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And Baby Makes 2?

By JOHN IRELAND *Special to The Tampa Tribune*

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Mary Cheney, the vice president's lesbian daughter, is pregnant. However, once she gives birth, Cheney's partner of 15 years, Heather Poe, will have no legal relationship to her child.

Mary and Heather reside in Virginia, which does not recognize the legal status of gay and lesbian couples. The federal government does not, either, and the Republican-led efforts to amend the Constitution to ban same-sex marriage would seal the deal.

Despite an effort to paint gay parenting as something novel and strange, it's nothing new.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 34 percent of female same-sex households and 22 percent of male same-sex households are raising children. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse estimates that between 8 million and 10 million children are being raised in a gay or lesbian household, by either a birth parent or an adoptive parent.

The Pew Research Center polled Americans in 1999 and then again in 2006 on the subject. Opposition to gay adoption came down from 57 percent to 48 percent over those seven years.

From the numbers, one might predict that this controversy and the legalized inequality that comes with it will soon be relegated to history. Will it be in time for Dick Cheney's grandchild?

Sure, it's easy to get wrapped up in a debate over sexuality. That seems to be the problem for gays in our country. If their identity is all about sex, it's easy to marginalize and vilify.

What happens, though, when the country looks around and sees a large percentage of gays settling down and changing diapers, packing lunches and chaperoning school trips to the zoo? There's nothing more conducive to monogamy than a parent's exhaustion.

For the sake of the next generation, we have got to figure this out soon. The states are anything but united. Florida does not allow gays and lesbians to adopt, single or coupled. Utah approves adoptions only by married heterosexual couples. Six more states - Louisiana, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, and Oklahoma - do not permit adoption by gay or lesbian couples.

Eight states, along with Washington, D.C., have affirmative case law granting gay and lesbian couples joint

adoption equality: California, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. In the majority of states - 34 of them - it's up to the judge, agency and individual social worker "what makes a family."

Obviously, lack of legal protection does not stop gays and lesbians from forming families. In fact, those who can afford it often spend thousands of dollars writing contracts and establishing financial mechanisms to provide some sort of legal protection to their children, such as durable powers of attorney, wills and trusts. The vast majority of Americans, gay or straight, cannot afford to arrange these, however. The legacy is a generation of unprotected and legally marginalized families.

Parents will do anything necessary to protect their children and families. Sexual orientation has nothing to do with that instinct. I suggest we all just step back, take an inventory of what matters most for children - love, security, education and a sense of self.

It's time that we let gay and lesbian parents do their job.

John Ireland is a writer and filmmaker in Los Angeles. His most recent film is "Finding Family: Gay and Lesbian Adoption in the U.S."