

Globalizing adoption: Linking children and adoptive parents

by [Anthony D'Amato](#) in the [June 30, 1999](#) issue

Millions of unwanted children around the world languish either in foster homes or "foster warehouses"—bleak government-run institutions where they are ignored by an indifferent staff. Many who survive become street children, enduring a jungle-like existence in the major cities of developing nations. An estimated 40 million children live this kind of life in Latin America alone.

Meanwhile, there are millions of childless people in the world who would love to adopt a child. Why, then, are so many children abandoned? Why are orphaned children not matched up with people who want to adopt them?

International law has moved strongly toward saying that each child has a right to grow up in a family. The international legal community has realized that a child must be nurtured and cared for if it is to grow up to be a responsible member of society. As Mercedes Rosario de Martínez, the founder of Colombia's Foundation for the Adoption of Abandoned Children, put it, "We don't give a child to a family; we give a family to a child."

But there is a huge gap between declaring children's right to have a family and implementing cross-country adoption. Despite the tireless work of private adoption agencies, millions of adoptable children and prospective parents still are not able to come together. Economists would call such a problem a market failure.

Some years ago Judge Richard Posner suggested that one way to bridge this gap is by treating these children as commodities. If they were put up for sale, then people who wanted them could simply bid for them. Posner's proposal was immediately denounced by people who said it would be degrading to put a price on a baby. I'm less dismissive of the idea. If the alternative to the market approach is to abandon children to foster warehouses, then Posner's proposal is certainly the lesser evil.

Another criticism of the commodities idea is that putting a price on an infant would cause supply to rise to meet the demand. Impoverished women would then become

pregnant in order to sell their babies. But it seems paternalistic to me to turn down a proposal because we think poor people will use it to their advantage.

There is, however, at least one serious problem with Posner's suggestion. Commoditizing children would have the unintended consequence of increasing kidnapping and child-snatching. These things are already happening. In many developing countries, a woman has a far more valuable asset in her baby carriage than in her handbag. For a payment of \$20,000 (half of which they keep for themselves), many underground adoption agents in the U.S., including some lawyers, will arrange for an American to adopt a child from a developing country. The person wishing to adopt is simply told to pick up the child and ask no questions. Imagine the extent to which child-snatching would escalate if children could readily be sold to a commodities broker. No baby would be safe. This objection alone must make us reject the idea of creating a market for children.

Is cross-cultural adoption a job best carried out by governments? Unfortunately, for children without families the fact that the earth is divided into sovereign nations is part of the problem, not the solution. For example, when Romania had its first democratic elections in 1990, its government allowed foreigners to adopt some of the children living in state-run institutions. The Romanian press criticized the government for "exporting our precious human capital" and for selling "our birthright to greedy, wealthy foreigners." The government then halted the adoptions and sent the children back to filthy warehouses. The children's welfare was not considered. Any government trying to ease international adoptions opens itself up to the same attacks. Consequently, governments suppress rather than address the problem of unwanted children.

Private initiative and charity offer the best solution for bringing together children and adoptive parents. The plan I propose might cost \$10 or \$20 million—a drop in the bucket for some major charitable foundations. World centers, perhaps one per continent, could be set up where children and the people who wanted to adopt could be linked. The children could be taken there by anyone interested in their welfare—lawyers, doctors, social workers, clergy. Since no money would be involved, no one would have a financial motive for bringing them. Airlines could be induced to give free travel to the children. The children could live at the centers while volunteer doctors and nurses examine them and give them proper medications and inoculations.

People wanting to adopt would e-mail their names to an Internet site. After their suitability as parents was investigated and established, their names would go on a waiting list. When children became available for them, they would pay their own way to the center to pick them up. They would then be required to file an annual report to the Internet site, detailing the state of the health, education and so forth of the adopted child.

This is a very feasible project. And it is greatly needed.