforce this belief. However, the First Presidency has addressed these concerns.

Not only does the choice to be a single parent leave the child bereft of the sealing ordinance, but its outcome can be confusing when the child is raised by extended family members. Shanna Bake of LDS Family Services explains that these children "often don't know who to call mom. Who do they listen to? Who do they go to first when they have a problem? What about discipline? It's undefined."

Some may view placing a child for adoption as "abandoning" that child. But, as Sister Bake emphasizes, adoption "is not abandoning your responsibility. It's taking *more* responsibility. It is truly taking care of your own, because you're saying, 'I can't give this child what he or she needs, but someone else can.'"

One writer expressed it this way: adoption is "not the abandonment of a baby but an abandonment of self for a baby's sake."⁷

Jessica grappled with her two remaining choices. She decided she would keep her baby, despite her father's strong feelings in favor of adoption. But then she realized that the things she valued most from growing up in her own family—a loving mother and a father with a temple marriage, the knowledge that she was sealed to her parents, financial security—were things she would be unable to provide her baby. She could give her baby love, but was love enough to raise a child? She hadn't prayed much for a while, but now she poured out her heart to Heavenly Father. The answer, when it came, was not the one she wanted, but she knew it was right.

Changes in Adoption Practice

In years past, most birth mothers who placed their children for adoption had little or no involvement in deciding who would be the parents of their children. "It was almost as if the baby went into a big black hole," says Brother Riley. Often the birth mothers were not even able to see the baby after the birth. They were left with unanswered questions:

Is my baby OK? Is she in a good family that loves and cares for her? Does he know how much I love him and why I made my decision? Does my baby know how hard it was for me?

Many adopted children faced questions of their own: What were my birth parents like? Why did my birth mother choose to let me go? Didn't she want me? What about my birth father?

Today, many of these issues have been addressed as adoptions have become more open. Usually the birth mother chooses the adoptive parents for her child, and she meets them before the birth. Together she and the adoptive family determine the type and frequency of future contact that will work best for them, whether such contact is through letters, photos, or face-to-face visits.





Sister Bake says that this type of adoption “really helps the birth mothers move on. Part of their grief comes from wondering, ‘Did I do the right thing?’ Through regular contact it’s reaffirmed: ‘Yes I did the right thing. He’s happy, he’s doing well, they love him.’ It helps them heal faster.”

Jessica couldn’t get enough of her baby.

For the past three days she had stroked little Aliza’s soft skin and hair, breathed in her baby scent, cried over her, and loved her.

Another couple would be taking her home—a couple who had all the characteristics Jessica had hoped for as she searched for her baby’s new parents. Jessica knew, deep in her soul, that Rachael and Chuck Sharp were supposed to be Aliza’s eternal parents. But for these three days, Aliza had been her baby.



Now it was time to place Aliza with her new parents. Jessica didn’t think she had ever shed more tears. Behind her sorrow, though, was the peaceful assurance that she was giving her daughter the most priceless gift she could ever give: both a mother and a father.

Beauty for Ashes

The Lord gives compensating blessings to those who sacrifice their will to His. Speaking messianically, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “The Lord hath anointed me . . . to give . . . beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isaiah 61:1, 3). In placing their faith in the Lord as they make a truly selfless choice, many birth mothers have found that from the ashes of their deepest pain, He has made something beautiful.

“Most likely this is the hardest thing these birth mothers will ever do,” says Sister Bake. “But in the end, almost all the girls I’ve worked with have said, ‘I’m a better person now—I’m stronger, wiser, and more mature.’”

Above: Chuck Sharp with his daughters.

Left: The Sharp family: Rachael, Aliza, Chuck, and Katy. The Sharps say they will forever be grateful for the two birth mothers whose sacrifices enabled them to have the family they hoped, prayed, and prepared for. Below: Rachael with Aliza and Katy.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE SHARP FAMILY



**Aliza
and
Rachael
Sharp.**

SERVICES FOR UNWED EXPECTANT PARENTS

LDS Family Services provides free, confidential counseling to unwed expectant parents and their family members at their offices in the United States and Canada. Counselors help unwed parents explore options that include marriage, adoption, and single parenting. Clients do not need a bishop's referral to receive services.

If expectant parents choose to place their baby for adoption through LDS Family Services, they may select the couple they want to adopt their baby. Birth parents and adoptive couples can have as much privacy and openness as they desire.

For more information, please visit www.ldsfamilyservices.org or call 1-800-453-3860 ext. 2-1711.

Jessica has since married in the temple and is attending school, with plans to become a nurse and to have children of her own someday. She still keeps pictures of Aliza in her living room. She receives letters occasionally; she's even seen Aliza several times since the placement.

Her experiences have changed her. She's softer now; her family members tease her about her tender side. She is grateful to the baby girl who inspired her to return to church and put her

life back on the right path. She knows she made a difficult but truly selfless choice, and she draws strength from that knowledge. Her future, like Aliza's, is bright. ■

Audrey Johnson (name has been changed), who placed her baby for adoption six years ago, acknowledges that, like many birth mothers, she used to wonder how she could recover from her grief. But, she says, "I believed Heavenly Father had a plan for my baby, and if I would submit to His will and follow His guidance, He would get me through it. And He did."

She says that at times she feels a little pensive, usually around her baby's birthday. "But the overriding feeling is one of peace," she says, "I know I did absolutely the best thing I could have done for her—and for me. It turned my whole life around. And I learned that not only could I be happy again, but I could be happier than I was before."

Six years have gone by since Aliza's adoptive placement. She is now an energetic six-year-old who loves eating popsicles, doing art projects, and playing with her three-year-old sister, Katy, who was also placed through LDS Family Services. Her parents cherish their little family, and they can't imagine it coming about in any other way. Among the memories they treasure most are the days when Aliza and Katy were sealed to them. They will forever be grateful for the two birth mothers whose sacrifices enabled them to have the family they had hoped, prayed, and prepared for.

NOTES

1. See Anjani Chandra and others, "Adoption, Adoption Seeking, and Relinquishment for Adoption in the United States," *Advance Data*, May 11, 1999, 9.
2. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102; June 2006, 104.
3. See Maggie Gallagher, *The Age of Unwed Mothers: Is Teen Pregnancy the Problem?* Institute for American Values, 1999, 9.
4. Monica L. Blume and Gideon O. Burton, *For the Love of a Child* (2005), 79.
5. See John Cairney and others, "Stress, Social Support, and Depression in Single and Married Mothers," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, Aug. 2003, 442, 445; Patrick F. Fagan, "Adoption: The Best Option," in *Adoption Factbook III* (1999), 4.
6. *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (1954–56), 2:90.
7. Curtis Young, "The Missing Piece: Adoption Counseling in Pregnancy Resource Centers," *Heartlink*, Jan. 2001, www.family.org/pregnancy/archives/a0030048.cfm.