How to Parent

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Or at least become one. There are an estimated 2.7 million children with HIV worldwide, and some 10,000 here in the U.S. Although an unlucky 20 percent die by age 4, the rest, with HAART's help, can live free of symptoms into adolescence and beyond, although many will struggle with the consequences of poverty, abandonment or drug addiction. Rose Winters, who heads the Children With AIDS Project of America, says, "These children will first go, on an 'unofficial' basis, to live with extended family or a family friend. If these informal arrangements don't work out, the children then enter foster care or are placed for adoption."

Adopting an HIV positive orphan is, of course, a life-changing decision that demands some serious soul-searching. And if you are gay and positive, get ready for all sorts of red tape. Still, despite some glaring exceptions (Florida, Mississippi and Utah), a majority of these United States are open to allowing gay parents to adopt. Check www.hrc.org/familynet/adoption_laws.asp for legal specifics in your state. Your chances will depend on the county you live in, the judge you stand in front of and whether you are adopting alone or in a couple.

When applying to adopt, you are likely to be asked many personal questions to assess your capacity to care for a child. Your HIV status is relevant only to the extent that any health condition might impede parental responsibilities or harm the child. Matt Coles, director of the AIDS Project at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), says, "I have not seen any formal policies about adoption by HIV positive parents," adding that since HIVers are protected under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), most state governments and judges will at least pause before denying adoption to parents with HIV.

On a more, er, positive note, the fact that you want to adopt a fellow HIVer puts you on a shorter list than those vying for "healthy" kids. For more information on how to go about finding a child with special needs, log on to www.aidskids.org. The site, run by Joy and Jim Jenkins' Children With AIDS Project of America nonprofit, offers not only their own heart-tugger about adopting two tots with the virus but also an online adoption form and loads of links. And try adoption.about.com/cs/gaylesbian for links to sites addressing issues specific to gay and lesbian parents.

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