



Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adopted Child

Making the decision to adopt a child is an exciting and often complicated process. In any type of adoption, it is essential to obtain as much accurate medical, genetic, and background information as possible about your child. It is unrealistic to expect to have full access to a child’s personal history at your first inquiry, as obtaining detailed personal information can be an involved process. Your adoption professional can help you in this effort. This information will inform you as a parent and will be invaluable to your child’s identity formation as he or she matures.

Accessing your child’s medical, genetic, and social histories has several purposes:

- It can help you figure out whether you have the resources—both financial and emotional—to meet a child’s needs.
- It may help you access adoption subsidies that are available at the State and Federal level, depending on the child’s eligibility.
- It will provide you and your prospective child with valuable information for future reference and an important sense of his or her story.
- It offers an opportunity to respond promptly to developmental, emotional, or medical needs.

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For some parents, there will never be enough information to make an adoption decision with absolute certainty, as adoption involves a leap of faith, and there will always be unknowns. Your adoption professional can help you make sense of what is available and help you make a decision in light of your family's circumstances and priorities.

Questions to Ask Your Adoption Agency or Organization

Asking questions will help you obtain the information you need to get a better understanding of your prospective child. You may also request a child's case file to obtain written personal records or a social history. Your questions and the information you receive will largely depend on the child's age and the type of adoption. For example, if you are considering the adoption of a newborn or infant, the birth parents' health history and birth mother's medical care during the pregnancy and delivery will be most important and more likely to be available. With an older child, information on the child's social, trauma, developmental, placement, educational, and mental health histories is essential. If your prospective child has been in foster care, you will want to know as much as possible about the child's placement history and experiences. Detailed information may be more difficult to come by in intercountry adoptions.

Being informed about a child's placement history and any prior maltreatment will give you a better understanding of the child's social history and how that might affect behavior and adjustment. This can help you understand incidents or events that might trigger emotional reactions. Trauma from prior abuse and neglect can affect a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive health into adulthood. See Child Welfare Information Gateway's Resources on Trauma for Caregivers and Families (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/trauma/caregivers/>) and the factsheet *Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/child-trauma/>) for more information.

As you consider adoption, keeping your family's needs in mind is essential. How much information do you need to make this important decision confidently? Even if little or no prenatal information is available, observing the child

and accessing whatever records are available will help to inform your decision. The following questions may help to guide your decision (North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2018; Elleseff, 2013):

About the Child

- What are the child's nicknames, personality characteristics, strengths, interests, preferences, skills, hobbies, etc.?
- What is the child's understanding of his or her story? What would a child with this history believe about her/himself?
- How will this child likely view parents/caretakers/the world?
- What types of behaviors can we expect from a child with this history? What special skills and/or resources will be needed to raise this child? Do we have them and/or can they be learned?
- How will this child fit in with our family?
- Does the child resemble anyone in his or her birth family? If so, whom?

Social and Placement History

- Why did the birth parents make an adoption plan, or why was the child removed from his or her birth family?
- Did the child experience abuse or neglect? At what age(s)? Who was the perpetrator and what happened?
- At what age did the child enter care, and for what reason?
- How many placements has the child experienced? Where and with whom were the placements, and what does the child remember?
- What were the relationships of the caregivers with the child? Is there available contact information for former caregivers to learn more about the child?
- Where has the child attended school?
- What are the results of any educational testing?
- What are the past and existing relationships with people he or she has lived with?
- How has the child handled visits with birth family members or former caregivers in the past?

Developmental Milestones

- Has there been a failure to thrive? A problem with feeding or swallowing?
- Have there been any issues with the child's gross or fine motor skills?
- Have there been delayed speech or language milestones?
- At what age did baby talk begin? When did the child first use words, and when did he or she begin to combine words and sentences?
- Has the child experienced inconsistent language gains (e.g., had the skill but then lost it)?
- At what age did the child first sit? Crawl? Walk?
- At what age did the child become potty-trained?
- How are the child's self-help skills, and when did they develop (e.g., feeding, dressing, bathing)?
- Does the child have any special educational needs or abilities?

Physical, Behavioral, and Emotional Health

- Does the child have a history of significant medical issues? If so, what are they and how have they been treated?
- Are records available from any physician or hospital visits?
- What is the child's current need for medical, dental, or mental health care?
- Is there an available therapy history? If so, is a list of current and past providers available?
- Has the child been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder?
- How much did the child cry as an infant or toddler?
- How does the child self-regulate? Is he or she able to self-soothe?
- What types of behavioral outbursts or temper tantrums does the child exhibit?
- Does the child show any signs of inattention and hyperactivity?
- Describe the child's fears, concerns, or triggers.

- Describe the child's social skills.
- How does the child respond to direction and/or criticism?
- How does the child handle transitions?

About the Child's Family

- What is the family's racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious background?
- Is the family's physical and mental health history available?
- What information is available regarding family members and recent contact? Are photos available?
- Are there siblings in foster care or those who have been privately adopted, or is there an adoption history for them?
- Is there a family history of neglect or emotional, sexual, or physical abuse?
- Is the father known and/or involved with the family?
- What is the educational background of the birth parents and siblings?
- Are there available letters, videos, or photos from the birth family?
- Are there specific connections that are important to maintain?

Prenatal history

- At what age did the child's mother give birth?
- What was the mother's health like during her pregnancy? What was the health of each parent at the time of the child's birth?
- What was the child's condition at birth?
- How many children does the mother currently have?
- Were maternal rights ever terminated? If so, with which child(ren) and why (find or ask to see the court order, if available)?
- Is there a maternal history of alcohol, prescription drugs, or other substance use?

School-Aged Children

- Are the child's language abilities and vocabulary consistent with his or her peers?

- How are the child's social skills?
- How does the child take direction?
- Is the child currently receiving educational supports (e.g., such as an Individualized Education Program)?

Information about adopted persons is governed by State laws. Information Gateway's State Statutes series provides more information on individual State requirements (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/>). See also *Providing Adoptive Parents With Information About Adoptees and Their Birth Families* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/collection/>). For more information, see *How to Adopt: Step 5: Learn More About the Child* (<https://www.nacac.org/help/how-to-adopt/steps-to-adoption/learn-more-about-the-child/>) on the North American Council on Adoptable Children website.

Why Some Information May Not Be Available

While your adoption agency is required to provide you with information on your prospective child, some details may be unavailable for several reasons, including the following:

Complex family histories. Children in foster care often have complicated family histories that may be difficult to track down.

Recordkeeping gaps. Children in foster care may have had multiple placements, foster families may no longer be affiliated with an agency, recordkeeping may vary, and caseworkers may have moved on.

Information gaps. Children who have been abused or neglected may not feel comfortable talking about it until they are in a safe and stable environment. In many cases, the adoptive parent may be the first person the child feels comfortable confiding in. Children may also be unaware of their heritage or, for example, their eligibility for membership in a Tribe.

Intercountry adoptions. The only source of information in intercountry adoptions may be the agency, orphanage, or adoption facilitator in the country of origin. There may be little to no information available about a child's

birth family and what is available may be inexact due to translation-related issues and terminology. Some medical universities and hospitals in the United States host international adoption clinics that may be found online. Before accepting a referral for an adoption, it may be advisable to have a physician review any available medical records or supporting documents. This type of preadoption review is conducted independently of the routine examination required for visa purposes once an adoption has been finalized (U.S. Department of State, 2018). These clinics are often a valuable postadoption resource when children and families benefit from ongoing assessments and various medical and support services. No Hands But Ours, a nonprofit organization for families pursuing intercountry adoption of children with special needs, has compiled a list of international adoption clinics (<https://www.nohandsbutours.com/2016/04/29/international-adoption-clinics-services-locations/>).

Some countries may decline to match prospective adoptive parents with a child or release corresponding information until the prospective parents travel to that country. Recordkeeping may vary across countries and orphanages, and some country laws and norms may discourage birth parents from providing background information.

Where to Find More Information

A more complete picture of your prospective child's past will better prepare you to make an informed adoption decision as well as help you provide the appropriate care and support once the child becomes part of your family. This information will also prove invaluable as your child matures and may wish to learn more about his or her identity. While social media may offer insight into a child's family, you should discuss any information obtained online with your adoption professional.

Child Welfare Information Gateway offers several resources, including the following:

- *Access to Adoption Records*, a factsheet that looks at laws that provide access to adoption records (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/infoaccessap/>)

- *Adoption Options: Where Do I Start?*, a factsheet that describes the different types of adoption, requirements, etc. (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-adoption/>)
- How to Adopt web section (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/>)
- *Impact of Adoption on Adoptive Parents*, a factsheet that explores some of the emotional ups and downs that adoptive parents may experience before, during, and after adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/impact-parent/>)
- *Intercountry Adoption: Where Do I Start?*, a factsheet that provides an overview of the intercountry adoption process (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-inter/>)
- National Foster Care and Adoption Directory (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>), which features a State-by-State listing of adoption and foster care support groups and resources and is also available as a mobile app
- Open Adoption and Contact With Birth Family (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/before-adoption/openness/>), a web section that features resources related to the varying degrees of openness in adoption

You may also find the following resources useful:

- International Adoption Clinics: Services and Locations, a webpage made available by the nonprofit organization No Hands But Ours (<https://www.nohandsbutours.com/2016/04/29/international-adoption-clinics-services-locations/>).
- *Things to Consider When Adopting* (<https://www.mnadopt.org/adoption-101/things-to-consider-when-adopting/>), helpful information compiled by MN ADOPT, a Minnesota adoption advocacy organization

- *The Choice of a Lifetime: What You Need to Know Before Adopting* by Kyle N. Weir, Ph.D., 2011 (Chicago: NTI Upstream)

References

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