

Clean Break Theory

c. 1940 – c. 1970

Details

Clean break theory provided a basis for many adoptions in the twentieth century. The theory is based on the idea that babies' characteristics are formed by their environment rather than their genes. There was a widespread belief that a "clean break" was beneficial for the personality development of babies of single mothers, and that they should be put up for adoption as early as possible. Clean break theory also implied that white married couples with secure incomes represented the 'ideal' family unit and were regarded as the only family capable of providing appropriate care for children (Australian Senate 2012).

Clean break theory gained widespread acceptance following World War Two. The results of Nazi rule in Germany discredited eugenics with its emphasis on hereditary characteristics. Experts increasingly claimed that babies were a 'clean slate' to be shaped by their environment. For instance, Sigmund and Anna Freud believed in adoption with early separation of mother and child on this basis. Similarly, the influential British psychologist, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst, John Bowlby, argued for prompt separation of the birth mother and baby so that early experiences did not disrupt personality development. This also helped the adoptive parents to create stronger bonds.

Married couples were considered able to provide more advantages than single mothers. In this way, clean break theory gave credence to a widespread policy of removing the babies of these mothers between about 1940 and 1970. To prevent disruption to the adoptive family, birth mothers were not given any information about the whereabouts of their children.

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Clean break theory underpinned adoption practice between about 1940 and 1970.

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