

Friday, 17 May 2013

Keeping up appearances



Visual similarities between children and their adoptive parents facilitate acceptance and social inclusion, Flinders University researcher [Dr Damien Riggs](#) (pictured) says.

In a survey of 40 parents of fostered or adopted children, Dr Riggs found visual appearances to be highly significant in the formation and development of families.

The survey of parents in Victoria and South Australia, undertaken between 2011 and 2012, showed the majority of parents often ignored any incorrect assumptions about their family's visible similarities in social settings.

“A recurring theme that came out of the interviews was that when someone said to a parent how much their child looked like them, the parent wouldn't correct them and, interestingly, often neither would the child,” Dr Riggs, a senior lecturer in [social work and social planning](#), said.

“The parents experienced these types of comments again and again, whether they were at the supermarket by strangers or dropping the kids off to school, and it really mattered to them,” he said.

Dr Riggs said that while parents did not intentionally try to make themselves look like their child, they did choose to ignore misjudgements about their family's visual similarities to avoid uncomfortable questions about their child's past.

“It's a way of passing – if someone assumes the parent and child look alike they are less likely to ask questions that may be upsetting or marginalising for the parent or the child.

“When you've overcome so many odds to adopt your child in what can be a challenging system, it makes life much easier when you don't have to answer questions about why they were put into foster care and whether or not they were abused.

“It facilitates inclusion when you don’t have people questioning or challenging you all the time.”

Dr Riggs, whose study was funded through an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant, will discuss his findings at a public forum – [*Keeping up appearances: The importance of visual similarities in the formation of permanent care families in Australia*](#), to be held on June 13 in the Noel Stockdale Room of Flinders University’s Central Library from 1pm to 2pm.

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