

# Genetics and the Culture of Child Adoption in America

Melissa Smoot

with the guidance of Dr. Tom Segady

## Key Questions

What **attitudes**, historically, has American society held toward the adoption of children by unrelated adults? What attitudes do Americans hold today?

-

How have popular ideas about **familial inheritance** affected the ways we think about child adoption?

-

How might **future advancements** in genetic thought and technology affect the practice of child adoption? Will these effects be novel, or will they **reflect** historical trends?



Flash card used by eugenicists to demonstrate that “feeble-mindedness” was a real, heritable trait--one that plagued unwed mothers and orphan children in particular.

(via Ellen Herman: <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/feeblemindedchildren.htm>)

“People who have never done I.V.F. don’t realize that my year and change of trying is nothing – a drop in the ocean compared with what others experience to have a baby: 10 or more I.V.F. cycles, years of their lives. Yes, I could stop IVF and adopt. **But the truth is that I want to carry a child to term inside my body.** I want to carry our child. I know it sounds selfish to some – even to me sometimes – but I still believe this IVF will work. I still believe I have a few good eggs left. And if I don’t, there are other options before we consider adoption.”

Amy Klein

‘Have You Ever Thought of Adopting?’  
(via The New York Times: [http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/29/have-you-ever-thought-of-adopting/?\\_r=0](http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/29/have-you-ever-thought-of-adopting/?_r=0))

## Key Findings

**Historically**, adoptive families faced societal pressures to conceal the lack of blood relations. This led to the careful matching of children to adults based on traits perceived heritable. Formalized scientific thought was used by some (e.g. eugenicists) to delegitimize adoption.

**Today**, adoption is viewed as a positive social phenomenon. Adoption culture still faces challenges; for instance, special-needs and older children are often passed over by potential parents in favor of “normal” babies.

**Potentially**, advancements in genetic technology could undermine adoption by further narrowing the pool of desirable children and by introducing alternatives for attaining children that may be more attractive to adults who presently adopt out of necessity.