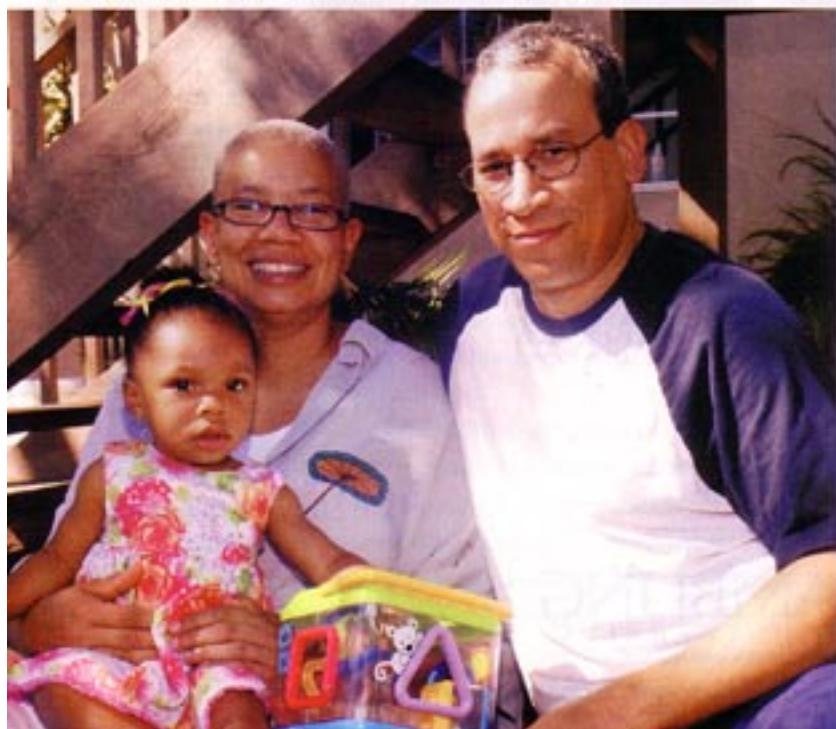


Adoptive parents Sonya and Dr. E. Charles Lampley adopted daughter Lauryn to complete their family. With 8-year-old son, Jarrett, the family poses in the backyard of the Chicago home. Robin Sewell and Chris Boree (below), who also chose adoption, share a family moment with daughter Christiane.



The Joy Of Parenting Adoption

More African-Americans are opening their hearts

By Tracey Robinson-English

THE adoption ceremony of baby Dariel Devante was bittersweet. At Spence-Chapin, a private adoption agency in New York City, an older couple who already had children and financially unable to raise an infant, tenderly surrendered their 6-pound, four-week-old daughter with black ringlets and caramel-colored skin into the arms of Donald and Renee Patterson. They would become her new adoptive parents.

The first embrace melted away the pain of the Patterson's battle with infertility and ended a difficult, yearlong search for a baby to fulfill their dream of starting a family. "The moment we saw her, we forgot everything that we went through," Renee recalls. "It was well worth it. She is a joy."

Today, 7-month-old Dariel Devante kicks her feet happily when she hears Renee's voice. "She knows I'm mommy," Renee says.

The Pattersons are among the thousands of African-American couples opening their hearts to children across the nation. Despite misconceptions, African-American adoption is reportedly on the rise and is taking place nearly as often as other adoptions.

November is National Adoption Awareness Month, and efforts are being made to spread the word and educate prospective parents about the process and rewards of bringing home a child to complete a family. In the African-American community, outreach efforts are underway in church-

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es, schools and neighborhoods, and through word-of-mouth networking.

"There's a misconception that the Black community doesn't take care of its own—that's ludicrous," says Hillary Ward, an outreach coordinator at the Sayers Center for African American Adoption in Evanston, Ill., a program founded by NFL Hall of Famer Gale Sayers and wife, Ardythe. "Whether it is formally or informally, we have had a tradition of taking care of our children," Ward adds. "We want to make more families aware that private adoption is available to them."

Operated through the Cradle, a respected private adoption agency in Illinois, the Sayers Center has placed more than 350 African-American infants with families since 1994. Ward observed that more Black couples in their 30s and 40s, as well as single African-American women, are stepping forward to give a child "a forever family." Single moms like Pam Batridge of Chicago adopted daughter Kamaya as an infant six years ago. "My goal was to parent," she says. "My heart was open to loving a child."

Whether you seek a fee-based private agency or a state-supported program, adoption has changed in the Internet Age. The process that was once cold, secretive and formal is faster, more open and marketed everywhere from television ads to Web sites. The Internet is connecting many adoptive parents to agencies, facilitators and birth parents. A browse on the Internet reveals numerous Web sites with family photos posted of couples wanting to adopt. Some are also chatting online to find a child who is right for them.

"Adoption is becoming very competitive," says Samantha Walker, an adoption specialist at the African-American Infant Program at Spence-



During family play time, the Lampleys enjoy an activity-filled day in their backyard as do the Sewell-Boree family at their Los Angeles home. Family counselors say it is important that adopted children have a constant feeling that they are wanted.



Chapin in New York City, one of the largest private adoption agencies in the Northeast.

The adoption process still requires that prospective parents deal with fingerprinting, background checks, waiting lists, reams of legal paperwork, visits from social workers and home-study courses. Completion of the process takes a minimum of six months to two years.

Adoption professionals reason that birth parents today are more empowered to choose from a pool of eligible adoptive parents and stay in contact through a growing "openness" trend. The term refers to ongoing contact between birth parents and adoptive

parents after the adoption is complete to serve the best interests of the child.

A birth mother selected Dr. E. Charles and Sonya Malunda Lampley of Chicago to adopt daughter Lauryn, now age 4. The couple, who already had a young son, Jarrett, decided to adopt a daughter to complete their family.

"We met with her [birth mother] a few times in advance of the birth, talked about the delivery, defined what openness meant, and developed a relationship," Sonya Lampley says. "When she went into labor, she called us. We arrived an hour after Lauryn was born. We spent time with the newborn and birth mother. Four days

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later, we took Lauryn home."

The Lampleys' openness agreement involves an exchange of phone calls, letters and postcards. "We have a strong bond," says Sonya. "It takes time to get used to the idea. You work through the relationship looking at the long-term and what is in the best interest of the child."

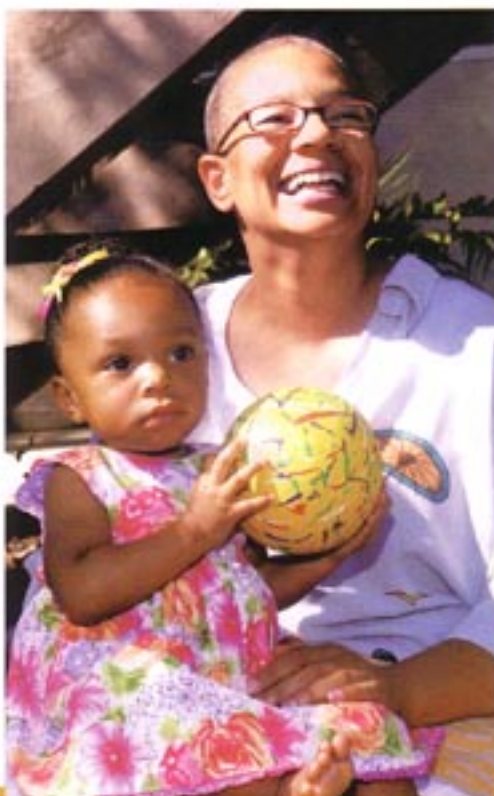
The sobering truth is that infants—regardless of race—are in high demand and scarce in state adoption systems. By comparison, older African-American children are plentiful in foster care programs and are often difficult to place for adoption, experts say.

Many couples who want to adopt an infant turn to private agencies that have relationships with birth mothers who want to place a newborn for adoption. Despite popular belief, private adoption agencies do not allow adoptive parents to select the baby's gender or skin tone.

Agency fees range from a sliding scale to upwards of \$10,000 for an African-American infant. Fees for White infants range from \$20,000 to \$40,000 adoption, experts say. "There is bias in the adoption system," says Bev Hall, director of Pact: An Adoption Alliance based in Oakland, Calif., which specializes in placing African-American infants with families. "The fees are based on the race of the child," Hall says.

High fees often make private adoption prohibitive for some African-American families. Some critics say charging a fee to adopt a Black child perpetuates a legacy of slavery.

"The system has not always been sensitive to the African-American community," adds Hall. "The adoption system must do a better job to understand the African-American community. Money and principles



Sewell shares a playful moment with daughter Christiane while Dr. Lampley enjoys a musical duet by son Jarrett and daughter Lauryn.



Robin says. "Clearly, we need even more Black parents to step to the plate. We had the means and desire and decided it was the right thing to do." □

are key issues. While the fees go for services, some African-American families feel uncomfortable as if they are paying for a baby."

There's also the matter of a birth mother having a change-of-heart before the adoption becomes final. The Pattersons experienced three disappointing change-of-heart episodes. "You realize that it's an extremely difficult decision for the birth mother to make," says Renee Patterson. "At the same time, you're on an emotional roller-coaster."

Though laws vary from state to state, once birth parents sign documents surrendering their rights, the adoption is final. Some states require a waiting period before surrender to allow birth parents time to change their minds. Once the period is up and the papers are signed, they can't take back the baby.

An increasing number of adoption agencies are now requiring birth parents and adoptive parents to develop a plan together to benefit the adopted child long-term. Experts say that openness allows for adoptive parents to be in a better position to answer questions about medical histories and the child's concerns about physical and cultural identity.

For adoptive parents Robin Sewell and Chris Boree of Los Angeles, both birth and adoptive families visit regularly as one big, extended household. Adopted daughter Christiane is receiving the best of both worlds now and in the future, they say.

"She will not have nearly the complications or horror stories of not knowing who her parents were,"