

# Adopt-an-Animal Programs Diminish Our Families

## *A Letter to the San Francisco Zoo*

Dear Editor:

As an adoptive parent and passionate advocate for adoption, I was disappointed and saddened to see the following announcement on your website:

### **ADOPT-AN-ANIMAL**

Looking for a unique and “wild” gift for a business associate, friend, family member or loved one?

Such cavalier use of the word adoption suggests that adoption is a short-term commitment of money to a cause, not a lifelong commitment of parents to children—particularly to children, who make up a sizable portion of your visitors. The “adopt-an-animal” marketing ploy creates confusion in the minds of adopted children and their nonadopted peers, encouraging predictable (and avoidable) teasing and taunts equating our children with wild animals and questioning the permanence of our families. It diminishes a wonderful, life-affirming, permanent way to form a family that deserves your respect.

Adoption is not sponsorship. It is a permanent commitment. For those of us touched by adoption, we know that adoption is forever, and we cringe when the word is used in an ostensibly child-friendly institution as a fund-raising gimmick. Adoption is a legal, sacred bond that forms a loving family equal in every way to families formed through birth. Adoption is just another way to build a family, one of which we are justly proud. Why does the SF Zoo undermine us and our children in this thoughtless way?

Lest you think we are oversensitive, let me stress that language is important. The way we describe such things as adoption tells us—and our children—how society really feels. While we see such things as “adopt-a-highway,” “adopt-an-animal,” and even “adopt-a pothole,” such usage does not make it right and only underscores society’s ignorance. Some adults may understand that you’re just being cute. Young children will take you at your word.

The National Zoo solved this problem decades ago by calling their program Friends of the

National Zoo. The Oakland Zoo responded to adoptive parents’ requests and changed their program to Sponsor-an-Animal. Clearly, this is not a new concern but one that we continually face. Some organizations “get it” and make the switch to more accurate and respectful language. When will the SF Zoo get it?

There are thousands of adoptive families in the San Francisco area. Indeed, one-third of the nation is touched by adoption within their immediate families. It is a growing way to build a family, and it is changing the face of the American family as a result. We in the adoption community understand that the use of adoption language in fund-raising is born of ignorance, and it is up to us to educate. By writing this letter, I hope that you will take our concern to heart and finally, after so many years of having this problem brought to your attention, get it—and fix it.

We ask that you respect adopted children and adoptive families by using the appropriate word to describe your program: Sponsor-an-Animal. We look forward to hearing that you have reconsidered your past resistance to change and are now willing to hear us, validate our concerns, and respect our children.

When that day comes, my husband, daughter, and I will be pleased to join the San Francisco Zoo at the family level. We’ll even sponsor an animal.

Sincerely yours,  
*Amy Klatzkin*

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# Stopping Adopt-a-Programs: Worth Our Effort?

## *A Letter to the Editor*

*Letters to the Editor*

The Forecaster

Falmouth, ME 04105

Dear Editor:

November is National Adoption Awareness Month. And until this year, it was also Falmouth Memorial Library's "Adopt-a-Book" month. Starting this year, however, the library's campaign to build the children's book section is called "Gift-a-Book." Why the change? It's quite simple, really: perusing the display of new children's books, choosing a favorite, and giving \$10.00 to the library is a fabulous thing to do. But it's not an adoption. I'm a big fan of books, whales, owls, classrooms and clean highways. All of these worthy causes deserve generous public and private support. But, as an adoptive mother, I believe "Adopt-a-[fill in the blank]" misuses a very special, potent word and can add to the public's misunderstanding of adoption.

Adoption creates a sacred, legal, and everlasting bond between a child and a parent. When a child is adopted, he or she becomes a permanent part of a family. And, yes, there is more than one meaning to the term "adopt." A city council adopts a resolution. A board of directors adopts a position. A company might adopt a new production method. But let's be clear: organizations use the familial sense of the word to play on people's emotions, to hook them, to make them feel more committed to a particular cause, and to open their wallets. The fund-raising use of "adoption" is not a new meaning of the word—it is a recent distortion that confuses children and does a disservice to adoptive families. Adoption is much more than sending in a check and getting some "adoption papers" in the mail, or getting your family or company name some recognition in the community. When was the last time you joyously welcomed a whale or a highway into your family?

There's a very simple, fitting word that works very well in these scenarios: "sponsor." When you sponsor

an owl or a classroom, you support the actions taken largely by another party. You may write a check and have someone else actually carry out the work, or you may even donate some of your own time and energy. You often get some recognition for your donation. Sponsoring a whale or highway can be a very rewarding experience, just as sponsoring a child can be. We all know the difference, don't we?

I don't believe that the fund-raising folks who employ "adopt-a-[fill in the blank]" are deliberately trying to misuse the word or insult anyone. I bet they've just never stopped to think about it. When I asked for some time at a meeting of the Falmouth Memorial Library's Friends' Committee, they very generously agreed to hear my position and read some materials I'd brought along. Almost all of the members were quite surprised by my point of view. They were very kind, well-educated, well-intentioned people who appeared never to have really thought about the implications of their campaign name. But when I challenged them to consider what message the "Adopt-a-Book" campaign sent to my children when we entered the library, and what lessons it taught Falmouth's children about the true meaning of adoption, they changed their thinking. I give them all tremendous credit for changing their campaign to "Gift-a-Book," a much more accurate, appropriate name.

My message here is simple. Adoption is adoption and fund-raising is fund-raising. Let's not debase one concept in service to the other. All good causes need our collective support. However, all children and families, not only those directly touched by adoption, need to understand what it really is: an age-old, sacred way of joining a loving family—forever. With the growing numbers of adoptive families—international, domestic, foster, mixed with biological children, open—our culture needs a clear understanding of the concept. To the Falmouth Memorial Library, thank you for your part in this effort.

Cathy Breen