

# Potential parents put through wringer in attempt to adopt a child

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## It makes no sense to set the bar higher for adoptive parents than for IVF.

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Next week is [National Adoption Awareness](#) week. So in the interest of raising awareness, let's try a quiz. It's called Spot the Moral Difference. Imagine that two Victorian women, Kimberley and Adele, want to be mothers. They are 45 years old, unmarried and infertile. Both have criminal records for non-violent crimes. In fact, Kimberley is a real person - Kimberley Castles, who is currently serving a prison sentence for welfare fraud. While in prison, she applied to undergo infertility treatment. Let's say the woman we're calling Adele applied to adopt a child.

Kimberley had to fight for it, but in July the Victorian Supreme Court ruled that she suffered from a legitimate medical condition and [should be allowed](#) access to IVF. But Adele could not even get to first base. Her age, marital status and criminal record made her ineligible to adopt.

So what is the morally relevant difference that allows Kimberley to be a mother but not Adele? Let's look at some possibilities.

Maybe adoptive parents need to be different to other parents. Maybe the government needs to choose special people to adopt because of their guardianship role. But the law doesn't see much difference. Both IVF and adoption legislation state that the welfare and interests of the child concerned is paramount. Both pieces of legislation tell us that decisions about who can be a parent must be based on what is good for the child.

Why then are the selection criteria for adoption so much stricter than for IVF? Why is it that people who apply to adopt a child must share their life stories, answer personal questions about their sex lives, confirm their heterosexuality, have their finances scrutinised and their homes checked by a social worker?

If Kimberley is potentially fit to be a parent, why isn't Adele?

Perhaps the difference is that Adele would be raising "someone else's" child - a child with a history, with needs and interests that already exist. It makes sense to try to "match" children with adoptive parents. But can the needs and interests of an adopted child be so different to those of Kimberley's IVF baby? Doesn't every child need a loving home, security, healthcare, education and a sense of belonging? And if the choice is between life in an orphanage and life at home with an older single mother, surely most "Adeles" would be good enough parents.

A third possibility is that the difference between adoptive parents and IVF parents is biology. Maybe we think that IVF parents are naturally better parents because they have biological connections to their children.

Unfortunately, there are many tragic examples of biological parents failing to do their job. Clearly, biology does not guarantee good parenting. So the simple fact that Adele would not be genetically related to an adopted child does not necessarily make her less capable of parenting. Biology does not explain the difference in the way we treat IVF and adoption.

So maybe the difference between access to IVF and adoption is simply a matter of supply and demand. There are many more potential adoptive parents than there are children to adopt, and the waiting lists are very long. Maybe we can justify stricter criteria for adoption because there are more parents to choose from, and we can choose the "best" possible parents. But here is the tricky bit - what makes someone "the best possible parent"? Is it really possible to distinguish between "the best possible parent" and "a good enough parent"?

Everyone who applies for IVF is assumed to be "a good enough parent" unless there is evidence to the contrary. For adoption, the bar is set much higher and applicants have to provide evidence that they will be good parents. In our research with people who have been through the adoption process, some described the assessment as "like a criminal investigation".

The criteria for both IVF and adoption should be transparent, evidence-based and morally justifiable. Kimberley Castles had a chance to argue her case before an independent panel and then in the Supreme Court. By contrast, people who are denied access to adoption have no recourse to appeal. Many adoptive parents in our study believed that any attempt to even question the process would prejudice their application and jeopardise their chances. Many described feeling like they were put through a wringer and being made to jump through hoops. Potential adoptive parents deserve the same respect and consideration as anyone else who believes that raising children is a profoundly human part of life.

There may be some people who think that neither Kimberley nor Adele should be allowed to parent. But do we really want to deny people the opportunity to parent simply because there are "better" people to choose from? Good parents come in many varieties - old, young, gay, straight, married, single, healthy and ill. If "only the best will do", then many of us would never have been allowed to be parents.

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*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/society-and-culture/potential-parents-put-through-wringer-in-attempt-to-adopt-a-child-20101103-17dz7.html>*