

Researchers study willingness to adopt children with special needs

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Queen's University researchers Philip Burge and Dianne Groll (Psychiatry) and two co-authors have just published a study regarding the attitudes and preferences of prospective adoptive parents. The study found that those who were most open to considering children with special needs had been formally seeking to adopt for some time and had completed government-required SAFE assessments and training.

The report entitled, *Making Choices: Adoption seekers' preferences and available children with special needs*, explores the willingness of prospective [adoptive parents](#) in Ontario to adopt children with abuse experiences and various degrees of behavioural disorders, learning and /or physical disabilities among other factors.

"Finding adoptive parents for child wards with special needs has long been a challenge. Notwithstanding some recent minor improvements in government policy, serious challenges still remain in placing thousands of child wards with special needs in permanent adoptive homes or guardianship arrangements," says Dr. Burge.

The study examined the preferences and attitudes of 5,830 AdoptOntario online registrants between May 2009 and February 2012. The registrants were classified as "public users," "prospective adoptive parents," or "adoption ready," based on their stage in the adoption application process, and were asked a number of questions to determine their preferences in child characteristics for adoption. The categories included questions on adopting older children, sibling groups, or children

with any of the 20 most common special needs referred by child welfare agencies.

Children whose disabilities were described as "mild" rather than "severe" were more preferred for adoption. As well, children whose special needs designation was as a result of past abuses (such as experiences of physical or sexual abuse) were more preferred versus those with concrete medical diagnoses and enduring conditions (such as autism or cerebral palsy). Dr. Burge suggests that this reluctance could be due to participants' unfamiliarity with the needs of children with medical conditions and an overestimation of the functional impacts of some disabilities.

The study proposes that in addition to the mandatory parenting courses required of adoptive parents by the government, it may be useful for the content of these courses to require direct contact between [adoption](#) applicants and children with the most commonly identified special needs. Increased familiarity with the children with these conditions, as well as the care needs of such children, may help parents feel more prepared to adopt a child with special needs.

"Matching our child wards with prepared and committed families gives these [children](#) a sense of permanency and security", says Dr. Burge.

The full text of the study is available online from the *Journal of Public Child Welfare*.

More information: *Journal of Public Child Welfare*,
www.tandfonline.com/action/showArticles?journalCode=wpcw20

Provided by Queen's University

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