
Adoption: Where Do I Start?

This article will help give you an understanding of the basic steps in any adoption process.

Step 1: Educate yourself.

What You Should Know

At times, the adoption process can seem complicated, time consuming, and frustrating. However, many resources exist to help prospective adoptive parents educate themselves about adoption.

- Local community colleges, adoption exchanges, adoption agencies, hospitals, religious groups, and other organizations may offer adoption preparation programs.
- Adoptive parent support groups often are willing to assist people considering adoption. In addition, regional adoption exchanges, local agencies, and state adoption specialists can send you information to help get you started.

There are also many books, magazines, and websites on this topic.

The National Adoption Directory at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad> provides lists of adoption resources in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, to assist families in their pursuit of adoption.

Step 2: Understand the law.

State laws and regulations govern U.S. adoptions. Learning about the adoption laws in your state, or any states involved with your adoption, can help avoid frustrating situations.

The State Statutes Search at http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/ highlights specific adoption-related topics and provides a quick overview and comparison of laws across the United States. Information regarding who may adopt, timeframes for consent and revocation of consent to adoption, and termination of parental rights laws are provided in the database, and can be searched by state, territory, or region.

Step 3: Explore your options and select an agency.

Families wishing to adopt have many options. The following is one way to think about how choices in adoption may flow from one another:



- Where will your family's child come from? (Will you go through domestic or intercountry adoption?)
- If you adopt domestically, what type of adoption is best for your family? (Is it domestic infant or foster care adoption?)
- If you choose domestic infant adoption, who will assist your family with the adoption? (Will it be a licensed private agency or an independent, facilitated, or unlicensed agency adoption?)

The way you choose to adopt will depend on the characteristics of the child you wish to adopt, how long you are willing to wait for your child, and other concerns.

Step 4: Complete a home study.

No matter what type of adoption you choose to pursue, all prospective adoptive parents must have a home study or "family study." A home study involves education, preparation, and information gathering about the prospective adoptive parents. This process can take from 2 to 10 months to complete, depending on agency waiting lists and training requirements. States vary regarding home study requirements, so you should check with your state adoption specialist to learn about the specific regulations in your state. The National Adoption Directory, on the Information Gateway website listed above, lists the state adoption specialist in each state and territory.

Step 5: Engage in the placement process.

Once your home study is completed, you are ready to begin the placement process--the time when a specific child is identified for your family. Depending on the type of adoption you are pursuing, this process and the potential time involved in waiting for your child vary greatly.

If you are pursuing an independent adoption, an attorney or facilitator may help you identify expectant parents or you may locate them on your own if allowed by state law.

If you are using a licensed private agency to pursue a domestic infant adoption, the expectant parents may select your family from among several prospective adoptive families.

In the case of foster care adoption or intercountry adoption of older children, you may review information about a number of children who are waiting for families. You will often have the opportunity for preplacement visits to get to know a child before he or she moves into your home in foster care adoption. Also, many foster parents in the United States adopt the foster children in their homes if the children become available for adoption.

If you are adopting an infant internationally you may receive a referral during this time.

Most adoptions of children from foster care are handled by public child welfare agencies. The national online photo listing, AdoptUSKids at www.adoptuskids.org, provides pictures and general descriptions of children in foster care around the country who are waiting for families. The Information Gateway resource listing, State Child Welfare Agency Websites at www.childwelfare.gov, provides links to photo listing services in each state.



Step 6: File necessary legal documents.

All adoptions need to be finalized in court, though the process varies from state to state. Usually a child lives with the adoptive family for at least 6 months before the adoption is finalized legally. During this time, a social worker may visit several times to ensure the child is well cared for and to write up the required court reports. After this period, the agency or attorney (in the case of independent adoption) will submit a written recommendation of approval of the adoption to the court, and you or your attorney can then file with the court to complete the adoption. For intercountry adoptions, finalization depends on the type of visa the child has and the laws in your state. The actual adoption procedure is just one of a series of legal processes required for intercountry adoption. In addition to your state laws, you must also follow the laws of the child's country of origin and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (formerly Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS]) requirements.

Step 7: Parent your child.

Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2003; Updated 2007, June 27). *Adoption: Where do I start?* Retrieved July 6, 2007 from <http://www.childwelfare.gov>

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