

# Getting Started: Adoption Packet 1

This packet is provided for prospective adoptive parents and others interested in learning more about the adoption process. Contents include:

- Adoption: Where Do I Start?
- Adoption Options: Factsheet for Families
- The Adoption Home Study Process

Child Welfare Information Gateway (Information Gateway) offers many other resources about all types of adoption. For more information or to order additional publications, visit the Information Gateway website at [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov), email Information Gateway at [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov), or call Information Gateway at 800.394.3366.



# Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

FACTSHEET  
FOR FAMILIES

July 2010

## Adoption: Where Do I Start?



This factsheet is an introduction to the many paths to building your family through adoption. It will give you an understanding of the basics in any adoption process and guide you to resources at each step.

### What's Inside:

- Step 1: Educate yourself
- Step 2: Understand the law
- Step 3: Explore your options/  
Select an agency
- Step 4: Complete a home study
- Step 5: Engage in the placement process
- Step 6: File necessary legal documents
- Step 7: Parent your child
- Additional resources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



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800.394.3366  
Email: [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov)  
[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

## Step 1: Educate Yourself

### What You Should Know

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 Program Managers can send you information to help get you started.

There are also many books, magazines, and websites on this topic; some are listed at the end of this factsheet.

### Some Places to Go

To learn more about what to expect when pursuing specific types of adoption, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet *Adoption Options*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_adoptoption.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adoptoption.cfm)

You can also check the resources listed at the end of this document.

The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory allows users to search for 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:

[www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad)

## Step 2: Understand the Law

### What You Should Know

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

### Some Places to Go

The State Statutes Search on the Information Gateway website highlights adoption topics and provides a brief overview and summaries of State laws on each topic: [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/state](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state)

Information regarding who may adopt, timeframes for consent and revocation of consent to adoption, termination of parental rights laws, and more are provided in the database and can be searched by State, Territory, or region.

In many States, the process to adopt a stepchild is different from other kinds

of adoption. To learn more about the legal issues involved, see the Information Gateway factsheet *Stepparent Adoption*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_step.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_step.cfm)

## Step 3: Explore Your Options/Select an Agency

### What You Should Know

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 our family's child *come* from? (Domestic or intercountry adoption?)
- If we adopt domestically, *what type of adoption* is best for our family? (Public agency, licensed private agency, independent, or facilitated/unlicensed agency adoption?)
- If we choose intercountry adoption, *what country* will our child come from? (Hague Convention or non-Hague Convention country? See box.)

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.

### Some Places to Go

For more information, see the Information Gateway factsheet *Adoption Options*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_adoption.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adoption.cfm)

If you choose to adopt a child from another country, you will need to know whether the country from which you plan to adopt is a party to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. Countries that are parties to the Hague Convention have specific requirements for the adoption process, including the home study, parent training and eligibility, applicable forms, and more. The mission of the Hague Convention is to safeguard the children and parents involved in the adoption process.

- The U.S. Department of State website lists countries that are parties to the Hague Convention: [www.adoption.state.gov/hague/overview/countries.html](http://www.adoption.state.gov/hague/overview/countries.html)
- Information Gateway's factsheet *Intercountry Adoption From Hague Convention and Non-Hague Convention Countries* provides more information on this topic: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm)

## Step 4: Complete a Home Study

### What You Should Know

No matter which 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 gathering information 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 Program to learn the specific regulations in your State. Intercountry adoption may carry special home study requirements, depending on the country and agency involved.

### Some Places to Go

The Information Gateway factsheet *The Adoption Home Study Process* provides more information about what is generally included in a home study: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_homstu.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_homstu.cfm)

The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory lists public adoption agencies in each State and Territory: [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad)

## Step 5: Engage in the Placement Process

### What You Should Know

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, the characteristics of the child or children you are seeking, and a variety of other factors, this process and the time involved in waiting for your child can vary greatly.

- If you are pursuing a foster care adoption, you may review information about a number of children who are waiting for families. Your agency may have adoption events, a photolisting service, TV or video segments describing waiting children, or other ways to let you know about available children waiting for families. You can also view waiting children at the national photolisting website: [www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org). You will often have the opportunity for preplacement visits to get to know a child before he or she moves into your home. Your family may also be able to serve as a resource, foster, or concurrent planning family, working with the agency to support the child's return to his or her birth family as well as being considered as a potential permanent family for the child if reunification does not occur.
- If you are pursuing adoption through a licensed private agency, the expectant parents may select your family from among several prospective adoptive families.
- 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 pursuing intercountry adoption, you may review information about your prospective child and may have the opportunity to meet your child in his or her placement setting (foster home or orphanage).

## Some Places to Go

Information Gateway's *Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adoptive Child* provides suggestions for obtaining a child's medical, social, and educational history: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_background.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_background.cfm)

*Foster Parents Considering Adoption*, also from Information Gateway, outlines considerations in this type of adoption: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_fospar.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fospar.cfm)

Information Gateway's *Intercountry Adoption: Where Do I Start?* provides more information on the placement process when adopting a child from another country: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_inter](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_inter)

*Use of Advertising and Facilitators in Adoptive Placements* provides summaries of State laws regulating the use of advertising and facilitators in private placements: [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/advertisingall.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/advertisingall.pdf)

## Step 6: File Necessary Legal Documents

### What You Should Know

All domestic adoptions need to be finalized in court. The process varies from State to State. Generally a child must have lived with the adoptive family for at least 6 months before the adoption can be legally finalized. 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 an independent adoption) will

submit a written recommendation of approval of the adoption to the court. You or your attorney can then file with the court to complete the adoption.

For intercountry adoptions, the actual adoption procedure is just one of a series of required legal processes. In addition to the laws of your State, you must also follow the laws of the child's country of origin and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services requirements (see [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)). If you adopt from a country that participates in the Hague Convention, the process carries further requirements to safeguard the parties involved. The process to finalize the adoption depends on the type of intercountry adoption, the type of visa the child has, and the laws in your State.

Most adoptions of children from foster care are handled by public child welfare agencies. The national online photolisting at **AdoptUsKids** provides pictures and general descriptions of children in foster care around the country who are waiting for families: [www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org)

Information Gateway publishes resource lists of links to photolisting services in each State:

- *State Adoption Photolisting Services Websites:* [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp\\_website.cfm?rs\\_id=19&rate\\_chno=AZ-0005E](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_id=19&rate_chno=AZ-0005E)
- *State Adoption Exchange Websites:* [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp\\_website.cfm?typeID=81&rate\\_chno=AZ-0003E](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?typeID=81&rate_chno=AZ-0003E)

## Some Places to Go

The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory provides an attorney referral service for each State: [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad)

Two Information Gateway factsheets provide more information about finalization of intercountry adoptions:

- *Intercountry Adoption: Where Do I Start?:* [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_inter](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_inter)
- *Intercountry Adoption From Hague Convention and Non-Hague Convention Countries:* [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm)

## Step 7: Parent Your Child

### What You Should Know

The final, and most important, step in the adoption process is to be a parent to your adopted child. Adoption is a lifelong process. Your family, like many families, may need support adjusting to life with your new child. Your family and your child may have additional questions at different developmental stages.

### Some Places to Go

Read more in the Parenting Your Child From Birth to Adulthood section of the Information Gateway website: [www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/families/parenting.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/families/parenting.cfm)

This includes information about:

- Parenting adopted children of different ages
- Adoption and school issues
- Transitioning from foster to adoptive parenting
- Parenting a child who has been sexually abused
- Postadoption services
- Selecting and working with an adoption therapist

## Additional Resources

### General Adoption

#### Adopting.com

[www.adopting.com/info2.html](http://www.adopting.com/info2.html)  
Extensive index of adoption resources on the Internet

#### *Adoptive Families Magazine*

[www.adoptivefamilies.com](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com)  
Bimonthly information source for families before, during, and after adoption

#### *How to Make Adoption an Affordable Option* (PDF – 2,221 KB)

[www.smartaboutmoney.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=KDo4VV4Mzfo%3D&tabid=442&mid=832](http://www.smartaboutmoney.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=KDo4VV4Mzfo%3D&tabid=442&mid=832)

Booklet from the National Endowment for Financial Education (current through 2004)

**Pediatricians With a Special Interest in Adoption and Foster Care Medicine**  
(PDF – 52 KB)  
[www.aap.org/sections/adoption/SOAFCAAdoptionDirectory2.pdf](http://www.aap.org/sections/adoption/SOAFCAAdoptionDirectory2.pdf)  
Nationwide listing from the American Academy of Pediatrics of physicians and clinics specializing in assessments of international adoptees

## Domestic Adoption

### Insight: Open Adoption Resources & Support

[www.openadoptioninsight.org](http://www.openadoptioninsight.org)  
Resources and support for families involved in open adoptions

### *Openness in Adoption: A Factsheet for Families*

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadopt.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)  
A factsheet to help you decide if open adoption is right for your family

## Foster Care Adoption

### *State Child Welfare Agency Websites*

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp\\_website.cfm?rs\\_ID=16&rate\\_chno=AZ-0004E](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E)  
Contains links to State child welfare agency websites in all 50 States and the District of Columbia

### AdoptUsKids

[www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org)  
National photolisting service of children in foster care waiting for families

## Intercountry Adoption

### U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

[www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov) (click on Adoption)  
Downloadable forms and frequently asked questions about intercountry adoptions

### U.S. Department of State

<http://adoption.state.gov>  
Publications, news and statistics, factsheets, information on the Hague Convention, and country-specific information

### The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption

[http://hcch.e-vision.nl/index\\_en.php?act=conventions.text&cid=69](http://hcch.e-vision.nl/index_en.php?act=conventions.text&cid=69)  
The full text of the May 1993 convention

### Joint Council on International Children's Services

[www.jcics.org](http://www.jcics.org)  
Membership organization that sets standards, conducts legislative advocacy, and provides country-specific adoption information

### *State Recognition of Intercountry Adoptions Finalized Abroad*

[www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/intercountry.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/intercountry.cfm)  
More information about States' laws on intercountry adoption finalization

## Kinship Adoption

### *Kinship Caregivers and the Child Welfare System: A Factsheet for Families*

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_kinshi/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_kinshi/index.cfm)

The benefits, barriers, and resources for kinship placements, including subsidized guardianships

### ***Kinship Care/Grandparents Raising Grandchildren***

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp.cfm?subjID=30&rate\\_chno=AR-0028A](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?subjID=30&rate_chno=AR-0028A)  
Linked list of organizations and resources for grandparents raising grandchildren

### **AARP Grandparent Information Center**

[www.aarp.org/family/grandparenting](http://www.aarp.org/family/grandparenting)  
Information about being a good grandparent, visitation rights, and raising grandchildren

### **State Factsheets for Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children**

[www.cwla.org/programs/kinship/statefactsheets.htm](http://www.cwla.org/programs/kinship/statefactsheets.htm)  
State-by-State information about kinship care

### **Generations United**

[www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)  
Programs, trainings, resources, public policy, and events of interest to grandparents and other relatives raising children

### **Tools for Working With Kinship**

**Caregivers** (PDF - 130 KB)  
[www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Tools-for-working-with-kinship-caregivers.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Tools-for-working-with-kinship-caregivers.pdf)  
Training materials, handbooks, assessment tools, links, and publications from the Casey National Center for Resource Family Support

## **Special Circumstances**

### ***Military Families and Adoption: A Factsheet for Families***

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/militarybulletin.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/militarybulletin.cfm)  
Answers to questions about adoption often asked by military families

### ***Stepparent Adoption***

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_step.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_step.cfm)  
Factsheet explaining the steps involved in stepparent adoption

### **Transracial/Transcultural Families**

[www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/types/families/transracial.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/types/families/transracial.cfm)  
Resources for professionals and families who have adopted or are considering adopting transracially or transculturally

## **Adoption Publishers/Booksellers**

**Adopting.org** (online)  
[www.adopting.org](http://www.adopting.org)

**Adoption World Specialties**  
[www.adoptionworld.net](http://www.adoptionworld.net)

**EMK Press**  
[www.emkpress.com](http://www.emkpress.com)

**Pact, An Adoption Alliance**  
[www.pactadopt.org](http://www.pactadopt.org)

**Perspectives Press**  
[www.perspectivespress.com](http://www.perspectivespress.com)

**Tapestry Books**  
[www.tapestrybooks.com](http://www.tapestrybooks.com)



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## Adoption Options



There are many different types of adoption and choices to be made in adoption. Find information in this factsheet to help you understand the various options and determine the best route to building your family through adoption.

### What's Inside:

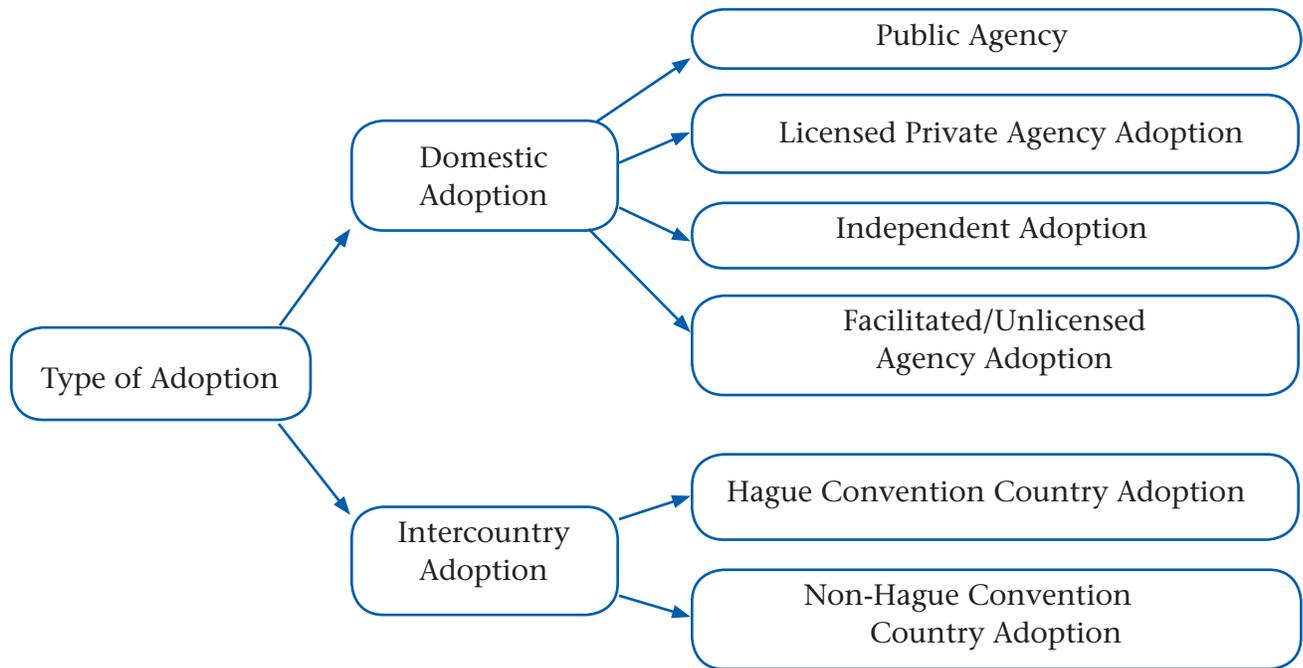
- Map of Adoption Options
- Type of Adoption
- Domestic Adoption
- Intercountry Adoption

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



**Child Welfare Information Gateway**  
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Email: [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov)  
[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

## Map of Adoption Options



This flowchart is a map of adoption options. You can read straight through the factsheet to learn about all of your options, learning first about the different types of domestic adoption and then about intercountry adoption, or you can click on any of the boxes in the flowchart to find out about that specific option.

The way you choose to adopt will depend on what is important to your family, including your feelings about contact with birth family members, your flexibility about the characteristics of the child you wish to adopt, your resources, and how long you are willing to wait for your child.

Federal legislation sets the framework for adoption in the United States; States then pass laws to comply with Federal requirements. Within each State, adoption is regulated by State laws, so you will find

many references to “your State” in this factsheet.

Military families interested in adoption and stationed outside their home State or overseas may want to read Information Gateway’s *Military Families and Adoption*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_milita.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_milita.cfm)

Relatives interested in adopting a related infant or child may follow any of the four paths outlined here, depending on the circumstances. Specific information about adopting a related child can be found on the ACF website:

<http://tinyurl.com/23z3pmn>

## Type of Adoption

One of the first decisions many prospective adoptive parents make is whether to adopt a child from the United States or from another country. Some of the considerations in deciding between domestic and intercountry adoption include the importance of having access to your child's medical and genetic history and how much contact you might want with your child's birth family, now or in the future.

### Domestic Adoption

In domestic adoption, you may choose to work with a public agency, a licensed private agency, an attorney ("independent adoption"), or an adoption facilitator (if allowed by laws in your State) or unlicensed agency. Public and licensed private agencies are required to meet State standards and have more oversight to ensure quality services. Unlicensed agencies and facilitators often do not have the same State oversight; consequently, there may be more financial, emotional, and legal risk for adoptive and birth families using unlicensed services. Many public and private adoption agencies offer free orientation sessions that will allow you to gain an overview of their available services prior to making any commitment to work with them.

Whether you adopt an infant or an older child, you are likely to receive more extensive history and background information about a child who lives in the United States than one who lives in another country. Domestic adoptions make it more

likely that you will be able to arrange for some degree of contact between your family and the child's birth family after the adoption (referred to as "openness"), if you choose. Even if the adoption is not "open" (i.e., there is no contact with the birth family), people adopted domestically may have an easier time locating their birth families or obtaining their genetic history if they decide to search for that information later in life.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway publications *Openness in Adoption: A Factsheet for Families* ([www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadopt.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)) and *Openness in Adoption: A Bulletin for Professionals* ([www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadoptbulletin.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm)) offer additional information about potential advantages and disadvantages of open adoptions.

For more information about domestic adoption, visit the Information Gateway web section on Adopting Infants Domestically: [www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/domestic\\_adopt.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/domestic_adopt.cfm)

### Public Agency Adoption

Public agencies mainly handle the adoption of children in the State foster care (child welfare) system. Children in foster care have been removed from their families for a variety of reasons, including abuse or neglect, and they may have experienced trauma as a result. These children range in age from infants to teens.

There are many children in foster care waiting for adoptive families. Children ages 8 and up, children of color, sibling groups, and children with disabilities are especially in need of adoptive families. Online adoption exchanges provide photolistings with pictures and brief descriptions of children in the foster care system across a State or region.

- See Information Gateway's *State Adoption Photolisting Services Websites*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp\\_website.cfm?typeID=82&rate\\_chno=AZ-0005E](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?typeID=82&rate_chno=AZ-0005E)
- **AdoptUsKids** provides a national website featuring children available for adoption in the United States as well as information and resources about adopting a child from foster care: <http://adoptuskids.org>
- Also, check Information Gateway's list of *State Child Welfare Agency Websites* to find your local department of social services to learn about children in your area who need homes: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp\\_website.cfm?rs\\_ID=16&rate\\_chno=AZ-0004E](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E)

By asking questions, observing interactions, and coming to understand what is most important to your family, your social worker can work with you to determine what type of child or children would benefit from your family's style of parenting and have their needs met with your family's particular strengths.

You may also want to find out about becoming a foster or resource family, serving as a child's foster family and working with the agency to support the child's return to

his or her birth family. Sometimes a foster family can become a child's permanent adoptive family, if the court decides adoption is in the child's best interests.

In public agency adoptions, matches are generally arranged by the agency, through a meeting of several social workers and supervisors and/or by a placement committee, based on the needs of the child and the ability of the family to meet those needs.

For more information about public agency adoption, visit the Information Gateway web section on Adopting Children From Foster Care: [www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/foster\\_care.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/foster_care.cfm)

### Licensed Private Agency Adoption

In a licensed agency adoption, the birth parents relinquish their parental rights to the agency, and adoptive parents then work with the agency to adopt. These agencies are required to adhere to licensing and procedural standards.

Many prospective parents work with licensed private agencies in order to adopt healthy infants. Waiting times for infant adoptions vary tremendously and can be as long as several years or more. In the United States, agency criteria for prospective adoptive parents are often more restrictive for infant adoptions than for adoptions of older children, again because fewer infants are available. Many agencies allow birth parents to choose a prospective adoptive family for their child based on profiles, books, or videos that prospective families create to share information about themselves. Prospective parents may have an opportunity to meet the birth parents

face to face; however, social workers may make decisions about which families' profiles are shared with expectant parents considering adoption, or agency staff may make the match of a child and prospective adoptive parent. In addition, agencies may give preference to certain types of individuals or couples (e.g., due to religious affiliation or marital status).

The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory lists public and licensed private adoption agencies and State Adoption Program Managers for every State and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Only licensed agencies are included.

[www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad)

## Independent Adoption

In an independent adoption, attorneys assist prospective parents with the adoption process, which usually involves the adoption of an infant. Families adopting independently identify the expectant parents (or pregnant woman) without an agency's help. Each family's situation is different; it is impossible to predict the length of time you may wait for a child. Some adoptive parents and expectant mothers find each other and make a plan within a week, while other adoptive parents search for years.

Infants usually are placed with the adoptive parents directly from the hospital after birth. While State laws differ about the

timing of the birth parents' consent and the conditions and timing of the birth parents' right to revoke that consent, there is always the possibility that birth parents will change their minds when the baby is born. The birth parents are the child's legal parents until they consent to the surrender of their parental rights. Information Gateway's *Consent to Adoption* offers information on State laws regarding consent and revocation of consent: [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/consent.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/consent.cfm)

If you decide to choose independent adoption, you will interact with the expectant parents or their attorney. Birth parents typically provide a written consent for the adoption that must be approved by the court. Attorneys who facilitate independent adoptions must adhere to the standards of the American Bar Association. Some attorneys who specialize in adoption are members of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys ([www.adoptionattorneys.org](http://www.adoptionattorneys.org)), a professional membership organization with standards of ethical practice.

Not all States allow independent adoptions. The following publications provide more information:

- *Who May Adopt, Be Adopted, or Place a Child for Adoption*  
[www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/parties.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/parties.cfm)
- *Online Resources for State Child Welfare Law and Policy*  
[www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/resources.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/resources.pdf)

- *Use of Advertising and Facilitators in Adoptive Placements*  
www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\_policies/statutes/advertising.cfm

Even when the birth mother and adoptive parents locate one another independently, they may still take advantage of services and/or may be required to have all or part of the process approved by a licensed agency. This is called “identified adoption.” The agency’s role is to conduct the home study for the adoptive parents and counsel the birth mother and father, if available.

### Facilitated/Unlicensed Agency Adoption

Adoptive placements by facilitators and unlicensed agencies offer the least amount of supervision and oversight. A facilitator is any person who links prospective adoptive parents with expectant birth mothers for a fee. Facilitators may or may not be regulated in their State and may have varying degrees of expertise in adoption practice. Families who work with facilitators often have little recourse if the plan does not work out as they had hoped. Some States prohibit adoptions by paid facilitators. Check the adoption program or policy in your State.

For more information on facilitated adoption, read Information Gateway’s *Use of Advertising and Facilitators in Adoptive Placements*: [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/advertising.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/advertising.cfm)

### Inter-country Adoption

Inter-country adoption differs in several significant ways from domestic adoption. Children eligible for inter-country adoption must have lost their birth parents to death or abandonment, or the birth parents must prove that they are incapable of caring for the children. In some cases, children adopted through inter-country adoption may have been raised in orphanages or institutional settings.

There is generally less information about a child’s birth and family history than in domestic adoption. If you or your child have questions about the child’s birth family later in life, finding birth family members or information about them could be difficult, depending on the country, their adoption laws and policies, and the agency with which you work. Children adopted from another country, especially older children, will require sensitivity to their change in culture, including (possibly) language, food, customs, societal expectations, etc.

The placement process for inter-country adoption varies depending on the agency you choose, the child’s country of origin, and whether or not the country is a party to the Hague Convention. As a child becomes available for adoption, he or she is matched by an adoption service provider with prospective parents who can meet that child’s needs. Families often have the opportunity to review whatever information is available about a child before accepting a placement. However, in many cases very little is known about the child’s medical or other history. Some pediatricians specialize in helping parents evaluate information found in inter-country adoption referrals.

See the American Academy of Pediatrics list of pediatricians with a special interest in adoption: [www.aap.org/sections/adoption/SOAFCAAdoptionDirectory2.pdf](http://www.aap.org/sections/adoption/SOAFCAAdoptionDirectory2.pdf)

Often, families need to travel to the child's country of origin to pick up their child. Some countries require more than one trip. The State Department (<http://adoption.state.gov>) provides the most comprehensive information regarding intercountry adoption, including the most common countries of origin. Necessary forms and frequently asked questions regarding intercountry adoption can be accessed through the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Adoption webpage (click on Adoption in the center of the page): [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)

Information Gateway's factsheet *Intercountry Adoption: Where Do I Start?* offers more detailed information on intercountry adoption: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_inter/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_inter/index.cfm)

Since the United States ratified the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption in April 2008, a number of requirements have changed for adoptions of children from countries that are also party to the Hague Convention. The Hague Convention was enacted to safeguard children and families involved in intercountry adoption. It includes requirements for adoption service providers (agencies), home studies, parent training, and more. Prospective parents who decide to pursue an intercountry adoption need to

decide early in the process whether they will adopt from a Hague Convention country or a country that is not a party to the Hague Convention, since many requirements will differ.

To compare requirements, services, and processes for Hague and non-Hague country adoptions, read *Information Gateway's Intercountry Adoption From Hague Convention and Non-Hague Convention Countries*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm)

The U.S. Department of State also offers a chart of comparisons: [http://adoption.state.gov/pdf/Side\\_by\\_side\\_comparison.pdf](http://adoption.state.gov/pdf/Side_by_side_comparison.pdf)

For more information about intercountry adoption, visit the Information Gateway web section on Adopting Children From Another Country: [www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/other\\_country.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/other_country.cfm)

## Hague Convention Country Adoption

Parents who adopt from a Hague Convention country must use the services of a provider that is approved or accredited specifically to provide Hague Convention adoption services. Parents will need to identify the desired country before obtaining a home study, and they will have to complete at least 10 hours of approved training. Children adopted from Hague Convention countries must be determined to be "adoptable" by their country of origin

and must meet the definition of a Hague Convention adoptee. Before entering the United States, the child must obtain an immigrant visa.

To find out if the country you are considering adopting from is a party to the Hague Convention, visit the Department of State website for the list of about 75 countries: [www.adoption.state.gov/hague/overview/countries.html](http://www.adoption.state.gov/hague/overview/countries.html)

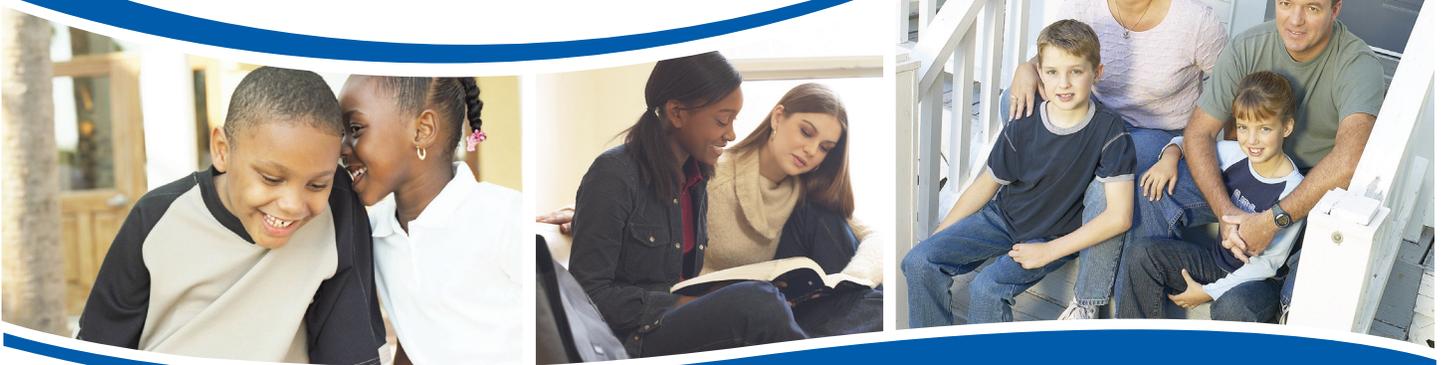
### **Non-Hague Convention Country Adoption**

Parents adopting from a non-Hague country may obtain a home study before choosing the country from which they will adopt as long as the home study meets State and Federal requirements. The adoption provider (agency) must be licensed in their home State. Parents may or may not be required to complete training before adopting. The child identified for adoption must meet the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services definition of “orphan” and will need to obtain a visa before being allowed to enter the United States.

Regardless of the type of adoption your family decides to pursue, if you are like most families, you may need to one day access services after adoption. For information on postadoption services, see Information Gateway’s Postadoption web section: [www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption)



# The Adoption Home Study Process



The laws of every State and the District of Columbia require all prospective adoptive parents (no matter how they intend to adopt) to participate in a home study. This process has three purposes:

- Educate and prepare the adoptive family for adoption
- Evaluate the fitness of the adoptive family

## What's Inside:

- Elements of the home study process
- The home study report
- Common concerns about the home study



- Gather information about the prospective parents that will help a social worker connect the family with a child whose needs they can meet

With accurate information about the process, prospective parents can face the home study experience with confidence and the excitement that should accompany the prospect of welcoming a child into the family. It may be helpful to remember that agencies are not looking for perfect parents. Rather, they are looking for a good match between a child's needs and a family's ability to meet those needs.

Specific home study requirements and processes vary greatly from agency to agency, State to State, and (in the case of intercountry adoption) by the child's country of origin. They are also subject to change. This factsheet discusses the common elements of the home study process and addresses some concerns prospective adoptive parents may have about the process.

If you are just beginning your journey to adoption, you may find useful information in Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Adoption: Where Do I Start?* [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_start.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_start.cfm)

Information Gateway also offers the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, a searchable database listing public and licensed private agencies, attorney referral services, support groups, State adoption specialists, and more, for each State, Territory, and the District of Columbia: [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad)

These resources, as well as factsheets with specific information about various

types of adoption (such as foster care or intercountry), can be found on the Information Gateway website: [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

## Elements of the Home Study Process

There is no single format that adoption agencies use to conduct home studies. Many agencies include the following steps in their home study process, although the specific details and order will vary. For more information, talk with the agencies you are considering.

### Orientation

Many agencies offer an initial informational session or orientation that provides an overview of the process and their agency. These generally are free, do not carry any obligation, and are a good way to find out about the agency, their process, the children available, and if the agency would be a good fit for you and your family.

### Training

Many agencies require trainings for prospective adoptive parents prior to or during the home study process. These trainings help prospective parents better understand the needs of children waiting for families, adoption issues, and agency requirements. They can help families decide what type of child or children they could parent most effectively.

## Interviews

You will probably be interviewed several times by a social worker. These interviews help you develop a relationship with your social worker that will enable him or her to better understand your family and assist you with an appropriate placement. You will discuss the topics to be covered in the home study report (see below). You will likely be asked to give examples of your experiences with children, your important relationships, your approach to parenting, and how you handle stress and past experiences of crisis or loss, including discussions about infertility, which is a topic of concern for many adoptive families. You and your social worker will discuss what age of child would best fit in your family, whether a sibling group would work well, and other important characteristics you would be willing to accept in a child. Again, this should be both a self-reflective process and a time to educate yourself about issues with which you may not yet be familiar. With couples, some agency workers conduct all of the interviews with both prospective parents together. Others will conduct both joint and individual interviews. If families have adult children living outside the home, they also may be interviewed during this process. It is important to be honest with the social worker and yourself about your own strengths and limitations.

## Home Visit

Home visits primarily serve to ensure that your home offers a safe environment for a child and meets State licensing standards (e.g., working smoke alarms, safe storage of firearms, safe water, pools covered/fenced, and adequate space for each child). Your

home should be free from hazards and offer a child-friendly environment for the age range for which you are being licensed. For example, poisons and household cleaners should be in cupboards with childproof locks, window drape cords should not hang within reach, firearms should be inaccessible to children, etc. Some States require an inspection from local health and fire departments in addition to the visit by the social worker.

Generally, agencies will require the social worker to view all areas of the house or apartment, including where the children will sleep, the basement, and the backyard. He or she will be looking for how you plan to accommodate a new family member (or members, if you are planning to adopt a sibling group). Social workers are not typically inspecting your housekeeping standards. A certain level of order is necessary, but some family clutter is expected. A comfortable, child-friendly environment is what is being sought.

If you are planning to adopt a child from another country (intercountry adoption), you will need to know whether the country from which you plan to adopt is a party to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. If it is, your home study will be subject to Hague Convention requirements. These requirements mandate which agencies or service providers may conduct your home study, what statements must be included about your parent training and eligibility, and how the home study must be submitted to the Central Authority for adoption in the country from which you plan to adopt.

- Find a list of countries that are parties to the Hague Convention on the U.S. Department of State website: [www.adoption.state.gov/hague/overview/countries.html](http://www.adoption.state.gov/hague/overview/countries.html)
- Read Information Gateway's factsheet *Intercountry Adoption From Hague Convention and Non-Hague Convention Countries*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm)

## Health Statements

Most agencies require prospective adoptive parents to have a recent physical exam and a statement from a physician confirming that they are essentially healthy, have a normal life expectancy, and are physically

and mentally able to handle the care of a child.

If you have a medical condition that is under control (for instance, high blood pressure or diabetes that is controlled by diet and medication), you may still be approved as an adoptive family. A serious health problem that affects life expectancy may prevent approval. If your family has sought counseling or treatment for a mental health condition in the past, you may be asked to provide information or reports from those visits. Many agencies view seeking help as a sign of strength; the fact that your family obtained such help should not, in and of itself, preclude you from adopting. However, each family's situation is unique, so check with the agencies or social workers you are considering if you have concerns.

## Income Statements

You do not have to be rich to adopt. You do have to show you can manage your finances responsibly and adequately. Some countries may have specific income requirements for intercountry adoption. Usually, prospective parents are asked to verify their income by providing copies of paycheck stubs, W-4 forms, or income tax forms. Many agencies also ask about savings, insurance policies (including health coverage for the adopted child)<sup>1</sup>, investments, and debts.

<sup>1</sup> The booklet *Protections for Newborns, Adopted Children, and New Parents* from the Employee Benefits Security Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, notes that parents should enroll their child in their insurance policy within 30 days of their placement or adoption to ensure coverage ([www.dol.gov/ebsa/pdf/newborns.pdf](http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/pdf/newborns.pdf)). The Employee Benefits Security Administration ([www.dol.gov/ebsa/aboutebsa](http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/aboutebsa)) has oversight over employer-offered insurance benefits and may be able to answer families' questions.

## Background Checks

All States require criminal and child abuse record checks for adoptive and foster parent applicants. In many States, local, State, and Federal clearances are required. Fingerprints may be taken as well.

Public and private agencies must comply with State and Federal laws and policies regarding licensing requirements and how the findings of background checks affect eligibility for adoptive parents. However, do not hesitate to talk to social workers and agencies you are considering about specific situations that might disqualify you from adopting. Agencies will consider your past experiences as well as how you dealt with them, what you've learned from them, and how you would use that knowledge in parenting a child. Some agencies may be able to work with your family, depending on the specific incident and its resolution. If the social worker finds you to be deceptive or dishonest, however, or if the documents collected during the home study process expose inconsistencies, the agency may not approve your home study.

## Autobiographical Statement

Many adoption agencies ask prospective adoptive parents to write an autobiographical statement or story. This is, essentially, the story of your life. It helps the social worker understand your family better and assists him or her in writing the home study report (see below). If you are working with an agency that practices openness in adoption, you also may be asked to write a letter or create an album or scrapbook about your family to be shared with expectant parents who are considering placing their

child for adoption, to help them choose an adoptive family. You may also be asked to prepare a similar album for children, if you are considering adopting children older than infants.

While writing about yourself may seem difficult, the exercise is intended to provide information about you to the agency, as well as to help you explore issues related to parenting and adoption. Some agencies have workers available to assist you with the writing. Most have a set of questions to guide you through writing your autobiography.

## References

The agency will probably ask you for names, addresses, and telephone numbers of three or four people who will serve as references for you. References help the social worker form a more complete picture of your family and support network.

If possible, references should be people who have known you for years, who have seen you in many situations, and who have visited your home and know of your interest in and involvement with children. Most agencies require that references be people who are not related to you. Good choices might include close friends, an employer, a former teacher, a coworker, a neighbor, or your pastor, minister, rabbi, or leader of your faith community (if applicable).

Approval would rarely be denied on the grounds of a single negative reference. However, if it were one of several negative factors, or if several references were negative, the agency might be unable to approve the adoption.

## The Home Study Report

Typically, the above steps conclude with the writing of a home study report that reflects the social worker's findings. Home study reports often are used to introduce your family to other agencies or adoption exchanges (services that list children waiting for families) to assist in matching your family with a waiting child.

In addition to the above-mentioned health and income statements, background checks, and references, home study reports also include the following types of information:

- **Family background:** descriptions of the applicants' childhoods, how they were parented, past and current relationships with parents and siblings, key events and losses and what was learned from them
- **Education/employment:** applicants' current educational levels, satisfaction with their educational achievements, any plans to further their education, as well as their employment status, history, plans, and satisfaction with their current jobs
- **Relationships:** If applicants are a couple, the report may cover their history together as well as their current relationship (for example, how they make decisions, solve problems, communicate, and show affection). Single applicants will be asked about their social life and how they anticipate integrating a child into it, as well as about their network of relatives and friends.
- **Daily life:** routines, such as a typical weekday or weekend, plans for child care (if applicants work outside the home), hobbies, and interests
- **Parenting:** applicants' past experiences with children (for example, their own, relatives' children, neighbors, volunteer work, babysitting, teaching, or coaching), in addition to their plans regarding discipline and other parenting issues
- **Neighborhood:** descriptions of the applicants' neighborhood, including safety and proximity to community resources
- **Religion/belief system:** information about the applicants' religion, level of religious practice (if applicable), and the kind of religious upbringing, if any, they plan to provide for the child
- **Feelings about/readiness for adoption:** There may be a section on specific adoption issues, including why the applicants want to adopt, feelings about infertility (if this is an issue), what kind of child they might best parent and why, and how they plan to talk to their children about adoption issues. There will likely be questions about how the applicants feel about birth families and the level of openness with the birth family that would work best, depending on the type of adoption. (Note: It is very typical for families' feelings about openness to change throughout the home study process, as they learn more and become more comfortable with the issues involved.) For more information, read *Information Gateway's Openness in Adoption: A Factsheet for Families*: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadopt.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)

- **Approval/recommendation:** The home study report will conclude with a summary and the social worker's recommendation. This often includes the age range and number of children for which the family is recommended.

Technology is changing how some agencies conduct home studies. Many records are now kept electronically. Families may choose to create an electronic album or Facebook page to share with potential birth parents in an infant adoption or to introduce their family to children or youth waiting for families in the foster care system.

Applicants also will be asked to provide copies of birth certificates, marriage licenses or certificates, and divorce decrees, if applicable. Some agencies share the home study with prospective parents; others do not. You may want to ask the agency about the confidentiality of the home study report and how extensively your information will be shared. Agency policies vary greatly, depending on the type of agency and type of adoption. In many cases, the information will be shared with other agencies to help unite your family with the child you are best able to parent. In some cases, the information may be shared with birth parents or others.

## Common Concerns About the Home Study

### How Long Will the Home Study Take?

The time it takes to conduct the home study will vary from agency to agency, depending on factors such as how many social workers are assigned to conduct home studies, what other duties they have, how many other people applied to the agency at the same time, and when any required trainings are offered. On average, a home study process takes 3 to 6 months to complete. The time will depend on you as well. You can help speed the process by filling out your paperwork, scheduling your medical appointments, and gathering the required documents without delay.

### How Much Does a Home Study Cost?

The cost of the home study depends on the kind of adoption you are pursuing. Agencies conducting domestic adoptions of children from foster care (such as your local department of social services) may not charge a fee for the home study. If these agencies do charge a fee, they often are modest (\$300 to \$500), and once you adopt a child from foster care the fee is usually reimbursed.

A private agency or certified social worker in private practice might charge from \$1,000 to \$3,000 for the home study. Other services (such as an application fee and preplacement services) may be included

in this fee. Be sure to discuss any fees thoroughly and ask for this information in writing to avoid any misunderstandings.

For more information about costs of adoption and resources to help defray those costs, see the Adoption Expenses section of the Information Gateway website:

[www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/expenses.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/expenses.cfm)

### What Might Disqualify Our Family From Adopting?

Aside from a criminal record or overriding safety concerns that would preclude agencies from approving your home study, the decision to qualify or disqualify a family is made on a case-by-case basis. Remember, agencies are not looking for perfect families. The home study process is a way for a social worker to learn more about your *real* family, as a potential home for *real* children. It is also an opportunity for you to explore adoption issues and what types of children you can best parent, with the social worker's help.

Who may adopt varies from agency to agency, State to State, and by the child's country of origin. Adoptions in the United States are governed by Federal, State, and local laws, regulations, and policies. Child Welfare Information Gateway has compiled States' laws regarding who may adopt in *Who May Adopt, Be Adopted, or Place a Child for Adoption?* [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/parties.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/parties.cfm)

Within State guidelines, many agencies are looking for ways to rule families *in* rather than rule them *out*, in order to meet the needs of children in the U.S. foster care system waiting for adoptive families. Many States also have their policies posted online. Information Gateway's *State Child Welfare Agency Websites* has links to each State's online adoption information: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp\\_website.cfm?rs\\_ID=16&rate\\_chno=AZ-0004E](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E)

### How Will the Children in Our Family Be Involved in the Home Study?

Your children (whether they joined your family through birth, foster care, adoption, or marriage) will be included in the home study in some way. Older children may be invited to participate in age-appropriate groups during one or more of the educational sessions. They also might be asked to write a statement describing their feelings and preferences about having a new brother or sister.

The social worker will likely want to know how the children do in school, what their interests and hobbies are, what their friends are like, and how their behavior is rewarded or disciplined. However, the emphasis will more likely be on how the children see a new sibling (or siblings) fitting into the family and whether they are prepared to share your time and attention. Children's input is usually quite important in the overall assessment of a family's readiness to adopt a child. The social worker will want to be sure that an adopted child or children will be welcomed and loved by all family members.

## Conclusion

Although the adoption home study process may seem invasive or lengthy, it is conducted to help you decide whether adoption is right for your family, to prepare your family for adoption, and to help your family determine the type of child you could best parent. The process also serves to ensure that children are matched with families who can meet their needs in loving, caring, healthy, and safe environments so that there is a good match between the child's needs and the family's capacity.

Flexibility and a sense of humor are vital characteristics when raising children, and they can be useful during the home study process as well. With perseverance and a positive outlook, you will be able to team with the social worker to make this a valuable learning experience—one that will help you do the best possible job in parenting the child who will eventually join your family.

Thousands of children in the U.S. foster care system are waiting for families. The **AdoptUsKids** website ([www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org)) provides a national photolisting of children in foster care (En Español: [www.adopte1.org](http://www.adopte1.org)). Information Gateway offers a complete listing of *State Child Welfare Agency Websites*: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp\\_website.cfm?rs\\_ID=16&rate\\_chno=AZ-0004E](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E)