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To BAAS Heart to Heart;

We very much enjoyed Kyle Heger's "Fight Back Against the Misuse of Adoption Language" in the Winter 1992 issue. As adoptive (BAAS) parents who are very sensitive to the misuse of language concerning adoption, especially implicitly negative terms like "real" or "natural" child or parent, and "gave up for adoption." We believe that language and people's feeling about adoption must co-evolve. We have given a lot of thought to the way we speak about adoption, and try to raise others' consciousness about the words they use.

We both felt that although we were of course sympathetic to Mr. Heger's concerns, and very stimulated by his ideas, we didn't really agree with him. First, the word "adopt" is too much a part of the English language to try to police. One can "adopt a resolution," have an "adopted country," and even, perhaps illustrative of the trivialization that bothers Mr. Heger, "adopt a highway (!)" Most of these uses, though interestingly not to "adopt a pet," are in the standard dictionary as secondary meanings (the first, at least in our dictionary, is "to bring a child into one's family"). Words are creatively borrowed, adopted and co-opted all the time.

This is not to say that the dictionary is the arbiter of how the language is, or more importantly, should be. We're all in favor of neologisms, especially when they are an attempt to rectify some kind of hurtful situation. However, to us, there are several things wrong with the idea of trying to abolish the use of "adoption" when it doesn't specifically refer to a child. The word is not just borrowed occasionally, it has a full-fledged meaning in many linguistic situations, most of which are perfectly valid and non-derogatory (though occasionally trivial, as Mr. Heger points out). To say, for example, that "sisterhood is powerful" does not diminish familial sisterhood. Rather, it borrows all the positive and wonderful aspects of the latter to enrich a new relationship. It seems to me that "adopting a pet," a "new stance," or even a highway does not threaten the deepest, most important meaning of the term, and in fact, pays homage to it in some sense. Whether a child believes this or not will probably have a lot to do with the way her own parents speak, and the way they articulate the ideas of adoption to her.

Second, it seems more powerful and surely more fun to simply invent a new word for what we have done, rather than engage in a frontal assault on the English language. Having said this, we thought for a while about what this new term might be. We tried out things like "chosen child" (not really true, and also sounds, to a Jewish family like ours, too much like "chosen people"), "love child" (the Supremes already used it, and besides, it means something else!), and "care child" (too much like Care Bears). We came up empty-handed (headed?), but that doesn't mean there might not be such a term. Any ideas from BAAS families?

Third, and more seriously, it is usually better to act positively than negatively. I don't feel it's right to tell someone, who may love their "adopted pet" in a very real way, that they can't use a word because we want to reserve that word for our own relationship. That seems, in a way, like regulating the use of the word "love." I have no trouble with the idea that I love my daughter Anna and also love bluegrass music, Mexican food, and a good basketball game. It's not the richness and multi-purpose usage of language we're trying to fix, it's terms which are inherently derogatory. By saying we "adopt a pet" nobody is really saying anything bad about our relationships with our children, they're expressing a very positive feeling towards a different situation.

Mr. Hegler's correct that this is something we'll have to explain to Anna ("Mommy, do highways have mommies and daddies?"), and it may be tricky, but we need to pick our targets carefully in these kinds of linguistic battles. We feel, personally, that it's preferable to have people adopt poodles than to be asked if we plan to have any "natural" children.

All this said, we want to stress that we also feel that Mr. Hegler's cause is a good one, and we applaud his articulateness and tenacity. Maybe what this points out is that these issues need more debate in the progressive adoption community. While we may differ about details, it is important that we present a united front against the prejudices, stigmas, and just plain ignorance that confronts adoptive, and particularly, to wax temporarily neologistic, omni-terran-polychromatic adoptive families.

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