

Adoption of older children by people in midlife: A good fit

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by DONNA KUTT NAHAS Special to Newsday



When Nancy Todd was younger, she envisioned becoming a wife and mother and living in a home with a white picket fence. “But my life didn’t work out that way,” says Todd, who is now 58.

“Mr. Right” was a no-show and Todd says she struggled with infertility and rejected the notion of conceiving through sperm and egg donations. “I was ambivalent about getting a donor egg from someone who has no biological connection to me, plus then there’s a nonexistent father,” she says. “I thought there are so many kids in the world who want and need a family.”

Just shy of 50, she adopted Carl, a 16-year-old foster child she met while he was attending high school in the Bronx, where she worked as a counselor. “My son gave me the right to be a mother, his parent,” says Todd, of Bay Shore, who married in 2011. “It was harder than

imagined, and we faced challenges to make ourselves a family but none of that matters because of what I have gotten from being his parent.”

Carl, now 25, is a pharmacy technician and lives with Todd and her husband. “Being part of a family through adoption makes me feel loved and special,” he says. “It has made me realize that I am not a mistake in this world.”

While their contemporaries look forward to the rewards of retirement, some older adults, like Todd, are embracing parenthood for the first time, expanding their families or filling an empty nest through adoption. There is no official data that tracks the ages of adoptive parents but experts say adoption has become more common among baby boomers who bring life experience, emotional maturity and realistic expectations to parenthood. For the most part, the adopted children are older, and some have special needs.

“Twenty years ago, it was unheard-of for older people to adopt children,” says Teresa Grella-Hillebrand, a therapist and director of the Counseling and Mental Health Professions Clinic at the Saltzman Community Services Center at Hofstra University. “But in the past four or five years, there has been an upsurge in interest that I’ve seen in my practice and in my colleagues’ practices.”

Midlife parents looking to expand their families often seek healthy prekindergarten or school-age children because they may view older ones as “bad or damaged,” says April Dinwoodie, chief executive of the Donaldson Adoption Institute, a nonprofit research group in New York City that also develops policy on adoption and foster care. “In reality, there are challenges, but they are not insurmountable.”

Child welfare professionals say there are many paths to late-life adoptive parenthood and older adults can adopt children of all ages, though infant adoptions are primarily domestic and may include special-needs babies, explains Katie Foley, the associate director of outreach at Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children in Manhattan. Others choose to foster

children until they can be reunited with their biological families but adopt them if the birthparents cannot provide their children a permanent home.

There are more than 107,000 foster children nationwide eligible for adoption and more than 50 percent are older than age 6, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau. In Nassau, there are currently four children eligible for adoption and their average age is 15, says Karen Garber, social services program coordinator at the county's Department of Social Services. In Suffolk, 158 children with an average age of 6 are waiting for permanent homes, according to Dennis Nowak, division administrator of Family and Children's Services/Adult Protective Services.

"Older kids [preteens and teens] need adoptive parents, and parents in their 50s and 60s are a great fit for that," says Barry Chaffkin, chief executive of Fostering Change for Children in New York City, which offers resources for families and child welfare professionals.

Age requirements for adopting internationally vary by country. Some mandate that the age difference between the new parent and adopted child not exceed 50 years.

In many cases, foster children have endured abuse and neglect or multiple placements in group homes and with families, Chaffkin says. "When you adopt a kid that has been through a bunch of life's challenges at 10 or 12, they carry that for a number of years," he says. "You need to be flexible, open-minded and not have unrealistic expectations; there is no perfect kid."

Gloria and Thomas Costello, both 59, know all about children who have suffered hardships. The couple, parents of four grown children — three biological and one adopted from Korea — embarked on their second round of child-rearing during their 40s, when they adopted eight special-needs children. After turning 50, they adopted five more. All 13 children, who range in age from 23 months to 21 years old, have disabilities or illnesses and live with their parents in Bay Shore. Six of them were the Costellos' foster children before being adopted by the couple.

“When we want to adopt, we say, ‘Give us the one no one wants,’ ” says Gloria, who’s also a grandmother of six. “My biological children call the adopted kids our second family.”

The Costellos, who spend roughly \$800 a week on groceries, receive medical and financial subsidies for the children from New York State.

Adopting from foster care carries virtually no out-of-pocket costs, unlike international adoptions that can average \$30,000 to \$40,000 or more. Prospective adoptive parents here must pass criminal background checks, attend mandated parenting classes and demonstrate that they can financially support the child. Experts say foster care and international adoptions are equally complicated and lengthy processes that can sometimes take up to a year to finalize.

Jean and Jeff Behrens first felt the tug to adopt in 2003 when they were both 43 and their daughter, Mia, was 4. Following failed fertility treatments, they decided to adopt a child but, after family illnesses, they put off their plans. Last year, nearly a dozen years later, when Mia was in the 11th grade at Bishop McGann-Mercy Diocesan High School in Riverhead and Jean and Jeff were both 55 years old, they received a flier in the mail from an adoption agency. In August, the East Patchogue couple, adopted Franklin, 13, from an orphanage in Colombia through Spence-Chapin.

“We’re at a stage of life where my daughter, Mia, is preparing for college,” says Jean, a social worker who describes the decision to adopt as a “spiritual one.” “People think you’re crazy because it certainly would be easier if we didn’t do this, but our friends, family and neighbors have been very supportive.”

In the few months since Franklin became a Behrens, his adoptive parents are adjusting to having a son who speaks little English. “I’m very good at charades,” quipped Jeff, who relishes taking Franklin on fishing trips and to basketball games. And big sister Mia says, “I’ve always wanted a sibling. I love having him here.”

Jeff Behrens resisted the adoption at first. “I always thought I needed a bigger house, a new house,” says the retired NYPD captain. “When Franklin first went into his room . . . he thought it was huge and it’s just a basic room with a closet, but to see that joy and gratitude made me re-examine my principles; that was the gift I got and continue to get every day.”

ADOPTION RESOURCES

If you’re an older adult considering adoption, here are some places to start your search:

YOU GOTTA BELIEVE

3114 Mermaid Avenue

Brooklyn, NY 11224

718-372-3003

yougottabelieve.org

NASSAU DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

60 Charles Lindbergh Blvd., Suite #160

Uniondale, NY

516-227-8519

nassaucountyny.gov/agencies/dss/

SUFFOLK DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

3085 Veterans Memorial Hwy.

Ronkonkoma, NY

631-854-9700

suffolkcountyny.gov/departments/socialservices.aspx

SPENCE-CHAPIN SERVICES TO FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

410 E. 92 St

New York, NY

212-369-0300

spence-chapin.org