

Why More Women Want 2 Dads to Adopt Their Babies

What happens when you give your baby up for adoption but still want to be their mother?



By Sarah Elizabeth Richards
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When Kayla Curtis was five months pregnant, she got up the nerve to contact a local adoption agency, and a caseworker there gave her a password to look at online profiles of couples who wanted to adopt. She spent the next two weeks scrolling through hundreds of them. "It was like the Tinder of adoption," she says. "They all sounded the same: 'We're a loving, Christian family' or, 'Your child will have a safe, loving home.'" Then she came across the profile of Joe Branham and Tom Kraft, a recently married gay couple (Joe's a real estate agent; Tom's a project manager), both from large families, who lived in Nashville, Tennessee — about six hours away from Kayla's home in southern Ohio.

"I liked that they wrote about wanting my involvement in their life and the baby's," says Kayla, who was then 20 and felt she and her boyfriend weren't ready or able to raise a child.

By that point, she knew she was having a girl. "I pictured a big Southern Thanksgiving and her running around and saying hi to everyone and they're all enamored with her." Kayla thought it would be more rewarding to help a couple who had more hurdles to having a baby on their own. She believed men could be just as nurturing as women. But there was another advantage to giving her baby two dads: Kayla would still get to be a mom of sorts. She wondered if she could be the person who talked to her daughter about getting her period or consoled her when a boy broke her heart. *Maybe this could be some kind of compromise*, she thought. Kayla could give

her child a better life, but her daughter would always know her. Her boyfriend was on board. So after "stalking" Joe and Tom online for a month, Kayla found Tom's number and called him. "Do you still want a baby?" she stammered.

Back when the stick showed she was pregnant, Kayla knew she didn't want an abortion. (Her Depo-Provera shot was supposed to have worn off months earlier, but her period hadn't returned so she assumed it was still working.) She wondered what it would be like to have a baby. Then reality hit. Her boyfriend was 19 and worked at a fast-food restaurant after having dropped out of college to pursue a music career. Kayla had finished her first year of college but wanted to save money from her job as an EMT before returning to study pre-med. Her parents offered to help, but she turned them down. "The idea of keeping the baby felt completely overwhelming."

In contrast to the days of birth moms handing over babies to social workers and never seeing them again, 95 percent of domestic adoptions now have some degree of openness, according to a survey. One study showed that birth moms who picked their babies' adoptive families had less regret, grief, and sadness than those who didn't.

Kayla's boyfriend was a sweetheart during her pregnancy, running to the store each time she craved banana peppers. But coworkers lectured her about her plans, saying, "How could you give up your baby?" or, "If you made a mistake, it's your responsibility to raise the kid." She considered quitting her job.

Some adoption experts say they've seen an increase in same-sex couples looking to adopt children from foster care since the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriages last summer. The increase is in part because same-sex couples can now meet any legal or policy requirements that parents be married, says Adam Pertman, CEO of the nonprofit National Center on Adoption and Permanency. According to U.S. Census data analyzed for *Cosmopolitan* by Gary Gates, former research director of the Williams Institute, an independent think tank at UCLA Law, in 2009, an estimated 1.4 percent of couple households with adopted children under 18 were headed by same-sex couples. By 2014, that rate had doubled.

"We're seeing some pregnant women picking gay dads because they get to be the only mom," explains Pertman. "They're still mothers, and they don't lose that identity because they're not raising their kids." While some birth mothers choose lesbian couples because they like "all that feminine energy," explains Janice Goldwater, founder and executive director of the adoption agency Adoptions Together, she's seen more women seeking gay men because they believe they won't have to compete with female parents for influence in their children's lives.

Sesa Juliana, 39, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, didn't set out to place her son Kyler with a gay male couple four years ago when she saw their Facebook ad (they have a friend in common). "I just fell in love with them. We have the same ideas about raising a kid, such as wanting him to be exposed to the arts," says Sesa, a single mom of three whose youngest child was 4 months old when she got pregnant with Kyler.

She likes her role in the new family. "No one can replace me. I'm Kyler's mom, and he's well aware he has three parents: Papa, Dada, and me." They Skype once a week, and Sesa and her 6-

year-old spent last Halloween with them in Silver Spring, Maryland. Adds Kyler's dad (Papa) Brad Benton: "We've explained to Kyler that he grew in his mommy's belly for us and she is a part of our family." One study shows children who have contact with birth relatives have a more positive identity as it relates to their adoption. "Even if it's as simple as knowing 'My birth mom is a good runner like me,'" says Susan Branco, a licensed counselor in Falls Church, Virginia, who works with adoptive parents and families.

But, Branco explains, many arrangements aren't so intimate. After the adoption papers are signed — and the birth parents are reminded they're giving up their legal rights to see the child — the parties can decide what kind of contact they'll have: Will they exchange photos once a year or have monthly visits? Yet such contracts are legally enforceable in only a handful of states. "Even in open adoptions, a birth mother has very little power," says Branco. "The most power she has is before the kid is born, when adoptive parents will say what you want to hear. After that, she has little leverage and could be disappointed." Branco cautions women hoping to retain a "mom" role to be realistic, since their kids will likely have other maternal influences, such as aunts and grandmothers, in their lives.



Because the trend is so new, there's little data on how relationships play out over time with adoptive gay couples, says therapist Debbie Riley, author of *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*. Multiple studies show that children raised by same-sex parents are just as emotionally adjusted as those in

traditional families. In Riley's experience counseling families with adopted children, the best arrangements happen when families are flexible over time. "When kids are young, they might go happily along with whatever the adults decide, but when they hit adolescence, they may want more or less contact or say, 'I'm glad you're in my life, but why didn't you keep me?'"

When Kayla's water broke one night as she watched *Family Guy*, she called Joe and Tom, then she and her boyfriend drove an hour to the hospital — she chose one far away from her coworkers' scrutiny. (Kayla says some coworkers and neighbors did not approve of her placing her child with a gay couple.) The delivery went fast, and when the baby emerged, Kayla asked the nurse to place her on her belly. "I wasn't conflicted about keeping her, so I let myself enjoy those first few moments of bonding," says Kayla, now 24. By the time Tom and Joe arrived with flowers, they were terrified Kayla would change her mind. (They'd had a prior adoption fall through.) "Do you mind if we pick her up?" they asked, cautiously. "I appreciated how they were so considerate about my feelings, and it was cute watching them fumble around trying to change her diaper. I knew without a doubt I'd made the right decision." The new dads named the baby Rachel.

Signing the papers was harder than Kayla imagined. In Ohio, a woman has 72 hours to change her mind. Kayla and her boyfriend sobbed as a social worker asked: "You are aware that you're giving up all legal rights to this child?" Joe and Tom were crying too. Kayla says the next few months were rough. "I'd cry for no reason. I'd think about her and miss her. I carried around her blanket."

Now Kayla does FaceTime with Rachel, 3, every few weeks. The dads and Rachel traveled to visit Kayla, and Kayla has visited them several times (she and her boyfriend have since broken up). "Kayla is somewhere between a friend and family who gave us the best gift we could ever have," explains Joe, who's been with Tom for 14 years. "Besides, she's cool as hell, and we would have been friends with her in high school." Rachel calls Kayla by her name. The dads will let Rachel decide what to call her in the future.

What might start off as a strong relationship can dwindle over time. When one D.C.-area birth mom placed her son with two dads at age 24 after finishing graduate school, she saw him 10 to 12 times a year. Now that she is married and has a 6-year-old, it's closer to two or three visits with texting. She wishes she could spend more time with him — the dads said they'd love that too — but has to balance the relationship with her own family. "I can only do so much," says the birth mom, who asked not to be identified, "and I know he has two great parents."

Kayla hopes that as her daughter grows older, she'll want to spend time with her. "I want to be the person she can talk to or visit when she wants to get away. But when she's 16, will she want to have a relationship or be mad because I gave her away?" says Kayla, who has a new boyfriend and plans to return to school next year. "I don't get to have a place in her life just because I gave birth to her." Still, she hopes her daughter understands one main thing: "I don't ever want her to think she was unwanted," Kayla says. "Putting her up for adoption was the hardest decision of my life, but I picked a storybook life for her."

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