



HOW DO I BEGIN THE ADOPTION PROCESS?

Special thanks to the Dave Thomas Foundation for
Adoption for their hard work, research, and
dedication in the world of adoption, particularly
adoption from foster care.

WHAT IS ADOPTION?

WHEN A CHILD IS ADOPTED, THAT CHILD MOVES PERMANENTLY FROM ONE FAMILY TO ANOTHER FAMILY. IN THE PROCESS, ALL PARENTAL RIGHTS ARE LEGALLY TRANSFERRED TO THE NEW PARENTS. THIS MEANS ADOPTIVE PARENTS HAVE THE SAME RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN WERE BORN TO THEM. IT ALSO MEANS ADOPTED CHILDREN HAVE ALL THE EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, LEGAL, AND FAMILIAL BENEFITS OF BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN.

THERE ARE A FEW DIFFERENT ROUTES YOU CAN TAKE WHEN ADOPTING A CHILD

- Public child welfare agency (also known as foster-to-adopt)
- Private agency adoption
- Through an approved adoption practitioner, licensed authority, or lawyer

PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE AGENCY

The local branch of your state's social service department or a child and family service agency is a child welfare agency.

PRIVATE AGENCY

A private agency is licensed to facilitate domestic or international adoptions. A private agency may be secular or religious, for profit or nonprofit.

ADOPTION PRACTITIONER, LICENSED AUTHORITY OR LAWYER

If you choose to use a lawyer for a private adoption, be sure it is someone who you know has a strong sense of ethics and a wide knowledge of adoption laws in your state. A responsible adoption attorney will be sure the birth parents have received counseling so they are confident about their decision and ready to relinquish custody.

The attorney can also ensure that you receive a complete health and medical history of both the child and the birth family. If you need a source for finding attorneys, talk to members of a local adoptive parent support group. They may have adopted independently and, if so, may be able to give you a recommendation.

We will discuss the cost variations of each of these in a [later section](#).



THE FOUR TYPES OF ADOPTION

WHEN STARTING THE ADOPTION PROCESS, YOU HAVE FOUR OPTIONS. YOU CAN ADOPT A CHILD FROM THE U.S. FOSTER CARE SYSTEM, ADOPT AN INFANT IN THE U.S., ADOPT A CHILD FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY, OR ADOPT A STEPCHILD. READ ON TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT EACH TYPE ENTAILS.

ADOPTING A CHILD FROM THE U.S. FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Children waiting in the foster care system vary in age, from infants to young adults. The average age of a waiting child is eight years old, and many have brothers or sisters with whom they should stay. The majority are healthy children who simply need and deserve loving and supportive adults in their lives.

Some children have medical challenges. Some of these disabilities or conditions are often treatable. It is important to understand that some medical and emotional disabilities are not easily corrected. But support and resources are available to help.

Begin by contacting your state's public agency or another adoption organization, like ECHO OrphanCare Partners.

ADOPTING AN INFANT IN THE UNITED STATES

If you would like to adopt a baby, contact your state's public agency, a licensed private agency, or an adoption attorney. Sometimes adopting a baby can lead to longer waits for prospective parents. To connect with an adoption attorney, contact your local bar association, the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at childwelfare.gov.

ADOPTING A CHILD FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY

Hundreds of thousands of children from around the world who are orphaned need families. Rules governing international adoptions can change quickly and can be complicated. If you are interested in adopting a child from another country, it is important to work with an experienced and ethical agency, group, or individual. If you pursue an international adoption, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services requires that you complete a home study. In most cases, the adoption agency or person helping you can assist in completing the home study and help you find a child who needs a family.

Learn more:

- U.S. Department of State: adoption.state.gov
- National Council for Adoption: adoptioncouncil.org

ADOPTING A STEPCCHILD

To learn about the requirements for stepparent adoption, consult an adoption attorney or contact the court in your state or county that handles adoption. You may refer to the Stepparent Adoption Fact Sheet for Families on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website, [childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/f_step.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/f_step.pdf)



KEEP READING TO LEARN ABOUT THE TEN STEPS OF THE ADOPTION PROCESS

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT [WEARETHEECHO.ORG](https://www.wearetheecho.org)

STEP 1:

EXPLORE THE TYPES OF ADOPTION.

EXPLORING YOUR WISHES FOR FAMILY AND YOUR PARENTING STYLE CAN HELP PUT A SUCCESSFUL ADOPTION ON THE RIGHT TRACK. BEFORE CHOOSING WHAT KIND OF ADOPTION YOU WANT, TAKE A QUICK PERSONAL INVENTORY. HOW MANY OF THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS DESCRIBE YOU?

- A belief in adoption and the ability to commit to a child
- Patience and perseverance
- A good sense of humor and talent for keeping life in perspective
- A love of children and parenting
- The ability to accept without judgment and to love unconditionally
- Awareness that healing doesn't always come quickly
- Willingness to teach an adopted child about his or her biological culture (This is a requirement for some international adoptions)
- Resourcefulness

If most (or all) of these qualities describe you, then take it one step further. Ask yourself:

- Do I clearly understand why I want to adopt?
- If I have a partner, do we work as a team? Are we both committed to adoption?
- Does my lifestyle allow me the time necessary to meet the needs of children?
- Have I discussed adoption with all my family members, including my children?
- Do I have support systems to help me after I adopt, or do I know where to find them?

Use your answers to the above questions as food for thought. Which of the four types of adoption best fit with your beliefs and goals as a parent?

Misconception:

46% of Americans believe children in foster care have entered the system because of juvenile delinquency.¹

Reality:

Children enter the system through no fault of their own, as victims of neglect, abandonment, or abuse. Children waiting to be adopted may be older, but they are no less deserving of permanent families

¹Source: 2017 US Adoption Attitudes Survey, February 2017. Commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and conducted by Nielson. Complete survey is available at davethomasfoundation.org

WHERE TO START

CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY

Provides access to information and resources to help protect children and strengthen families, including foster care adoption information. A function of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Visit childwelfare.gov.

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR ADOPTION

National Council for Adoption meets the diverse needs of children, birthparents, adopted individuals, adoptive families and all those touched by adoption through global advocacy, education, research, legislative action and collaboration. Learn more at adoptioncouncil.org.

DAVE THOMAS FOUNDATION FOR ADOPTION

Provides funds to adoption agencies that hire specially-trained adoption recruiters whose sole mission is to find permanent, loving families for the children most at risk of aging out of foster care without being adopted. Visit davethomasfoundation.org.

ADOPTUSKIDS

Contains valuable adoption information, as well as photos and descriptions of thousands of children in the U.S. waiting to be adopted. Visit adoptuskids.org.

LEARN MORE

Americas Kids Belong, americaskidsbelong.org

Entrusted Network, entrustednetwork.org

Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO), cafo.org

ECHO Orphancare Partners, wearetheecho.org

STEP 2:

RESEARCH THE COSTS

ONCE YOU'VE DECIDED WHICH TYPE OF ADOPTION TO PURSUE, LEARN MORE ABOUT THE COSTS INVOLVED.

Total costs vary depending on the type of adoption, the agency you use, the state in which you live, attorney fees (if applicable) and if travel is required. It is very important to obtain fee information before beginning the process. You should always request a detailed written explanation of the fees, including what the fees cover and any potential additional fees.

COVERING THE COSTS

ADOPTION SUBSIDIES

If you adopt a child from foster care, he or she may be eligible for adoption assistance. Federal or state adoption subsidies are available to help cover the short- and long-term costs of adopted children who are in need of special services.

BENEFITS VARY FROM STATE TO STATE, BUT ALL STATES TYPICALLY PROVIDE:

- Monthly cash payments
- Medical assistance
- Social services
- One-time-only reimbursement of non-recurring adoption expenses

Before getting too far into the process, ask your social worker whether these subsidies are available from your state. You will not be able to negotiate subsidies once your adoption is finalized, so it is best to investigate your options early, even if you don't currently need assistance. For more information about adoption subsidies, contact the Adoption Subsidy Resource Center provided by the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) at nacac.org.

LOANS AND GRANTS

Many sources offer adoption loans or assistance to individuals. Some sources to contact include:

- Brittany's Hope Foundation, brittanyshope.org
- Gift of Adoption, giftofadoption.org

- Show Hope, showhope.org
- Lifesong for Orphans, lifesong.org

You might also check with your church's denomination, as some allocate a portion of their general missions budget for adoption grant-making.

EMPLOYER BENEFITS

Many employers offer adoption benefits, such as financial reimbursement, paid leave or other time off for their employees who adopt. The average adoption-friendly employer offers up to \$9,100 in financial assistance and more than six weeks of paid leave per adoption.²

Adoption-Friendly Workplace, one of the Foundation's signature programs, provides free resources to educate employers on how to add adoption benefits. Visit adoptionfriendlyworkplace.org.

TAX CREDITS AND EXCLUSIONS

The adoption tax credit is a non-refundable, permanent tax benefit for eligible families who adopt through foster care, internationally, or privately. In 2019, the maximum federal tax credit for qualifying adoption expenses is \$14,080 per child. It may be carried forward for five additional years, applying to each year's liability until the full credit amount is used or time expires.

Because of potential changes in this credit, it is important to speak with your tax advisor to request the IRS publication called "Instructions for Form 8839," or visit irs.gov. The amount each family can claim changes each year due to inflation.

MILITARY REIMBURSEMENTS

For active-duty personnel, the military offers up to \$2,000 (\$5,000 if more than one child is adopted) for qualified adoption expenses per calendar year. For couples who are both in the military, only one member may claim expenses for each adopted child. Visit militaryfamily.org for more information.

A child with disabilities may be eligible for benefits through the military's Extended Care Health Option, and the Exceptional Family Member Program works to ensure that parents of children with special needs are assigned for duty in areas where the child's needs can be met.

Learn more about Military Reimbursements at the Child Welfare Information Gateway, a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_milita.cfm

COMMON RANGE FOR ADOPTION COSTS³

Foster care adoption through a public agency: \$0–\$2,500 Private agency adoption: \$5,000–\$40,000+; Independent adoption with an attorney: \$8,000–\$40,000+; International adoption: \$15,000–\$40,000+.

COLLEGE TUITION ASSISTANCE

Scholarships and financial aid are often available for former foster youth and youth adopted from foster care. Visit childwelfare.gov or in Virginia, <https://www.dss.virginia.gov/fmf/> to learn more.



Misconception:

Foster care adoption is expensive.

Reality:

The truth is, foster care adoption is not expensive. In fact, it's often free. There is also financial support available for parents who choose this route.

²Source: Adoption-Friendly Workplace Survey conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2017

³Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway, a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s_cost/s_costs.pdf.

STEP 3:

SELECT AN ADOPTION AGENCY

NOT ALL ADOPTION AGENCIES ARE ALIKE. SOME HANDLE THE ENTIRE ADOPTION PROCESS, HELPING YOU THROUGHOUT. OTHERS EXPECT YOU TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE TO LEARN ABOUT PROCEDURES AND DEADLINES. GET A SENSE OF HOW MUCH CONTROL YOU WANT OVER THE PROCESS AND THEN DECIDE ON AN APPROACH AND AGENCY THAT FITS YOU BEST.

YOU MUST WORK WITH AN AGENCY OPERATING IN THE STATE WHERE YOU CURRENTLY LIVE. YOU MAY CHOOSE TO WORK WITH A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE AGENCY. CONTACT YOUR STATE ADOPTION UNIT FOR AVAILABLE OPTIONS. BE SURE EACH AGENCY YOU CONSIDER IS LICENSED TO PROVIDE ADOPTION SERVICES IN YOUR STATE. YOU MAY STILL BE ABLE TO ADOPT A CHILD LIVING IN ANOTHER STATE.

FIND AGENCIES IN YOUR AREA:

- Contact your state's adoption unit for a list of licensed adoption agencies — both public and private.
- If you are interested in adopting a child from foster care, contact one of your local Departments of Human Services.
- Look online for licensed private adoption agencies. Contact adoptive parent support groups or adoptive parents for referrals.
- Check the Child Welfare Information Gateway (a service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) at childwelfare.gov.

TO FIND A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE AGENCY THAT IS A GOOD FIT FOR YOU, YOUR BELIEFS AND YOUR SITUATION, COMPARE INFORMATION FROM SEVERAL DIFFERENT AGENCIES BY ASKING:

- What kind of training is provided for parents?
- Can I be a foster parent and still be considered as an adoptive parent?
- What criteria does the agency use to match children with families?
- What type of adoptive parents does the agency seek?
- How long, on average, must one wait for a child?
- If I learn of a child in another state, will the agency pursue the child?
- How much does a completed adoption cost — in total and each part?
- Can the agency help me locate sources of financial aid, including subsidies?
- Can the agency provide references from parents who recently adopted?
- What post-adoption resources does the agency provide or connect to parents?

STEP 4:

WORK WITH AN AGENCY

ONCE YOU HAVE SELECTED AN AGENCY, IT IS FINALLY TIME TO BEGIN THE FORMAL ADOPTION PROCESS. ASK YOUR AGENCY FOR GUIDANCE. TYPICALLY, YOU WILL ATTEND AN ORIENTATION MEETING OR TRAINING SESSION FOR PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS, WHERE YOU WILL:

- Meet social workers and learn about policies and practices
- Learn about the children who are available
- Be asked to examine your feelings about adoption and determine if adoption is the right choice for you
- Gain insight into the challenges and rewards of adoptive parenting
- Get application materials

ATTEND AN ORIENTATION SESSION

If possible, attend an orientation session before filling out an application so you are confident in the agency's abilities to meet your needs. Application fees are often non-refundable, even if you decide to work through a different agency or change your mind about adopting.

Once you have chosen an agency and have completed the application process, ask your social worker how you should go about scheduling and preparing for your home study.

Misconception:

Parents over the age of 55 are not able to provide a healthy and loving environment for children.

Reality:

A growing number of Americans believe parents over 55 can provide a healthy and loving environment for children.¹

¹Source: 2017 US Adoption Attitudes Survey, February 2017. Commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and conducted by Nielson. Complete survey is available at davethomasfoundation.org

STEP 5:

BEGIN YOUR HOME STUDY

A HOME STUDY IS MUCH MORE THAN A BACKGROUND CHECK ON YOU AND MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY. IT IS A WAY FOR YOUR SOCIAL WORKER TO GET TO KNOW YOU; TO EDUCATE YOU ABOUT ADOPTION AND HOW IT AFFECTS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES; AND TO PREPARE YOU TO PARENT A CHILD WHO BRINGS EXPERIENCES, IDEAS AND EXPECTATIONS THAT MIGHT BE DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OWN.

EVERYONE MUST COMPLETE A HOME STUDY. THE PROCESS CAN TAKE FROM 3-6 MONTHS, DEPENDING ON THE AGENCY, THE SOCIAL WORKER AND THE PROSPECTIVE PARENTS' COOPERATION.

FIND OUT COSTS AND REQUIREMENTS FOR HOME STUDIES AND PARENTING CLASSES

HOME STUDY REQUIREMENTS

Home study requirements vary by agency and by state. Ask for a list of the items your agency needs to complete the process, such as birth certificates, divorce decrees, licenses, personal references, background, and criminal checks and proof of recent physical examinations.

Costs for a home study also vary, depending on the agency type. Public agencies often charge little or nothing. Private agencies typically charge between \$1,000 and \$3,000.

The length of time a home study is valid is determined by your agency and your state. Home studies typically last one year and can be renewed on an annual basis thereafter.

ADOPTION PREPARATION AND PARENTING CLASSES

Many agencies offer, and sometimes require, group classes for adoptive families. Even if your agency does not require a training course, you should consider taking this opportunity to learn more about the ages and stages of childhood, the dynamics of abuse and neglect, adoption issues, the impact of trauma on children and parenting children who are adopted. The classes provide a forum for you to discuss any questions and concerns you have about the process. It is important that you be familiar with the kinds of issues that arise when a child or sibling group joins your family. For example, older adopted children may have unique needs and life experiences that will affect their interactions with you, new siblings and new classmates. Once you have successfully completed the classes and home study, you will be licensed or certified to adopt.

STEP 6:

FINDING AND LEARNING YOUR CHILD

TO BEGIN THE SEARCH FOR A CHILD, GET IN TOUCH WITH YOUR STATE AGENCY, YOUR COUNTY AGENCY OR A PRIVATE ADOPTION ORGANIZATION IN YOUR COMMUNITY. HERE ARE SEVERAL NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS THAT PROVIDE VISUAL INFORMATION OF WAITING CHILDREN:

- Adopt America Network, adoptamericanetwork.org
- AdoptUSKids, adoptuskids.org
- Children Awaiting Parents, capbook.org
- Heart Gallery, www.heartgalleryofamerica.org

GET TO KNOW YOUR CHILD

When you have found a child and have been identified as his or her potential family, learn as much as you can about the child. Talk to foster parents and social workers. How often has the child moved while in care, or changed schools? Does he or she still have contact with extended family? What are the child's favorite foods and games? What is the best way to comfort the child? What is his or her background? What were the birth parents like? What are the family's and child's medical histories? Knowing everything possible about your child will make the transition from foster care much smoother for both you and the child.

The agency social worker should provide any available information about the child or the adoption process to help you reach your decision. Your social worker will also help you determine whether your family is the right fit for meeting the child's needs.

If the child has certain medical conditions or challenges, this is the time to decide if your family is prepared and fully committed to addressing any issues that may arise from these special needs.

A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

It is a simple fact: children waiting for adoption have had a disruptive home life and have frequently experienced significant trauma. They've been separated from their birth parents — and often from siblings or extended family — through no fault of their own, and they're often left with feelings of loss and grief and a fear of rejection.

They are eager to belong. But they may doubt themselves because of past experiences, or they may be suspicious of new adults entering their lives. They may not openly discuss

specifics, but that doesn't always mean that they have fully accepted or understand the idea behind adoption.

Create a welcoming environment so a child feels comfortable discussing thoughts and feelings with you, and let him or her know that it's okay to talk about it.

AS YOU CONTINUE TO BUILD A NEW PERMANENT HOME FOR THE CHILD, KEEP IN MIND SOME OF THE QUESTIONS HE OR SHE MAY HAVE ALONG THE WAY:

- Are you going to give me away someday?
- Will I be abused again?
- What about my brother and sister?
- Will you not only adopt me, but also accept me?
- Will I have to change schools?
- What if you don't like to do the things I like to do?
- Will you want me to call you Mom and Dad?
- Will my birth parents think I don't love them?
- Will I have to change my name?
- Do I dare hope that you will be my forever family?

For more help answering a child's questions:

- Contact your social worker
- Take advantage of counseling offered by the agency
- Join an adoptive parent support group
- Seek adoption-related articles, books, and resources



STEP 7:

PREPARE FOR YOUR CHILD AND GET ORGANIZED

IT'S TIME. YOU KNOW YOUR CHILD, AND NOW HE OR SHE IS READY TO BE PLACED IN YOUR HOME. AT THIS POINT, YOU NEED TO GET ALL THE NECESSARY DOCUMENTS IN ORDER, SO THE TRANSITION IS SMOOTH FOR BOTH YOUR CHILD AND YOUR FAMILY.

FOLLOW THIS LIST OF NECESSARY PREPARATIONS

CONTACT YOUR INSURANCE COMPANY

Your child will be covered under your health insurance plan beginning on the date he or she is placed in your home. Find out what documents your insurance company requires for authentication, such as the adoption petition. Check for any exclusions in your health insurance policy relating to pre-existing conditions. Update wills and change beneficiary designations on life insurance policies as needed.

OBTAIN A COPY OF YOUR CHILD'S ORIGINAL BIRTH CERTIFICATE

It may be difficult to get this document once the adoption is finalized, but without it, your child could have trouble getting passports and other important documents.

PREPARE TO GET A NEW SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER AND BIRTH CERTIFICATE

Your child will need IDs that reflect a new last name and family situation. If your child already has a Social Security number, you may be able to keep the number and change his or her name by using a new birth certificate. Regardless of what you choose to do, your child must have a Social Security number for you to claim him or her as a dependent.

LINE UP SERVICES FOR YOUR CHILD AND FOR YOURSELF

Child care if you adopt a younger child — some states provide it; school enrollment for older children; therapy, counseling and tutoring options; an adoptive parents' support group.

MAKE YOUR HOUSE CHILD FRIENDLY

First, prepare your child's new room to show that the area belongs to him or her. Modify, reposition or remove any household objects that could be dangerous.

INFORM YOUR FAMILY OF SPECIFIC CHANGES THAT WILL OCCUR

Tell them how their roles and lives may change when the new child(ren) arrive(s). Be proactive and prepare to help them through the transition.

NEGOTIATE AN ADOPTION ASSISTANCE AGREEMENT

Parents who adopt eligible children with special needs from a public or private agency can receive federal or state benefits. Ask your agency about obtaining a subsidy and what steps you need to take. You must negotiate the subsidy before the adoption is finalized.



STEP 8:

BRING YOUR CHILD HOME AND PETITION TO ADOPT

CHILDREN WHO ARE PLACED WITH AN ADOPTIVE FAMILY THROUGH A PUBLIC AGENCY MAY MOVE IN AS SOON AS THE PARENTS ARE APPROVED. THIS MEANS YOU HAVE COMPLETED ALL REQUIRED PRE-PLACEMENT VISITS AND THE TIMING IS NOT DISRUPTIVE TO THE CHILD'S SCHOOLING OR OTHER ACTIVITIES. YOU ASSUME TEMPORARY LEGAL CUSTODY OF THE CHILD ONCE HE OR SHE IS PLACED IN YOUR HOME.

Your adoption agency will monitor the placement while your family adjusts. This monitoring period normally takes about six months, but can be as short as a few weeks and as long as a year. The social worker may call or visit so that you can discuss how the placement is working for your new child and for you. The next step is for your agency to recommend that the court approve your adoption.

ADOPTION PETITION

After your agency recommends you, it's time to petition to adopt. The petition is the document that makes your adoption legal. On the document, you formally request permission to adopt your specific child and then file it with the court.

To file a petition, you and your agency social worker (or attorney) will need to present the following (guidelines vary by state or jurisdiction):

- The child's birth certificate or birthdate and place of birth
- A written statement confirming your desire and suitability to adopt, as well as your ability to financially provide for the child
- A written declaration from the child's caseworker or agency that the adoption is in the child's best interest
- The date on which you received custody of the child, and from whom you were awarded custody
- A statement from the child's caseworker or agency of the legal reason why the birth parents' rights were terminated
- Written disclosure of any relationship that you share with the child (other than as an adoptive parent), such as being the child's aunt, grandparent, stepparent, coach or teacher.
- Consult an attorney if you need more help with the legal process or to simply help guide you.

STEP 9:

FINALIZE THE ADOPTION

A FINALIZATION HEARING LEGALLY COMPLETES THE ADOPTION PROCESS.* IT IS WHEN YOU, THE ADOPTIVE PARENT OR PARENTS, ARE GIVEN PERMANENT LEGAL CUSTODY OF THE ADOPTED CHILD.

These hearings typically take place within 6-12 months after the child is placed in your home. Your social worker or attorney will notify you of the date and time. The proceeding lasts about 10-30 minutes and will include you, your adopted child, your family's lawyer, and the social worker who placed the child. Be sure you have completed the necessary paperwork. The finalization could be delayed if you are missing any required documents.

The court will seek to establish that the child has been placed in a safe, loving home. Be prepared to provide all the identifying information included in your adoption petition, in addition to answering open-ended questions, like:

- Why do you want to adopt?
- How will you care for your new child?
- How will your family adjust to the new child?
- Is there anything the court should know before finalizing the adoption?

The court may also wish to address the adopted child if he or she is deemed old enough to express their wishes independently.

As soon as the judge signs the adoption order, you gain permanent, legal custody of your child. Finalization is the last formal step in the adoption process and the official beginning of your new family.

*Some states finalize adoptions through paperwork only and there is no hearing.

Misconception:

76% of those considering adoption are concerned the biological parents will be able to take the child back.¹

Reality:

This simply isn't possible. Once a child has been legally made available for adoption, the birth parents cannot claim a child or petition for his or her return.

¹Source: 2017 US Adoption Attitudes Survey, February 2017. Commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and conducted by Nielson. Complete survey is available at davethomasfoundation.org



STEP 10:

CELEBRATE FAMILY AND STAY INFORMED

CHILDREN WHO ARE ADOPTED FROM ORPHANAGES OR FROM FOSTER CARE OFTEN HAVE HAD DIFFICULT STARTS IN LIFE. AS A RESULT, THEY MAY NEED HELP WITH BEHAVIORAL, EMOTIONAL, OR DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES. ADOPTIVE PARENTS CAN ACCESS POST-ADOPTION RESOURCES TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN THRIVE, SUCH AS FAMILY AND CHILD COUNSELING, PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS, SPECIALIZED EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT, RESPITE CHILD CARE, AND GRIEF AND LOSS COUNSELING. ASK YOUR ADOPTION AGENCY IF IT PROVIDES FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR POST-ADOPTION NEEDS.

WHAT'S NEXT?

FINDING POST-ADOPTION RESOURCES:

Ask your adoption agency for recommendations. Search state and county post-adoption provider listings online. Ask adoptive parents or local adoption support groups for referrals. Find out if your employer provides resources. Reach out to ECHO OrphanCare Partners to have a support team assigned to your family.

CHOOSING A PROVIDER

Find a professional who understands the needs of adopted children and their families. Does he or she have experience with foster and adoptive families? Has he or she received adoption-related training? Can you receive a reference from one or two families he or she has worked with previously?

Most importantly, once you've successfully completed the adoption process, you're not all on your own. Become familiar and stay in touch with the following agencies and resources that can help you along the way.

American Academy of Pediatrics, aap.org

Center for Adoption Support and Education, adoptionssupport.org

North American Council on Adoptable Children, nacac.org

Child Welfare Information Gateway, childwelfare.gov

IT'S TIME TO CELEBRATE WITH YOUR NEW FAMILY!!!

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: WHAT TYPES OF ADOPTION ARE AVAILABLE?

A: The four main types of adoption are:

- Adopting a child from the U.S. foster care system
- Adopting an infant in the United States
- Adopting an infant or child from another country
- Adopting a stepchild

Q: WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS TO ADOPT? DO WE AS ADOPTIVE PARENTS HAVE TO BE THE SAME RACE OR HAVE THE SAME ETHNIC BACKGROUND AS THE CHILD WE ADOPT? DO WE HAVE TO BE MARRIED, OR WITHIN A CERTAIN AGE RANGE OR INCOME LEVEL?

A: If you adopt from foster care, the answer is no to all of the above. Families are as diverse as the children who are available for adoption.

Q: WHAT QUALITIES ARE IMPORTANT FOR PARENTS WHO ADOPT?

A: Traits like flexibility, patience, good problem-solving skills and a willingness to identify local community resources are all critical. Children don't need perfect parents, just loving individuals willing to meet the unique challenges of parenting and make a lifetime commitment to caring for and nurturing them.

Q: WHAT IS THE ADOPTION PROCESS?

A: The adoption process can vary depending on the type of adoption, the agency through which you work, the state in which you live and the state or county of residence of the child. Once you choose an adoption agency, the social worker will walk you through the process. In all cases, a home study and background check will be necessary. In addition, adoption preparation classes are required for foster care adoption.

Q: WHAT IS A HOME STUDY?

A: A home study is an in-depth application and interview process with a social worker that involves in-person interviews, reference checks, background checks and home visits. The study is not standardized and may vary from state-to-state and agency-to-agency. The average home study usually takes 3-6 months to complete.

Q: HOW MUCH DOES ADOPTION COST?

A: It depends on a number of factors, such as type of adoption, the agency through which you work, the state in which you live, attorney fees and whether or not travel is required. Foster care adoption can cost \$0 to \$2,500, while private or international adoption might cost \$15,000 to \$40,000 or more.

Q: HOW LONG DOES THE ADOPTION PROCESS TAKE?

A: There are many variables that determine how long it will take to complete the adoption process, such as whether adoption preparation classes are required, the length of time to complete the home study and the length of time to identify a child for your family. On average, the adoption process can take 1-2 years.

Q: WHO ARE THE CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE?

A: Children in foster care were removed from their families due to abuse, neglect or abandonment. A child might live temporarily with extended family, a foster family or in a group home while social workers try to help the birth family. If the birth family's problems can't be resolved, the agency with custody of the child goes to court to legally terminate parental rights. At this point, social workers must find a safe and loving adoptive family for the child. Ages range from infant to teenager, and virtually every race, ethnic group, and socioeconomic category is represented. Some children are waiting alone and others are waiting with siblings, while others with siblings are waiting while separated.

Q: HOW DO I FIND THE RIGHT ADOPTION AGENCY FOR ME?

A: To find an adoption agency that is a good fit for your family, compare information from several agencies after asking these questions:

- Is the agency a licensed child placing agency (CPA)?
- How many children does the agency place each year?
- How does the agency obtain files for waiting children?
- What criteria does the agency use to match children with families?
- Can the agency provide references from parents who've recently adopted?



GLOSSARY OF ADOPTION TERMS

Adoption: A legal process in which an adult assumes legal and other responsibilities for another, usually a minor.

Adoption agency: An organization licensed by the state that provides services to birth parents, adoptive parents and children who need families. Agencies may be public or private, secular or religious, for profit or nonprofit.

Adoption placement: The point at which a child begins to live with prospective adoptive parents or, in the case of foster care adoption, the point at which the status of the placement changes to adoption.

Adoption subsidies: Federal or state adoption benefits (also known as adoption assistance) designed to help offset the short- and long-term costs associated with adopting children who need special services.

Adoption tax credit: The federal adoption tax credit has helped thousands of American families offset the costs of adoption since it was established in 1997. The one-time credit per adopted child applies to all types of adoption (except stepparent adoption), including international, domestic private, and public foster care. Many states also have state adoption tax credits. To learn more about tax benefits, please review the IRS publication "Instructions for Form 8839," available through the Internal Revenue Service at 800-829-3676 or [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov), or consult your tax professional.

Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA): Passed Virginia General Assembly in 2019, ASFA clarified the importance of safety to child welfare decision-making and emphasized to states the need for prompt and continuous efforts to find permanent homes for children. Permanent homes might be with birth families, if accomplished safely, or with adoptive families or permanent legal guardians.

At-risk placement or legal-risk placement: The placement of a child into a prospective adoptive family when birth parents' rights have not yet been legally severed or when rights have been severed but the appeal period has not expired.

Concurrent planning: A process in foster care case management to reduce the time a child spends in foster care before being placed with a permanent family. Child welfare staff work toward family reunification and, at the same time, develop an alternative permanency plan for the child should reunification efforts fail.

Consent form: The legal document signed by birth parents that terminates their parental rights to their child.

Custody: The care, control and maintenance of a child that is legally awarded by the court to an agency (in abuse and neglect cases) or to parents (in divorce, separation or adoption proceedings). Child welfare departments retain legal custody and control of major decisions for a child in foster care. Foster parents do not have legal custody of the children for whom they provide care.

Decree of adoption: A legal order that finalizes an adoption.

Disruption: When a child leaves the adoptive home prior to the finalization of the adoption. This can occur when the adoptive parents choose to return the child for reasons of their own, or when the agency disrupts the adoption if the adoptive parents are not complying with post-placement requirements or are endangering the child in any way.

Domestic adoption: The adoption of a U.S. infant through a licensed adoption agency or adoption attorney.

Fictive kin: People not related by birth or marriage who have an emotionally significant relationship with an individual.

Finalization: The legal process that makes the adoption permanent and binding.

Foster parent(s): An individual or couple who has temporary care of a child but has no legal rights in determining certain aspects of a child's life.

Foster to adoption: In this type of placement, foster parents agree to adopt the child if and when parental rights are terminated. Social workers place the child with specially trained foster-adopt parents who will work with the child during family reunification efforts, but who will adopt the child if he or she becomes available for adoption.

Guardian ad litem: A person, sometimes an attorney, appointed by the court to ensure that the child's best interests are addressed in court hearings and other proceedings. In many jurisdictions, court-appointed special advocate (CASA) volunteers serve as guardians ad litem.

Home study: Also called a family profile, this is an in-depth review that prospective adoptive parents must complete to be able to legally adopt. A home study typically includes inspections of the adoptive parents' residence; evaluations of their relationships, parenting ideals, medical history, employment verification and financial status; and criminal background checks. Home studies can become outdated and typically need to be renewed after one year.

Indian Child Welfare Act: The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) is a federal law that seeks to keep American Indian children with American Indian families. Congress passed ICWA in 1978 in response to the alarmingly high number of Indian children being removed from their homes by both public and private agencies. The intent of Congress under ICWA was to "protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families." ICWA sets federal requirements that apply to state child custody proceedings involving an Indian child who is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe.

International adoption: The adoption of a child who is a citizen of one country by adoptive parents who are citizens of a different country.

Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC): The legal agreement between the states concerning a child living in one state being adopted by parents living in another state. In addition to obtaining a home study and following their state's adoption laws, prospective adoptive parents must comply with the adoption laws of the child's state of residence. Families who are involved in an adoption across state lines generally work both with an adoption worker in their home state to complete a home study and pre-service training, and with another adoption worker in the child's state to walk them through the steps needed to satisfy the ICPC requirements.

Legally free for adoption: A child is legally free when the parental rights of both birth parents have been terminated by the court and all appeals have been exhausted.

Life book: A pictorial and written representation of the child's life designed to help the child understand his or her unique background and history. The life book usually includes information on birth parents and other relatives, birthplace and birthdate. It may be put together by social workers or foster or adoptive parents working with the child.

Matching: The process of combining the best interests of the child with qualified adoptive parents. The best interests of the child are determined by social workers, advocates and, with older children, their wishes.

Multi-Ethnic Placement Act/Interethnic Placement Act (MEPA/IEPA): Sometimes called "Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Placement," this is a federal law enacted in 1994 (MEPA) and amended in 1996 (IEPA). These two laws (together known as MEPA/IEPA) remove race, ethnicity and country of origin from effective consideration when child welfare workers are making placement decisions for children in the public child welfare system.

Open adoption: An adoption plan in which identifying information about birth and adoptive families is openly shared. There may be ongoing contact after placement occurs.

Parental rights: All legal rights and corresponding legal obligations that come with being the legal parent of a child.

Permanency planning: A goal-directed process designed to prepare children and families for a permanent living arrangement. This includes adoption, legal guardianship or permanent placement with a relative or non-relative.

Placement: The point in time when the child goes to live with his or her legal adoptive parents. This can also be a "pre-adoptive" placement for a six-month pre-finalization period.

Post-legal adoption services: Services provided subsequent to legal finalization of the adoption. There are primarily four types of post-legal service providers: social service agencies, private therapists, mental health clinics and support groups for parents and children.

Post-placement supervision: Upon placement and prior to adoption finalization, a social worker will be assigned to complete post-placement supervision of the adoptive family. The social worker will visit the home during a set period of time (according to state or county requirements) to determine if adoption of the child is in the best interests of the child.

Private adoption agency: An agency licensed by the state to facilitate domestic adoptions, international adoptions or both. A private agency may be secular or religious, for profit or nonprofit.

Public adoption agency or public child welfare agency: This is the state or county government agency that has legal custody of children in foster care and is responsible for placing them in foster and/or adoptive homes.

Respite care: Designed to give foster parents the opportunity to temporarily place children in their care into the care of another licensed caregiver. Respite caregivers must meet the same requirements and receive the same training as licensed foster parents. Respite caregivers may qualify for a portion of the financial assistance.

Special needs: This includes several categories relating to disabilities, age, sibling status and at-risk status. When a child is determined to be a member of a special needs group, he or she may qualify for adoption assistance payments (subsidies).

Termination of parental rights (TPR): The legal process that permanently severs a parent's rights to a child.

Title IV-E Funding: Federal foster care funds, authorized under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, are paid to states on an uncapped, "entitlement" basis, meaning any qualifying expenditure by a state will be partially reimbursed, or matched without limit. Definitions of which expenses qualify for reimbursement are laid out in regulations and policy interpretations.

Trauma: Many children in foster care suffer a variety of traumatic events, such as physical and sexual abuse, witnessing domestic and community violence, separation from family members and re-victimization by others. Complex trauma can have devastating effects on a child's physiology, emotions, ability to think, learn and concentrate, impulse control, self-image and relationships with others. Across the life span, complex trauma is linked to a wide range of problems, including addiction, chronic physical conditions, depression and anxiety, self-harming behaviors and other psychiatric disorders.

Waiting children: Children in the public child welfare system who cannot return to their birth homes and need permanent, loving adoptive families to help them grow up safe and secure.

Workplace adoption benefits: Compensation to workers through employer-sponsored programs that may include financial reimbursement for adoption expenses and paid or unpaid adoption leave.



WHAT'S NEXT?

We'd love to help you take another step toward becoming a foster or adoptive parent. To talk with someone or to request more information, visit

wearetheecho.org