

Gay dads want their son to grow up straight

By Candace Sutton and Larry Schwartz
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Two men and a baby... Tony Wood and Lee Matthews playing with baby Alexander.

An extraordinary documentary about how two gay men flew to America and hired a surrogate mother to have a son is set to rekindle the debate about what constitutes an Australian family.

In the US they call it the "gayby boom".

In Australia, where laws vary, it is still the centre of emotional and ethical controversy.

Tony Wood, 40, and Lee Matthews, 34, are an upper-middle-class professional couple who decided five years ago they wanted to be parents.

The men each donated their sperm to fertilise eggs donated by a young American woman they chose after studying a catalogue in a process "very cut and dried, like retail shopping".

The resulting embryos were then impregnated into another American woman, who gave birth to a 2.8 kilogram boy, Alexander, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, last December.

In a process which is banned in most countries around the world, the men used a California-based surrogacy and egg donation firm, Growing Generations, which is dedicated to the gay and lesbian community. The firm's website says it has assisted with the birth of at least 196 babies in cases from around the world.

There is no law prohibiting surrogacy in NSW. But no contract between parties to undergo surrogacy would be recognised in the courts and the legal status and the nationality of a child born overseas would be under question.

The Melbourne couple brought Alexander back to Australia and now plan to raise the boy, who Mr Matthews said he hoped would grow up "straight" rather than gay, in a two-father family.

Despite the fact that the woman who carried Alexander, Junoa, is flying to Australia in December for his first birthday, Mr Wood and Mr Matthews do not consider her the boy's mother.

"She is not actually the mother . . . at the end of the day you have two dads, you don't have a mum," Mr Matthews said.

The men, who have been a couple for 14 years, initially encountered some "vehement" opposition from within the gay community to their plans to parent.

But they said increasing numbers of gay couples, particularly lesbians, were opting for parenthood.

"We believe our family is entitled to the same recognition as other families," Mr Wood said.

The men's story is expected to stir up a controversy when it airs as an SBS documentary, *Man-Made: The Story Of Two Men And A Baby*, on September 30.

Community division on the subject of gay unions was highlighted by Prime Minister John Howard's recent comment that "if the same status is given in our society to gay unions as is given to traditional marriage, we will weaken that bedrock institution".

A spokesman for the Catholic Church said yesterday gay male parents were denying a child its natural right "to the love and nurture of a mother".

"With stolen children, adoptions and all those things of the past 40 years, we have seen the problems that come with family situations than couldn't be avoided.

"What are we creating with these children? This is a case of adults fulfilling their own desires, but it is the children who suffer."

Bill Muehlenberg, vice-president of the Australian Family Association, said one of several concerns was "the commodification of children, the idea of baby-buying and all that goes with it". He said surrogacy, "with or without homosexual couples", was problematic.

"We may be placating the whims and fancies of adults but too often the very real interests of children are being overlooked in the debate," he said.

But Dr Justin Oakley, director of Monash University's Centre for Human Bioethics, said: "I don't see there's any particular problem with it and I think it's a shame [Mr Matthews and Mr Wood] have had to resort to such means in order to become parents or to become fathers."

Mr Matthews said he believed he and his partner had become parents "for all the right reasons . . . because we thought we could offer . . . a nurturing, protective and supportive environment.

"Parenthood isn't right for everyone. There's a huge lobby that sees surrogacy, and surrogacy in particular for same sex couples, as devil worship."

Mr Wood said they went through with it "because we love kids and thought we'd get a lot out of it ourselves and . . . hasn't it turned out better than you could have imagined".

"We have the perfect child. Every parent probably says that.

"He's an absolute delight, just amazing and he's got the most wonderful nature."

The couple said yesterday they were not necessarily advocating surrogacy and costs would be prohibitive to many gay couples.

Mr Matthews said he knew of "a handful of gay men" in Australia with their own babies. It had become far more common in the US.

In the documentary film, William Halms, of Growing Generations, says costs are so high he calls his own three children who were born in the program, "\$75,000 babies". A first-time surrogate mother is paid \$US20,000 (\$30,130), a second-time one is paid \$US25,000 and so on.

Egg donors, mostly college students, received an average \$US5000, he said.

Mr Matthews and Mr Wood declined to reveal how much they had spent. The St Kilda men have maintained frequent email, mail and telephone communication with the surrogate mother.

Junoa, herself a mother of two, says in the documentary that she had long wanted to be a surrogate mother.

"I wanted to give someone who really wanted children the chance to parent," she says.

"To imagine not being able to have children destroys me."

After the birth, she says the process has left her with "a little fear, a little heartbreak, but a lot of pride".

"I thought, 'him leaving is going to break my heart', but then I am so proud his daddies will get to take care of him and raise him," she says.

But nevertheless she looks wistful and depressed before parting with the child.

Mr Matthews and Mr Wood have not ruled out having more children.

This story was found at:

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/09/13/1063341818025.html>