

ALTERNATIVES TO ADOPTION



Information for parents considering adoption for their child

INTRODUCTION

You may be a sole mother with a new born baby - or- perhaps you are still pregnant and single. This booklet has been written from the point of view of the natural parent to give you some idea of your options and information about where you can obtain help.

In today's society, very few Western Australian mothers place their children for adoption. Prior to July 1973 when there was no supporting parents benefit for single women, little or no counselling, restrictions in the use of foster care for single women, and a great many social pressures on single mothers. More than a third of all children born out of wedlock were separated from their natural families by adoption.

Happily this situation has changed dramatically over the years. In fact, today, less than 1% of all the children born out of wedlock are relinquished for adoption. There are other options.

WE ESTIMATE THAT MORE THAN 99% OF ALL UNWED MOTHERS IN
WESTERN AUSTRALIA CHOOSE TO RAISE THEIR CHILD.

Therefore the focus of this booklet is on the ALTERNATIVES to adoption, and the help that is available to you within the community. However, we have included information on the various forms of adoption so that you may consider the full range of options available.

If you are considering adoption or seeking an alternative care arrangement for your child, it is important you also seek counselling, as the options mentioned can only be discussed here very briefly.

Even with the best of counselling, it is impossible for most people to remember all the information they have been given.

This booklet should be used as a back-up to counselling, so that you may have information in writing to take home and talk things over with your family and friends and/or the father of the child.

THE ALTERNATIVES INCLUDE

- * TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY (during the first twelve weeks)
- * ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT TO CARE FOR YOUR CHILD YOURSELF
- * SHORT TERM CARE OR TEMPORARY FOSTERING
- * STEP-PARENT ADOPTION OR PARENTING ORDER (GUARDIANSHIP)

You may wish your future husband to assume legal responsibility or adopt your child.

- * PARENTING ORDERS (GUARDIANSHIP) ASSUMED BY ANEAR RELATIVE
- * ADOPTION BY A NEAR RELATIVE
- * PARENTING ORDERS (GUARDIANSHIP) BY A NON-RELATIVE
- * ADOPTION BY A NON-RELATIVE Usually strangers to you at the time of your baby's birth.

TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY

In almost all circumstances it is important to give yourself plenty of time before making any decision with life-long implications. Unfortunately, this is not practical if you are considering abortion.

Other decisions can wait, but you should decide before the twelfth week of pregnancy whether or not you wish to continue your pregnancy.

Do **NOT**, under any circumstances, attempt any "home remedies" as these can be very dangerous. If you are considering an abortion, (i.e. - a termination of pregnancy) it is important to seek out professional counselling, (e.g. Family Planning Association of WA or Women's Health Care House).

You may wish to speak to other women about their personal experiences with abortion. You may also wish to compare the feelings of women who have surrendered children for adoption.

In an unpublished study of women who had each surrendered a child for adoption and later had an abortion, **all of the women reported that abortion had been less traumatic for them and had caused fewer problems and regrets than adoption.** Our own enquiries at ARMS verify this study. Remember though, it is important to make a decision that you feel comfortable with and which is in line with your own values.

Remember also, that you have an option to keep and care for your own child. It is possible that some women who have abortions may experience feelings of grief, regret and loss similar to the feelings of mothers who have surrendered a child for adoption.

You cannot predict for sure how you will feel about abortion if this is your choice. It is an especially difficult choice because it must be made in haste, giving you little time to consider at a time when you are feeling confused.

But do decide.

If you put off deciding you will have no choice. If you decide to continue your pregnancy, you will feel much more comfortable knowing that you are having your baby because that is what you want to do.

PREPARATION FOR BIRTH

If you are pregnant at the moment, the birth will often be made a lot easier for you if you prepare yourself in advance.

The Child Health Services (Parenthood Section) at 16 Rheola Street, West Perth, and also King Edward Memorial Hospital are just two places which hold courses for prospective parents for birth and/or parenthood.

If you live too far from Perth, your doctor, Child Health Clinic, or Community Health Office may be able to advise you of a similar service near you. King Edward Memorial Hospital also has a clinic in Hensman Road that caters especially for the needs of adolescent expectant mothers of seventeen years and younger. The adolescent clinic provides ante-natal care plus additional support services such as a social Worker and a dentist.

Information on other services to prepare you for childbirth are available from the Parent Information Centre - Health Department.

THINKING ABOUT YOUR OPTIONS

First and foremost, you should be aware that:

NO MATTER WHAT YOUR AGE YOU, THE MOTHER, ARE THE LEGAL GUARDIAN OF YOUR CHILD and any decision about your baby's future must come from you. (See section on Fathers Rights and Responsibilities and Rights of Other Relatives.)

The decision you make about your baby's future is **SO IMPORTANT** that you should not be tempted to rush into it.

Two "Golden Rules" are -

- 1) Never make a final decision when you are feeling unhappy or depressed, and
- 2) Don't make a final decision about your baby's future **until after the birth**. It is important to make the decision about a real person, not just a Concept.

PREGNANCY AND YOUR EMOTIONS

Pregnancy is not an illness or a disease. However, you will undergo a number of changes both physical and emotional.

Physical problems you may encounter during early pregnancy include - anaemia, sore breasts, frequent urination, nausea, vomiting and mood swings.

Due to the drastic changes in your body's hormones you may feel tired and sleepy much of the time. Your emotions may be unstable. One moment you may be happy and then suddenly feel like crying. These feelings are normal and may occur even in women who have planned for a pregnancy. Later, you may notice changes in your hair and skin. Stretch marks may appear over the abdomen, buttocks and breasts. These become less noticeable after pregnancy.

Varicose veins may appear on your legs or in your pelvic region, and you may become very uncomfortable with heartburn and shortness of breath due to the pressure of your growing baby.

In addition to these and other changes that occur normally in most pregnant women, an unplanned pregnancy creates an **additional emotional stress**.

This is **definitely not** the time to be considering either adoption or any of the other alternatives.

All pregnant women in the late stages of pregnancy become impatient and wish it was "all over and done with".

You will need to take care that your natural desire to have the pregnancy over and done with does not become confused with a rejection of your baby.

Remember - an unwanted pregnancy usually does not result in an unwanted baby.

No matter what your age, you cannot know the depth of your feelings for your child until after the birth - especially if this is your first baby.

For some women it takes two or three months after the birth before they feel that special sense of "attachment" or "bonding" take place.

Some unhappy women who have initially rejected their babies and signed adoption papers, have experienced this sense of bonding weeks after it was too late to reclaim their babies.

Throughout the history of humanity, the very survival of the human species has been dependent upon a **mother's natural instincts** to love and to nurture her child after birth. These instincts are **just as strong** in very young and single mothers as they are in older or married mothers.

The love a mother feels for her child is present regardless of whether the child was conceived as a result of a loving relationship or a rape. Sometimes, though, if problems exist between you and the baby's father, it takes time to sort out your feelings towards the child.

- All the more reason to - SLOW DOWN AND TAKE YOUR TIME.

"Be Comfortable With indecision".

AFTER THE BIRTH - DECISION MAKING

GIVE YOURSELF TIME BEFORE MAKING A DECISION

The law in this state allows you to sign adoption papers as early as **the twenty eighth** day after birth. However, you should not feel under any pressure to make a decision as early as this. Nor should you feel any pressure to sign the preliminary adoption particulars, especially not while you are still recovering in hospital.

After the birth of a baby, many women suffer some degree of depression, even in the happiest of circumstances.

You need time to know and understand your own feelings. If you are considering any form of adoption or guardianship, it is best to wait. At the very least until you have your post-natal check-up and have been declared fit, both physically and emotionally by your doctor.

If possible, we suggest that you give yourself at least **twelve weeks** in which to make a decision which is going to affect both you and your baby **for the rest of your lives**.

You should also keep in mind that securing a continuous relationship with your baby as early in its life as possible, will be important to your future relationship with each other. Research has shown that at some time between the ages of six months and nine months, most babies develop a special emotional tie to one specific person in their lives. Ideally, therefore, it is best if a decision can be reached before the baby is six months old.

COUNSELLING

Counselling and assistance may be obtained from a number of agencies.

These include –

Adoption Research and Counselling Service

Pregnancy Help

Department of Family and Children's Services, Adoptions Branch.

Your hospital social worker
Adoption Jigsaw (WA) Inc.
Department of Social Security
Legal Aid Commission

WHAT HAPPENS TO MY BABY WHILE I AM MAKING MY DECISION?

We would encourage you to care for your baby yourself while you are deciding what to do. If you need support during this time, don't be afraid to ask for help from any of the agencies mentioned, or your family and friends. Perhaps both you and your baby would like to be boarded with a family for a period while you make up your mind? It is much better for your child's development if he or she is not parted from you for as long as possible, especially in the early months of their life.

SHORT TERM CARE - TEMPORARY FOSTERING

Foster Care means that another family will care for your child for a short period of time, say several weeks or for longer periods such as six months.

The natural parents remain the child's legal parents and guardians and have the right to visit and contact their child.

If you or your family cannot care for your child immediately, you may need assistance with temporary fostering for your baby while you make your decision.

Please Note: Foster care other than that arranged with immediate relatives must be with foster parents who are approved and licensed by the Department of Family and Children's Services. Further information can be obtained by phoning the Foster Care Association in Subiaco. (See telephone numbers in the back of this booklet.)

COST OF FOSTER CARE

The Department of Family and Children's Services will meet the cost of foster care. If the child is not in your care you do not receive the sole parent pension. You should discuss this possibility with your social worker.

A word of caution! Long term foster care should be avoided for the child's sake and for yours. The law provides that if a child is left in the care of foster parents for a period of three years, the foster parents **MAY ADOPT YOUR CHILD.**

Most substitute parents endeavour to reunite the child with its natural mother as soon as practicable. A few see alternative care as a "backdoor" to adoption, and put pressure on young mothers to allow them to adopt the child.

If your child's care givers encourage you to give them your child for adoption or guardianship you should immediately contact your social worker or seek help from either the Foster Care Association or ARMS – Association Representing Mothers Separated from their children by adoption.

SETTING GOALS - MAKING PLANS

In the next section we will discuss the assistance and support available to you if you make the choice to care for your own child.

This is the choice that is now made by more than 99% of all unwed mothers in Western Australia.

We also discuss briefly your opportunities for further **EDUCATION, JOB TRAINING, and EMPLOYMENT** while parenting your child.

Firstly, though, do keep in mind that if you try and plan for the rest of your life during your pregnancy, or within the first few weeks after the birth, as some people may want you to do, you will become overwhelmed and discouraged, and you may be tempted to give up in disgust. It is far more productive to seek solutions to **immediate needs**, allowing the distant future to take care of itself.

This does not mean you should just drift and make no plans, because that is the worst thing you could do. In fact, some parents have lost their children because they drifted and made inadequate plans for their children. Adequate plans, though, do not mean detailed plans to cover all of the next twenty years. **Make flexible plans for you and your child that will meet**

your needs now for the next year or two. Making plans to go on welfare for now does not mean you will be on welfare forever. The average time-span for a person to remain on Sole Parents Pension is two years. You may return to work or complete your education much earlier if you wish. Living with your mother now does not mean you must be living with her in five years. You will be surprised at how much you can accomplish for yourself if you set attainable short term goals instead of an unrealistic plan for the next twenty years.

OPTION 1 - TO KEEP AND CARE FOR YOUR OWN CHILD

YOU ARE A PARENT

You may have noticed that some of the questions your professional helper, or even your family or friends, have asked you concern whether or not you really want to become a parent at this time in your life. In addition, you are probably hearing the many reasons why you should not become a parent now. People may be pointing out to you all the disadvantages of being a parent.

It is true that parenting is an enormous responsibility. Raising children demands commitment, time, patience, understanding and much hard work from parents. There is also much joy attached to being a parent. For you, however, the choice of whether or not you will become a parent now has already been made. Planned or not, prepared or not, you are a parent.

Even if you decided at this stage to relinquish your child - **nothing can make your life as it was before.** You have become a mother and will always be so. Your legal relationship to your child can be severed by adoption or guardianship but not your genetic or emotional relationship.

Besides the problems of parenthood, there are many joys as well, and some of the most difficult things in life are those that also give us the most rewards and allow us to grow as people. Parenthood gives you the opportunity to nurture, guide, and support, protect, encourage, share with and give to your children. There are smiles and tears, thanks and tantrums, times when your child seems perfect, times when your child seems to be a

miniature monster. All of this, all the loving and the giving, can enrich your life as nothing else can.

SUPPORT AVAILABLE IN THE COMMUNITY

A common theme of counselling is often an emphasis on whether or not you can raise your child alone. Keep in mind that no parent ever raises a child completely alone, whether married or not.

Support is available to sole parents in the form of family members, friends, neighbours, churches, baby-sitters, as well as day care centres, kindergartens, Schools, child health centres and voluntary support organisations.

You should keep in mind that your single status is probably only temporary. The majority of single mothers go on to marry. Step-parent adoptions and/or parenting orders (guardianship), by your new husband, may be a consideration for you in the future. This is commonplace and accounts for most of the adoptions currently taking place in Western Australia.

FAMILY SUPPORT

Have you confided in your own family? Have you asked for their support? Remember that your baby is your parent's GRANDCHILD. Many parents have strong feelings for their grandchildren especially AFTER THE BIRTH and are only too happy to help their daughter to keep and care for her baby.

When you approach your parents for their support, you should keep in mind that, just as mothers need time to adjust to the **reality** of the baby and of being a mother, so too do grandparents need time to adjust, perhaps even more so. This may be a good time to seek family counselling.

If you do not have parents who can help you, perhaps you have aunts, uncles, older brothers or sisters, or a close friend who is willing to help you.

You should not hesitate to ask your relations/friends for help - perhaps to share accommodation at least for a little time after you leave hospital while you learn to care for your baby.

SUPPORT FROM THE CHILD'S FATHER OR HIS PARENTS

If your own family is not supportive - it is possible that the baby's father or his family may wish to help. Have you told the father of the child that he is a parent?

Even if you had a disagreement with him, he has the right to know he is a father. You may like to share this booklet with him and discuss your options together.

A FATHER'S RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

As with other members of your family, the father will need time to adjust to the knowledge that he is a father. Where possible, the natural father should assist financially with maintenance for his child. A blood test may be necessary to prove paternity.

On rare occasions, a father may encourage a mother to surrender their child for adoption because he fears he may be asked to provide maintenance for the child. Most fathers, however, do not want to see their child lost by adoption. If the mother chooses to place their child for adoption she may do so. **However, the child's father has a right to disagree with his child being placed for adoption,** and he may also apply for parenting/custody rights of the child if he wishes. To do this, **he should apply to the Family Court** through a solicitor. If there is any doubt as to his paternity, a blood test may be carried out.

The adoption will be stopped and custody granted to the natural father if the court is satisfied it is in the child's best interests.

RIGHTS OF OTHER RELATIVES

Likewise, the child's **grandparents** or, indeed, any relatives or persons interested in the welfare of the child, **have the right to disagree with the child being placed for adoption and may apply for parenting/custody rights through the Family Court.**

The adoption will be stopped, and custody granted to the relative, if it can be shown to be in the child's best interests.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

SOLE PARENTS PENSION:

Formerly the Supporting Parents Benefit, is paid by the Department of Social Security (Commonwealth Government) immediately following the birth of your baby. The amount is updated every six months so you should check with Social Security for the latest figures

SENIOR COLLEGES AND CAMPUSES

Tuart College, 105 Banksia Street, Tuart Hill, 6060

Canning College, Marquis Street Bentley 6102.

These colleges are for students seventeen years of age or older and allow you to complete your high school education as a full time student, i.e. five days a week, or part-time according to your needs.

Canning College has a Child Care Centre that takes children from two and a half years. The other colleges have no on-site child care but local child care centres are nearby.

COLLEGES OF T.A.F.E. - TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION:

As of January 1997 all childcare centres that were previously connected to TAFE Campuses have been privatised. This means that though you may be able to enrol your child in a childcare facility nearby or on-site to the school you wish to attend, you are given no special preference as a student. So enrol early. Ring your local TAFE to enquire about nearby child-care facilities.

UNIVERSITIES: - With child care on-site

Murdoch University - babies six months to six years

University of W.A. - babies one month to six years

Curtin University – (Two centres)

1) Babies six weeks to three years

2) Three years to five years

Edith Cowan University - Nedlands, Churchlands, Mount Lawley and Joondalup Campuses - birth to six years.

ATTENDING UNIVERSITY WITHOUT FINISHING HIGH SCHOOL - ALTERNATIVE TEST FOR ADULT. ADMISSION.

If you have reached the age of twenty years or older (i.e. mature age), and would like to attend University, it is possible to do so even if you have not finished your high school education.

You should contact the TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS SERVICE CENTRE at 100 Royal Street, East Perth, 6004 and ask to sit for the Special Tertiary Admission Test (S.T.A.T.).

Several tests are held during each year and they are usually held on a Saturday. After receiving the results of the S.T.A.T., you then need to apply to the university where you hope to study through the Tertiary Institutions Service Centre and you may be accepted according to the results of your test.

Telephone the TERTARY INSTITUTIONS SERVICE CENTRE for further details of this option.

STEP. PARENT ADOPTION OR / PARENTING ORDERS (GUARDIANSHIP)

1. YOUR HUSBAND ADOPTING YOUR CHILD

It is likely that you will marry in the near future to someone other than your child's natural father. If so, you may consider having your child adopted by your new husband.

Step-parent adoption has the advantage that your child will have the right to take your husband's name and automatic rights of inheritance as if born in the marriage.

The disadvantages are -

Adoption severs the relationship between the child and the natural father and his family.

You need to engage a lawyer as the Department does not handle the legal arrangements for relatives wishing to adopt.

2. ALTERNATIVELY YOUR HUSBAND MAY APPLY FOR A PARENTING ORDER (GUARDIANSHIP)

The advantage of this, instead of adoption, is that the relationship with the natural father's family, e.g. grandparents, is not severed.

The disadvantage is that your husband may need to adjust his will to include the child.

You may simply change your child's surname by licence or deed poll. Contact Registrar General, Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Note: Should you happen to marry the natural father of your child at some time in the future, you will simply need to advise the Registrar General, Births, Deaths and Marriages, of your marriage and they will then prepare and send you out forms to be filled in and your signatures witnessed, and the child's birth will be reregistered with full details.

A point of interest. Did you know that one in every 6 mothers that gave up a child for adoption, later married the natural father of their lost child.

PARENTING ORDERS (GUARDIANSHIP) BY A RELATIVE

If you are unable to care for a child yourself, perhaps because you feel you are too young, have you considered the possibility that your own parents (or some other relative) may wish to assume parenting care of your baby? After all - babies with very young mothers often have very young grandparents. A second consideration is that the father of the child and/or his parents may have strong feelings for their new little relative, and may wish to take care of the baby. Parenting orders are granted by the Family Court.

Family Laws have recently been revised and 'Guardianship' laws that tended to treat children as a commodity have been replaced by 'Care

Orders' or "Parenting Orders" of various types. These orders recognise the rights of children to access their parents, and the child retains their heritage.

The intention of a parenting order is that it is **permanent**. However, if circumstances change sufficiently, variations could be made in the future.

A judge of the Family Court would need to be absolutely satisfied that any variation in the care arrangements was in the best interest of the child.

ADOPTION BY A RELATIVE

Grandparents and other relatives may also apply to legally adopt the baby as their own. However, in most cases a parenting or care order is usually sufficient and considered preferable.

PARENTING ORDERS (GUARDIANSHIP) BY A NON-RELATIVE (OUTSIDE THE FAMILY)

Parenting Orders (guardianship) by a couple who are not related to the child is a legal alternative to adoption. This system means that care and responsibility is transferred to another set of "parents" whilst the natural mother retains her legal relationship with her child as the child's mother.

If you are in a position that you have to give your child to someone outside the family, then such an order has an advantage over adoption in that it can be tailored to meet the specific needs of each case. Such agreements, like an Adoption Plan, **need to be legally binding** and included with the care order arrangements, otherwise you may find the new parents renege on the agreement (go back on their word) once they have been granted care of your child. Agreements made can be enforced by the Courts.

With a Parenting or Care Order you will know the new identity of your child and may have on-going information about your child's health and welfare, and possibly contact.

However, you **should understand that in other respects** it is very similar to adoption and **you will lose all rights to parent your child**.

As with adoption, it is very important that you seek counselling. We suggest talking with mothers who have the experience of losing a child to adoption

E.g. ARMS – Association Representing Mothers Separated from their children by adoption or Adoption Research and Counselling service before making a commitment.

Care Orders are granted by the Family Court and arrangements are made by a lawyer.

ADOPTION BY NON-RELATIVES (OUTSIDE THE FAMILY - USUALLY STRANGERS)

All adoptions by non-relatives are arranged by the Department of Family and Children's Services, Adoptions Section, 189 Royal Street, East Perth.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

If you are considering adopting for your child, be sure to read the section at the front of the booklet -

"Thinking about your options"

"Pregnancy and your emotions"

"After the Birth - Decision Making"

It is also a good idea to obtain counselling from a number of different sources, to speak to mothers who have also relinquished a child for adoption, and to read books about other adoption experiences.

While in hospital, and prior to signing an Adoption Consent Form, you have the right to see, cuddle, feed and care for your baby. You may also have your baby "room in" with you. During a confused pregnancy you may think you will never want to know anything, that you just want it over and done with. Some mothers mistakenly believe that if they do not see their child they will not feel the loss. Your body, however, will not let you forget that you have given birth.

Even if your baby does not seem real to you at first, or does not seem like **your baby**, eventually you will feel the loss. For instance, one mother who placed her child for adoption shortly after the birth **described her feelings**

at three months after the adoption as "waking up as if from a nightmare" and thinking, "What have done!"

Research now verifies that you are very real to your baby. For nine months your child has been in intimate contact with you and knows your voice and heartbeat.

Your child also feels the loss of you and all that is familiar when parted from you.

It is healthier if you can deal with your situation at a conscious level. Seeing and caring for your baby will help to connect you with the reality of your experience.

To avoid future regrets and guilt, the choice you make should be based on reality, not on pretence.

TAKE YOUR TIME

Don't allow anyone to pressure you into a hasty decision. You may take as long as you like with your decision.

TEMPORARY FOSTERING

May be arranged to care for your baby while you consider your options (read section on Short Term Care-Temporary Fostering).

Did you know that in some parts of the world (e.g. Finland) it is illegal to sign an adoption consent form before the baby is twelve (12) weeks old? This is done to protect the mother from making such a serious decision before she has sufficiently recovered from the birth. It is also meant to protect the child from unnecessary separation from his/her natural family. Unfortunately, mothers and babies are not given the same degree of legislative protection in Australia. You need to be aware of this to protect the interests of your baby and yourself.

"WHAT IF I SIGN AN ADOPTION CONSENT AND THEN CHANGE MY MIND?"

You have twenty eight (28) days from signing the Consent Form in which to change your mind. That is to **REVOKE CONSENT**. During this time you may visit your baby if you wish, as often as you like. You may also take photographs.

If you change your mind after the twenty eight day period, you should still contact your social worker **immediately**. If the baby is not already placed in a new home it may still be possible to have your child returned without any further action.

CHALLENGING AN ADOPTION

After a child is placed in the care of the prospective adopters, it still takes several months (approximately six months or longer) before an adoption is finalised. During this period the Director-General of the Department of Family and Children's Services (State Government) is the Legal Guardian of your child, not the prospective adopters. Only after a judge of the Family Court has granted an Order of Adoption does the prospective adopters become the new legal parents of the child.

If your child has been placed, but the adoption not yet finalised and you, or your child's father or any other relative, decide that you do not want the adoption of your child to proceed, you should

1. Notify the Department of Family and Children's Services.
2. Contact the Adoptions Clerk at the Family Court and ask him to stop the adoption proceedings.
3. Obtain a lawyer as soon as possible.

If necessary, you should apply for Legal Aid. This process is far more difficult and uncertain than simply "revoking a consent". However, the Court may return the child to his/her natural parent or relatives if it can be shown to be in the child's best interests to be raised within his/her natural family if that is possible.

SELECTING ADOPTING PARENTS

If you wish, you may ask to see a selection of two or three dossiers on prospective adopters. These dossiers will describe the prospective adopters **without** revealing their identity. However, it must be pointed out that, even though you may decide upon a set of adopting parents, adoption workers **cannot give you a guarantee** that these are the people who will adopt your child. You will be given another choice. -

"MAY I KNOW WHO WILL ADOPT MY BABY?"

Providing this has been agreed upon in the Adoption Plan, you may know the name of the adopters. Alternatively you may only want to receive no identifying information about them.

However you can have a say about the adoptive family chosen for your child, e.g. religion, ethnic background, living in the country or the city and whether other children are in the family.

"WHAT IS AN ADOPTION PLAN?"

An Adoption Plan is a legal agreement between birth parents and adoptive parents and sets out any arrangements for the exchange of information about the child. It may also set out arrangements for contact between the adoptive parents and birth parent(s).

"CAN INFORMATION BE EXCHANGED OR CONTACT MADE WITH THE CHILD AFTER THE ADOPTION HAS TAKEN PLACE?"

ONLY if this has been agreed to as part of the Adoption Plan.

"WILL MY CHILD KNOW WHO I AM IF THERE IS NO ADOPTION PLAN?"

Only if the adopting parents tell him/her your surname which is written on the "Order of Adoption". Once the child is an adult, however, i.e. over eighteen years, he/she will have full rights to his birth certificate which contains your full name. He will also have access to your marriage certificate if you have married.

"WILL MY CHILD WANT TO SEE ME AT EIGHTEEN YEARS OF AGE?"

Some do, but many others are quite content just to have all the details of their birth and your name and leave it at that. Some wait until they are much older before they make enquiries. Some don't enquire at all. Others may be desperate to know their true parentage throughout their childhood years but are reluctant to discuss the issue for fear of hurting the adoptive parents' feelings or appearing ungrateful.

Adopting parents nowadays are encouraged to help their children search.

"CAN I KNOW THE NAME OF MY CHILD AFTER EIGHTEEN YEARS?"

You may be allowed to know the identity of your child once he/she has become an adult. However, you should keep in mind that eighteen years of loss, grieving, uncertainty and anxiety about your child's welfare is the equivalent to a life sentence. We know that much damage to the natural parent's emotional health and physical health (from stress related diseases) can and does occur in that time.

Even if you find your missing son or daughter in future years, they may refuse to meet you, perhaps forever.

"CAN I KEEP MY IDENTITY A SECRET FROM THE ADOPTING PARENTS?"

NO.

Once the adoption is finalised, the adopting parent's will be issued with an "Order of Adoption" form. This form will state your child's original names, including the original surname. Therefore, the **adopters will always know your family name**. In addition they will be given birth details and background information on you and the father of your child.

"WHAT IS A COURT ORDER?"

A person who is part of an adoption can apply for a Court Order from the Family Court of Western Australia to prevent the release of identifying adoption information. The Court Order will only be granted if the Court

believes that the release of the information will place the person, their marriage partner or children at serious risk.

"WHAT IS AN ADOPTION ORDER?"

An Adoption Order is a certificate issued by the Family Court of Western Australia and the adoptive parent's then become the legal parents of the adopted child. The Adoption Order is usually granted between six and twelve months after the child has been placed with the adopting parents.

"WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CHILD UNTIL THE ADOPTION ORDER IS MADE?"

The natural parent is responsible for the child until he or she has signed the Adoption Consent Form. The Director General of the Department for Family and Children's Services then becomes the child's guardian until the Adoption Order is granted by the Family Court of Western Australia. After this, the adoptive parents become the legal parents and guardians of the adopted child.

"CAN MEDICAL INFORMATION BE OBTAINED?"

YES. When someone wants medical information about another person in an adoption the Department will try to find the person and obtain the information. A letter from a doctor may be needed if specific medical information is sought

"CAN PEOPLE SEPARATED BY ADOPTION GET IN TOUCH WITH EACH OTHER?"

YES. People over eighteen years of age can try and contact someone using the following services of the Department of Family and Children's Services.

*** Contact Register**

People can place their name on the Contact Register, a service managed by the Department's Family Information and Adoption Service. Anyone involved in an adoption (including relatives) can place their name on the Contact Register stating whether or not they want to be contacted.

If two people who are part of the same adoption, place their name on the register requesting contact, each will be advised.

* Message Box

This is a service where a person can leave a written message with the Department. This message is kept at the Department until the person to whom it is written makes contact with the Department.

The person to whom the message is written is always given the opportunity to decide whether to accept the message.

All messages are confidential

* Outreach Service

This is where the person involved in an adoption (including a relative) can ask the Department to try and find someone from whom they have been separated because of an adoption.

POST ADOPTION COUNSELLING

If you decide to give up your child for adoption, it is important for your own sake that you plan to attend for counselling for some time after placing your child for adoption in order to help you cope with the grieving process.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, you must realise that adoption is **PERMANENT** and **LIFELONG** and once adoption is finalised-the law is such that

YOU HAVE PERMANENTLY LOST ALL RIGHTS IN RELATION TO YOUR CHILD.

A FEW POINTS TO CONSIDER

It is now socially acceptable to be a single mother in the same way as widows and divorced mothers are accepted.

You are a very important person to your child. Children benefit most by being raised by their **OWN** family. It is really important to recognise that there are some things that a child needs that only the natural parents can

give. However, parenting can be a difficult task. Therefore, you should consider in advance what moral and practical support is available to you.

Even if adopted, there is **NO GUARANTEE** that your child will remain in a two parent family. The rate of divorce is now in excess of one marriage in every three. This applies to married couples who adopt children.

Secondary Infertility. Some women who have given a child up for adoption in the past have assumed wrongly that they would always be able to have other children in the future.

However, an estimated ten percent of relinquishing mothers have given up the only child they were ever going to have.

Recent research into the long-term effects of adoption on the natural mothers shows that many mothers continue to suffer feelings of loss and grief throughout their lives. Indeed, the sense of loss and grief can intensify with the passing of years. This contradicts the popular myth that mothers "go away and forget" or that they "Get over it with the birth of other children."

Adoption, be it "open" or "closed" is a serious step, and the long term consequences for you and your child need to be carefully considered.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING INFORMATION EXCHANGE IN AN ADOPTION? - (SEMI OPEN ADOPTION)

An adoption agreement that provides for an exchange of information is exactly the same as closed adoption except that it allows for the possibility of an on-going exchange of non-identifying information between the adoptive parents and the natural parents using the adoption agency as a "go-between". For instance, the adoptive parents may agree to exchange letters once or twice a year, perhaps with a photograph, and let you know of the child's progress.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING AGREED CONTACT IN AN ADOPTION? (OPEN ADOPTION)

In an Open Adoption Plan it is possible to arrange the occasional visit once or twice a year. Where adoption is truly necessary, open adoption is

generally more humane than closed adoption. Any agreement regarding contact must be included in the Adoption Plan.

WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES OF INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND AGREED CONTACT?

Natural parents not only want their children to be loved and cared for, most want and need to provide that love themselves. The fundamental fact about all adoptions, whether open or closed, is that natural parents lose to adoptive parents the right, joy and responsibility of loving and raising their children. They lose their natural place in their children's lives.

A WORD OF CAUTION!

Information exchange and agreed contact have been tried in other countries for many years. **Many mothers who would not have otherwise considered adoption, have been persuaded to give up their children with the promise of ongoing contact.**

The great danger in these systems is that once the child is legally adopted, many adoptive parents renege on their agreement (go back on their word). Some literally shift house (or travel inter-state) and are not able to be traced. Others simply refuse to supply on-going information or allow visits. When this occurs there is nothing the natural mother can do. Access agreements made in adoption cannot be enforced by the Court.

As with "closed" adoptions, both open and semi-open adoptions are PERMANENT and LIFELONG. Even though you may gain some comfort from knowing the identity of your child or from having the occasional information about your child's welfare, you should understand that you will PERMANENTLY lose all rights to parent your child.

THE CHILD'S RIGHTS

If only a baby could talk! What would he/she have to say on the matter?

Some single mothers subconsciously feel their baby is rejecting them.

This is because other people presume to speak on behalf of the child, telling the mother that her baby needs more than she can give, undermining her

self-esteem and her confidence to parent her own child. "The best interests of the child" is a devastating phrase for a mother that may be in temporary difficulties. It suggests that comparison should be made between natural parents and infertile strangers who may wish to adopt.

Most parents are not required to compete with strangers for the right to raise their children. A child has the right to be raised within his/her own family, preferably by at least one of the natural parents.

You may be interested to know that the United Nations "**Convention on the Rights of the Child**" held in October 1989 in Victoria, stated that;

"The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality, and as far as possible, **the right to know and be cared for by his or her natural parents.**

It is important for friends and family to realise that if they show acceptance of the baby, this will make it easier for the mother to accept the baby.

ADOPTED CHILDREN MAY FEEL REJECTED

Mothers who have given children up for adoption in the past have done so believing that they were making a supreme sacrifice "in the best interests of the Child".

Young mothers considering adoption are not generally told of the widespread misunderstanding by adopted children that they were "rejected by mothers who did not want them".

It is heartbreaking for mothers to discover years later that **their sacrifice is seen by the child as a rejection**, yet this is commonplace. The assumption that they were rejected by "their own mothers" can cause a lot of pain and psychological damage to adopted children.

IS A CHILD ANY BETTER OFF ADOPTED?

Being adopted is different, but not necessarily better or worse.

Some adoptive parents desert their families, divorce, die, become alcoholic, abuse their children and in a few documented instances have even murdered their adopted children. Some adopted children enjoy more material benefits than they might have with their own family. In other instances the reverse is true. In the majority of cases, natural families and adoptive families are very similar and the child is no better or worse off than had he or she remained with their own parent.

ADOPTED CHILDREN SUFFER IDENTITY CRISIS

Adopted children do lose their natural heritage.

They lose their right to be raised within their own families and the knowledge of their own social background and medical history. They lose the right to know "Who am I?"

THE ISOLATION OF THE ADOPTED CHILD

Adults who have been adopted children tell us that they often felt "different" from children who were born into their families. Some have found comfort in the company of other adopted people by joining support groups such as "Adoption Jigsaw".

Finding support in each other's company will be much more difficult for the children adopted today, as there are very few other adopted children of the same age group. For example, in one year (1969) six hundred and seventy three (673) local children were placed for adoption outside the family.

Today in Western Australia we have a much larger population and yet in the eighteen months following the declaration of the 1995 Adoption Laws, only twenty adoptions of healthy local children have been finalised.

Adopted children in the future will feel an even greater sense of isolation as they are so few in number.

ADOPTION OF THE OLDER CHILD (PRE-SCHOOL)

All parents, whether married or single, have difficult times with children. Mothers with pre-school children can have times when they feel everything

is getting too much for them to handle and they may feel very depressed for a while.

It is during these times that single mothers are most vulnerable. It is not uncommon for a mother in a state of depression to consider adoption. They may sign a consent form and within twenty eight days they have permanently lost all rights to their child. The child is gone forever.

If the mother is treated for her depression, often the very thing that blocks her from making a full and complete recovery is the fact that during her illness, she has lost her child by adoption. (If the mother also has other children, the loss of their brother/sister can cause psychological problems for the remaining children in the family.)

It is hoped that one day legislation will be in place which will require a mother to receive a medical clearance before signing an adoption Consent.

Until that day comes, we can only repeat our advice.

- Never make a decision about adoption while you are feeling unhappy or depressed.

- Seek medical attention for yourself - and short-term respite care for your child.

KNOW THE VALUE OF YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEMS

In Western Australia we now have a whole range of support systems that make it possible for any mother who wishes to keep and care for her own child, to do just that.

It hasn't always been this way. The Sole Parents Pension (or Supporting Parents Benefit as it used to be called) was not available to unmarried mothers before 1973.

Temporary Foster Care was not offered to mothers considering adoption in the 1960's and 70's.

Child care centres, learning centres and voluntary support groups have been established in the last decade.

It is important to know that none of these improvements just happened. These changes are due to a whole range of people, both professional and voluntary, who have worked and lobbied for the rights of the single mother and her child.

Mothers who were once forced to give up their babies for adoption now have a choice.

The great majority of single mothers value their support systems.

Occasionally though, a couple will live together in a de facto relationship while still claiming the benefits of a sole parent. While this type of arrangement generally benefits the male partner the most (he receives the benefits of a married life without the financial responsibilities) it is always the mother who pays the penalty for social security fraud. A mother gains nothing from such an arrangement and stands to lose so much.

CONCLUSION FROM MOTHER TO MOTHER

Those of us who are now relinquishing mothers remember all too vividly how frightened and alone we felt when we faced our unplanned pregnancies.

In our fear and confusion some of us allowed others to make our decisions for us.

Many of us were panicked into making a hasty decision within days of childbirth "in the best interests of the child" or because we were told by well-intentioned people that "bonding" should take place with the adoptive parents as soon as possible.

Some of us felt so guilty for having "sinned" or having "shamed our parents and families" that we thought we could only atone for our mistakes by relinquishing our children.

Parents and families who were once shocked by our pregnancies and encouraged us to surrender our babies because they believed it would be better for us and for our futures, have spent years watching their daughters suffer.

Many grandparents have grieved with their daughters. Most would give a great deal to be able to turn back the clock and do things differently.

Some of us were warned that the loss of our children would be painful, but most were assured that our pain would eventually disappear.

In the early years we were told we would "go away and forget". In later years we were told that we would "come to terms with our loss".

We had no idea of the magnitude of the pain, nor did we understand that we would continue to feel a sense of grief and loss for the rest of our lives.

A few of us (approximately one in ten) surrendered the only child we would ever bear.

For those of us for whom there were other children, we discovered that no other child could replace the child we lost. We love all our children, including the Surrendered child.

We have also come to realise the pain we have unintentionally caused our children, who felt that they were "given away" because they were not wanted. They also felt isolated and unconnected because they had no knowledge of where they came from and who they were.

They lost the ordinariness of seeing themselves reflected in their family's features or characteristics, and so feeling okay about themselves.

They also lost their natural brothers, sisters, grandparents.

We may have learnt to live with the pain of our loss thinking we had done the best thing for our child, but on reunion we have found, however good their adoptive family has been, that our child has still suffered these other side-effects of adoption and they grieved too.

Most of us now understand they we were still confused and not sufficiently recovered from childbirth when we were asked to sign the adoption papers, **but we still cannot believe that we were actually persuaded to surrender our child to the unknown.**

When most of us would not give away a puppy to a faceless, nameless stranger, it is hard to accept that we were obliged to surrender our children

to total strangers who would not allow us to know their names, nor even say "how do you do".

Most of us surrendered our children without understanding the alternatives that were available, the services we could have had, or the rights to which we were entitled.

We wrote this booklet because you do have alternatives and you do have rights. We want to make sure that you and your family members are fully informed so that your decision will be based on knowledge - on reality, and not on fantasies of "forgetting" or of a guaranteed "better life" for your child.

There is far more we wish we could tell you, but space does not permit.

We know that it is difficult to foresee the future, to anticipate how you will feel years from now.

We hope this booklet has given you an idea of the range of alternatives and what to expect.

We wish you and your child much happiness.

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