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Trans-racial adoption debate rages

By Lini S. Kadaba and Benjamin Y. Lowe

In Boyertown, the Stone family keeps busy with a houseful of children.

Victoria is a cheerleader and enjoys writing and reading, while sister Amanda plays softball and loves cooking. Brother Michael wrestles and collects sports cards. Dale delights in books; Maddi treasures her baby dolls. All were foster children whom Michael and Cathy Stone adopted in recent years. They are between the ages of 2 and 10.

But in the adoption world, some experts are still asking whether children like these can grow into emotionally healthy adults with strong identities when they live in families like the Stones'.

Michael Stone, 35, is white. So is Cathy, 54. Victoria, Amanda and the younger Michael are biracial, part African American and part Puerto Rican. Maddi is African American. And Dale is white.

"We couldn't have kids of our own, so we prayed to have one," said Michael Stone, a day-care director. "Now we have five. Love doesn't see color."

Not everyone would agree. Some wonder about the wisdom of trans-racial adoptions. Black social workers and others question whether parents of one race can truly support children of another race in the development of self-esteem.

Others worry that too much emphasis on race-matching would hinder placement of the large number of minority children in foster care. Most adoptive families are white.

"It's a very hotly charged issue," said Gloria Hochman, spokeswoman for the National Adoption Center in Philadelphia.

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About 28 percent of children in the public welfare system end up in adoptive homes where at least one parent is of a different race or ethnicity than the child, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Federal law, which tried to settle the issue more than a decade ago with the passage of the Multiethnic Placement Act, says adoptions cannot routinely be delayed or denied on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion. The act grew out of concern that

minority children, who are represented disproportionately, were languishing in the foster-care system as they waited to be adopted by same-race families.

But the role of race in adoption still simmers and at times boils over, as happened recently in Chester County.

Susan and Randall Borelly, a white couple in the Downingtown area, have said in a federal lawsuit filed Tuesday that they were denied the chance to adopt a 3-year-old foster child because he is black and they are white. The boy was removed from the home April 5 and placed for adoption with a family that is black.

The case has already raised many of the same issues that have raged since the 1970s, when the National Association of Black Social Workers called trans-racial adoptions "cultural genocide."

While the rhetoric has softened in recent years, those who prefer race-matching argue that white families cannot provide minority children all the racial and cultural supports that same-race families can.

Those who support trans-racial adoptions counter that race-matching delays adoptions of minority children, and the practice should not be resurrected.

"The research simply argues against the broad notion that trans-racial adoption harms children," said Richard J. Gelles, dean of the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also an adviser on the Borellys' side.

Race-matching was common practice before the mid-'90s, adoption experts said. Under current law, agencies that receive federal funds can consider race only in individual cases as one of many factors.

Since the Multiethnic Placement Act, as well as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the number of children in foster care and waiting for adoption has declined.

In 2004, the most recent year for which statistics are available, there were 518,000 children in foster care, with 118,000 waiting for adoption. That's down from 552,000 foster children in 2000, with 132,000 waiting, according to the federal government.

"That's good news," said Wade Horn, assistant secretary for children and family at the U.S. Health and Human Services Department.

Others say that the numbers have not improved enough to justify a call for more trans-racial adoptions. Instead the bigger factor in the backlog, they say, is a problem with the system itself. For example, they say there is a lack of effort to recruit black adoptive families.

"The system isn't working well," said Ruth-Arlene W. Howe, a law professor at Boston College who studies trans-racial adoption. "This country is still terribly racist, but it's not directly acknowledged."

Litigation-jittery agencies, she and others say, have gone too far, ignoring race completely in placements. Between 1997 and 2004, Horn said, 147 complaints under the Multiethnic Placement Act have been logged.

Joseph Crumbley, a Jenkintown family therapist, is president of the board of directors for the North American Council on Adoptable Children. He said research shows that "children in trans-racial adoptions have special challenges."

Love alone is not enough, said Crumbley. Minority children need skills to deal with inevitable discrimination and positive role models to counter negative stereotypes. Same-race-adoptive parents have an advantage, he said. "That history is yours that you can share with the child," he said. "You don't have to find a surrogate."

Lawmakers, he said, need to better address "when and how race can be considered in the placement of children." He would like routine consideration of race and culture, because they affect children.

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The Stones say they think they are doing just fine when it comes to raising their "beautiful rainbow family."

Even though the family lives in an overwhelmingly white community, they have made efforts to stay connected to the children's blood relatives, the parents said.

"We will always uphold their roots," Cathy Stone said. Prejudice has not been a problem so far, she said, though they get their share of stares. "If they experience things we haven't, we'll both experience them for the first time," she said.

When asked if people think of her differently because she has white parents, Victoria said, "No one has ever said that to me."

Cathy Stone said that the only thing she's learning to adjust to is rap music. "I'm down with that," she said, smiling.

"Not really," Victoria quipped.

Barbara Keane, president of the Families With Children From China-Delaware Valley, said she and her husband, both white, regularly celebrate the culture of their two daughters.

That might mean language school, or exposure to Chinese traditional dance, or visits with women of Chinese descent.

"I have a bias that trans-racial adoptions work," said Keane, of Doylestown, a psychologist.

Cindy Thomas, 49, a white social worker who lives in Mount Airy, plans to finalize the adoption of an African American infant, Maya, through a private agency later this year.

Thomas said she was learning firsthand about assumptions people make based on race. But she does not think such issues should influence adoption placements.

"The best combination," Thomas said, "doesn't always mean it's going to be the same-looking kind of family."