



Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

A FACTSHEET
FOR FAMILIES

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Adoption Options



Prospective adoptive parents have many adoption options. The way you choose to adopt will depend on what is important to your family, including how you feel about contact with birth parents, how flexible you can be about the characteristics of the child you wish to adopt, the resources you have available for adoption fees, and how long you are willing to wait for your child. This factsheet provides some basic information about adoption

What's Inside:

- Domestic or intercountry adoption
- Domestic infant or foster care adoption
- Licensed private agency, independent adoption, or facilitated/unlicensed agency
- How the placement process may vary
- Other choices to consider
- Resources

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
Children's Bureau/ACYF
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20024
703.385.7565 or 800.394.3366
Email: info@childwelfare.gov
www.childwelfare.gov

options; for more information, see the resource list at the end of this document.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway (Information Gateway) National Adoption Directory (www.childwelfare.gov/nad) offers State-by-State listings of public officials, public and licensed private adoption agencies, and support groups for adoptive parents or people searching for birth relatives.

This factsheet focuses on 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? (Domestic infant or foster care adoption?)
- If we choose domestic infant adoption, *who will assist our family* with the adoption? (Licensed private agency, independent [attorney], or facilitated/unlicensed agency adoption?)

For more specific information about these choices, see the companion table, *Adoption Options at-a-Glance* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adoptionoptionglance.cfm).

Domestic or Intercountry 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 considerations in deciding between domestic and intercountry adoption may be how you feel about parenting a child whose background differs from your own and how you feel about potential involvement of the child's birth parents.

Domestic Adoption

Children adopted domestically often (though certainly not always) have more in common with their adoptive parents in terms of racial and ethnic background. Whether you adopt an infant or an older child, the potential also exists for some degree of contact between your family and the child's birth family after the adoption (referred to as "openness"). Even if the adoption is not open, persons adopted domestically may have an easier time locating their birth families if they decide to search as adults.

The Information Gateway factsheet, *Openness in Adoption: A Factsheet for Families* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm), and the bulletin, *Openness in Adoption: A Bulletin for Professionals* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm), offer more information about potential advantages and disadvantages of open adoptions.

Intercountry Adoption

Birth parent involvement is less likely in an intercountry adoption. In order for children to achieve orphan status (and be eligible

for adoption) in many countries, the birth parents must have died or “abandoned” them. In these cases, search for birth families as an adult can be more difficult and, in many cases, impossible.

Strict immigration requirements apply to adoptions of children from other countries. It is important to choose a licensed, knowledgeable organization for intercountry adoptions because the process is often lengthy and complex. Expenses for this type of adoption include agency fees as well as transportation, legal, and medical costs. Total costs can range from \$7,000 to \$30,000 or more, but they are generally predictable.

While intercountry adoption can be more expensive than domestic adoption (particularly adoption from foster care), the wait for an infant or younger child is generally more predictable than in domestic infant adoption (depending on the country and agency).

Licensed private agencies with intercountry programs are indicated in the National Adoption Directory (www.childwelfare.gov/nad). For more information about intercountry adoptions, see the Information Gateway factsheets, *Intercountry Adoption* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_inter/index.cfm) and *Transracial and Transcultural Adoption* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_trans.cfm).

Domestic Infant or Foster Care Adoption

If you choose to adopt domestically, you will need to decide whether you wish to adopt an infant or adopt a child (or children) from the foster care system. In making this decision, you may want to consider your support system, what resources you have available for adoption expenses, and how flexible you can be about the characteristics of the child you wish to adopt.

Infant Adoption

Many prospective parents seek to adopt healthy infants, often of a background similar to their own. Waiting times for infant adoptions vary tremendously and can be as long as 2 years or more. Many agencies now involve birth parents in choosing adoptive parents and have discontinued traditional “waiting lists” (first come, first placed) because so few infants are available through agencies. 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. Expenses for domestic infant adoption can range from \$5,000 to more than \$40,000. (An amount between \$10,000 and \$15,000 is common).

Foster Care Adoption

Foster care adoptions, sometimes called “special needs adoptions,” are typically handled by public agencies (local Departments of Social Services). Most children in foster care have been abused or neglected and, as a result, may have physical, emo-

tional, or mental disabilities. These children often are older (grade school through teens) or are sibling groups who have a goal of being adopted together. Adoption services through a public agency are usually free or available for a modest fee. Federal or State subsidies are sometimes available to assist families adopting a child with special needs as defined by the Children's Bureau Child Welfare Policy Manual (www.acf.hhs.gov/j2ee/programs/cb/laws_policies/laws/cwpm/policy_dsp.jsp?citID=49). For more information about adoption subsidies, see the Information Gateway factsheet *Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted From Foster Care* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_subsid.cfm).

Cost of Adopting (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s_cost/s_cost.cfm), an Information Gateway publication, discusses resources to help defray the cost of adoption. The Information Gateway factsheet, *Foster Parents Considering Adoption: A Factsheet for Families* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fospar.cfm) reviews issues that foster parents should consider when making the decision to adopt their foster child. **For all types of adoption**, a Federal adoption tax credit of up to \$10,160 is available for qualifying families (www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc607.html).

Some employers also offer adoption benefits to offset the cost of adopting (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_benefi.cfm).

Licensed Private Agency, Independent Adoption, or Facilitated/Unlicensed Agency

While public agencies handle the adoption of children in the State child welfare or foster care system, if you wish to adopt an *infant* from the United States, you may choose to work with a licensed agency, an attorney (sometimes called "independent adoption"), or an unlicensed adoption facilitator (if allowed by laws in your State). Licensed private agencies need to meet State standards for licensure and have more oversight to ensure quality services. Unlicensed agencies and facilitators often do not have the same State oversight and consequently there may be more financial and emotional risk for adoptive and birth families using these services.

Licensed Private Agency Adoption

In a licensed agency adoption, the birth parents relinquish their parental rights to the agency. Adoptive families then work with adoption agency professionals toward placement. Licensed agency adoptions provide the greatest assurance of monitoring and oversight of professional services, because these agencies are required to adhere to licensing and procedural standards. The wait for an infant through a licensed private agency may be longer. Prospective parents may not have an opportunity to meet the birth parents face to face. Social workers in agencies make decisions about 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 faith or marital status). Expenses range from nothing (if a private agency contracts with a public agency to place children from foster care) to \$40,000, but they are generally predictable.

Independent Adoption

In an independent adoption, attorneys assist families; however, birth parents typically give their consent directly to the adoptive family. You will interact directly with the birth parents or their attorney if you choose this option. Attorneys who facilitate independent adoptions must adhere to the standards of the Bar Association. Some attorneys who specialize in adoption are members of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys (www.adoptionattorneys.org), a professional membership organization with standards of ethical practice. State law regulates allowable expenses (such as the birth mother's medical care) that can be reimbursed by adoptive parents. Read *State Regulation of Adoption Expenses* (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/expenses.cfm) for more information. Expenses in this type of adoption can be less predictable. Not all States allow for independent adoption; check with your State Adoption Specialist.

Even if the birth mother and adoptive parents locate one another independently, they may still take advantage of services offered 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 (or those by unlicensed agencies) offer the least amount of supervision and oversight. A facilitator is any person who links prospective adoptive parents with expecting birth mothers for a fee. Adoption facilitators are largely unregulated in many States; families often have little recourse should the plan not work out as expected. Some States do not permit adoptions by paid facilitators. Check with your State Adoption Specialist.

The National Adoption Directory (www.childwelfare.gov/nad) lists public and licensed private adoption agencies in every State including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Only licensed agencies are listed in the National Adoption Directory. The directory also lists a State Adoption Specialist for each State.

How the Placement Process May Vary

In every case, adoption starts with an educational and home study process. *Adoption: Where Do I Start?* has more information (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_start.cfm). How you choose to adopt will impact how and when a child is placed in your home. The following information gives a brief overview of how placement may proceed depending on the type of adoption you choose. For more assistance comparing the

different types of adoption, see Information Gateway's companion chart, *Adoption Options at-a-Glance* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adoption.cfm).

Intercountry Adoption

The placement process for intercountry adoption varies depending on the agency you choose and the child's country of origin, but it is typically somewhat predictable. As a child becomes available for adoption, he or she is matched with prospective parents who can meet that child's needs. Families often have the opportunity to review a child's information prior to accepting a placement. Some pediatricians specialize in helping parents evaluate that information (<http://www.aap.org/sections/adoption/adopt-states/adoption-map.html>).

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 website (www.travel.state.gov/family/adoption/adoption_458.html) 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 (<http://uscis.gov/graphics/faqs.htm>).

Foster Care Adoption

There are many children in foster care waiting for adoptive families. Check with your local Department of Social Services to learn about children who need homes in your area. Adoption exchanges (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?typeID=81&rate_chno=AZ-0003E)

provide photolistings with pictures and brief descriptions of children in the foster care system across the State or region. Once a match has been made between a family and child, and you have reviewed and feel comfortable accepting the child's social and background information, you and the child begin visiting at the direction of the involved adoption professionals. Pre-placement visits vary depending on the situation and the age of the child. After the successful completion of these visits, the child is placed for adoption and comes to live with your family. For more information, read *Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adoptive Child: A Factsheet for Families* (www.childwelfare.gov/f_background.cfm).

The **AdoptUsKids** website (www.adoptuskids.org) provides a national online photolisting of children in foster care waiting for families. Information Gateway provides a complete listing of *State Child Welfare Agency Websites* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E).

Domestic Infant Adoption (Licensed Private Agency)

Adoptive parents working with private agencies often have little control over the process of identifying a child. This process varies greatly depending on the agency. Some agencies are faith-based and give preference to families from a particular religious background. Many agencies allow birth parents to choose a prospective adoptive family for

their child based on profiles or books that families create to share information about themselves. As a result, the wait for your child may be unpredictable and, in some cases, quite long. The Information Gateway factsheet, *Openness in Adoption: A Factsheet for Families*, has more information (www.childwelfare.gov/f_openadopt.cfm).

Independent Adoption

Families adopting independently identify the birth parents 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 to be placed. Some adoptive parents and expectant mothers have found each other and made a plan within a week, other adoptive parents search for 1 to 2 years. Infants are usually placed with the adoptive parents directly from the hospital after birth.

Facilitated Adoption

The placement process for families adopting through an adoption facilitator will vary greatly depending on the facilitator and the situation. Placements through an adoption facilitator may be much like placements through independent adoptions.

Other Choices to Consider

The following Information Gateway publications may help with other important decisions as you determine which path to adoption is right for your family.

Openness in Adoption: A Bulletin for Professionals

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm

Information about potential advantages and disadvantages of open adoptions.

Parenting the Sexually Abused Child

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_abused/f_abused.cfm

Information about child sexual abuse and special considerations for parents who adopt children who have experienced abuse.

Transracial/Transcultural Adoption

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_trans.cfm

Tips for families preparing to adopt a child of a race or culture different from their own, including what can be done post-adoption to help the child develop a strong sense of cultural and racial identity.

Resources

General Adoption Resources

Adopting.com

www.adopting.com/info2.html

Extensive index of adoption resources on the Internet.

Adoption Today Magazine

www.adoptinfo.net

Issues and answers surrounding international and domestic adoption.

Adoption: Where Do I Start?

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_start.cfm

An overview of the adoption process.

Adoptive Families Magazine

www.adoptivefamilies.com

Bimonthly information source for families before, during, and after adoption.

American Association of Open Adoption Agencies

www.openadoption.org

Information and resources developed by agencies practicing openness.

How to Make Adoption an Affordable Option

www.nefe.org/adoption/index.html

Booklet available from the National Endowment for Financial Education (current through 1997).

Insight: Open Adoption Resources & Support

www.r2press.com

Resources and support for birth and adoptive families involved in open adoptions.

IRS Adoption Tax Credit

www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc607.html

Legal Issues of Independent Adoptions

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_legal.cfm

An overview of independent adoption issues, including birth fathers' rights.

National Adoption Directory

www.childwelfare.gov/nad

A comprehensive State-by-State adoption resource.

Perspectives Press

www.perspectivespress.com

Books on infertility and adoption.

Tapestry Books

www.tapestrybooks.com

Books on adoption.

Foster Care Adoption Resources**The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids**

www.adoptuskids.org

The national online photolisting service of children waiting for families in the foster care system. ↗

National Adoption Center—10 steps to Adoption

http://adopt.org/servlet/page?_pageid=67&_dad=portal30&_schema=PORTAL30

Explains steps to adoption of children in foster care.

State Child Welfare Agency Websites

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E

Contains links to each State's adoption and foster care information as well as the photolisting of children in the foster care system waiting for families.

Intercountry Adoption Resources**U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly INS)**

<http://uscis.gov/graphics/index.htm>

Frequently asked questions regarding adoption.

American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://www.aap.org/sections/adoption/adopt-states/adoption-map.html>

Nationwide listing of physicians and clinics specializing in assessments of international adoptees.

Intercountry Adoption

www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_inter.cfm

An overview of intercountry adoption with resources for more information.

Joint Council on International Children's Services

www.jcics.org

Membership agency that promotes ethical practices in intercountry adoption among its member agencies.

State Department Website

http://travel.state.gov/family/adoption/notices/notices_473.html

International Adoptions booklet, important notices, and country-specific information.