

Abandoned babies get hope for new life

A NEW-BORN baby was found abandoned last night outside a church in a cardboard box. Police are appealing for the mother to come forward.

This is becoming an all too common scenario in Hong Kong, with the number of abandoned babies in the territory showing a sharp rise.

In 1994, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) reported 11 abandoned babies. Last year the figure more than doubled to 23, and from January to the end of May this year there have already been 11 abandoned babies.

When abandoned children are found they are placed under the Protection of Children and Juveniles Ordinance while the police try to trace the parents.

The child will be placed in one of the SWD children's centres and a case-worker will be appointed to attend to the child's needs.

If the parents cannot be traced, the director of the SWD will be appointed the child's legal guardian and he will be responsible for the child's welfare plans, including the possibility of adoption.

The officer in charge of one of the SWD's adoption units, Li Chor-man, said children who were eligible for adoption had either been deserted by their parents or had been relinquished by them, for personal or financial reasons.

"Most of the abandoned babies are left by young unmarried mothers aged about 15 or 16, they may be unemployed or still at school," Ms Li said.

She said the majority of young mothers abandoned their babies because they had no child-care assistance and lacked the maturity to look after them.

"Often the young mother feels isolated because her family refuses to offer emotional and financial support," Ms Li said.

*As the number of abandoned babies continues to rise, the Social Welfare Department has the job of finding them new, loving parents, writes **Kate Morrow***

"Sometimes couples are too immature to cope with the emotional stress and the responsibility of having a child and they separate from their partners when the baby is born."

Ms Li encourages mothers who abandon their babies to come forward and seek help from the SWD because she said they may be able to offer them some advice on child welfare, including fostering or adoption.

"The baby's welfare is our primary concern," she said.

Other babies who are put up for adoption have been relinquished by their parents.

Usually they are unmarried, or they may be mentally ill or have a history of drug addiction.

Ms Li said that sometimes older couples may not be able to cope with having a mentally handicapped baby and for this reason will decide to give up their child for adoption.

"They may feel guilty because they have not produced a 'perfect' baby, or they may not have the resources to care for their child," she said.

"We never force a couple to give their baby up for adoption, but we do give them advice.

"We make sure if parents voluntarily give up their baby for adoption they are doing it for the right reasons. We will discuss all the options with them and let them make up their minds."

Once the children are formally relinquished, the parents sign a declaration consent form and the child is made a ward of the director of Social Welfare through court proceedings, then they are put up for adoption.

"Usually couples wanting to adopt are childless. They approach us because they have a desire to share their love. They feel a baby will complete their family," Ms Li said.

She added that an "ideal" couple wanting to adopt must be committed, must treat the child as if it were their own and accept it as an individual.

Any couple wishing to adopt will have to complete a detailed questionnaire. They will be visited by a SWD case worker, who will ask them to talk about themselves and their family circumstances which are relevant to the adoption.

If the couple are suitable they can file an application to the court and a hearing will be scheduled at the family court.

The couple will appear before a judge. If they are approved an adoption order and certificate will be issued. The whole process can take less than a year to complete.

Ms Li believes there will never be a shortage of local couples wanting to adopt babies.

However, for children with special needs, it is a different story.

The majority of children with special needs are sent overseas because there are fewer local couples willing to give them a home.

Last year, 119 children were adopted locally and 11 children were adopted overseas. In 1994, 128 children were adopted locally and nine children were adopted overseas.

"Usually, local adoptive parents like to have 'normal' children," Ms Li said.

"That means under the age of eight, healthy and coming from

families where there are no social problems."

Gretchen Ryan, a member of the Adoptive Family of Hong Kong, agrees.

"There is still a bias in the community towards children with special needs. We need to offer support to the children and help dispel any myths," she said.

Children who are classified as having "special needs" are either mentally or physically handicapped, or they may have parents who are drug addicts or have a criminal background.

"The trend in Hong Kong is that couples are still reluctant to accept children who are over five or who have severe disabilities," Ms Li said.

She believes local parents are not open-minded when it comes to adopting children with special needs.

She said Hong Kong did not have the resources to cope with their very specialised care and people were also more conservative.

"We are trying to encourage younger couples to adopt children with special needs and older children, over the age of five and under the age of 21," Ms Li said.

Within the SWD adoption programs, both local and overseas, the priority is to place children with families of the same ethnic background, to minimise the adjustment problems and cultural changes.

However, exceptions are made in overseas adoptions as most of the children have special needs and the SWD aims to find them the most suitable home.

The SWD often liaises with the International Social Services Hong Kong branch and Mothers' Choice, which arranges adoption in the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

There are certain requirements all adoptive parents need to abide by in Hong Kong.

They must be married, be at least 25 years old and not more than 40 years old.

The family must not have more than three biological or adopted children, unless they are willing to adopt a child with special needs.

They must have been a Hong Kong resident for at least 18 months and be planning to stay in the territory for another 12 months to allow time to complete the adoption process.

Other factors taken into consideration include the couple's personality, attitudes and

experience, financial security and ability to love the child.

Couples must also have a reasonable standard of health and education.

Most adoption cases have a happy ending, Ms Li said, and abandoned children are found homes with loving parents.

"I see an amazing transformation in the children from the time they arrive in the children's centre to the time that they leave to go to their new home with their adoptive parents," she said.

"When we see the children when they first arrive they are shy, isolated and sometimes ill, but when we see them interacting with their prospective parents, their faces light up, they develop a healthy appetite and they look content."