



The Adoption Home Study Process

A major step in building your family through adoption is the home study. 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 conducted by a licensed social worker or caseworker. This process has three purposes:

- Educate and prepare the prospective family for adoption
- Evaluate the capability and suitability of the prospective family to adopt
- Gather information about the prospective adoptive family that will help a social worker match the family with a child or youth whose needs they can best meet (applicable to adoptions in which public child welfare agencies are involved)

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With accurate information about the process, prospective adoptive parents can face the home study experience with more confidence. 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 or youth's needs and a family's ability to meet those needs. It is important to keep in mind that the adoption home study process is actually about the *process* and not just the final report.

Specific home study requirements and processes vary greatly from agency to agency, from 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 questions prospective adoptive parents may have about the process.

If you are just beginning your journey to adoption, you can find additional useful information on Child Welfare Information Gateway's website (<https://www.childwelfare.gov>). Some of those resources include:

- For basic information about adoption, see *Adoption Options: Where Do I Start?* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-adoption/>.
- For home study requirements in your State, check *Home Study Requirements for Prospective Parents in Domestic Adoption* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/homestudyreqs-adoption/>.
- For listings of public and licensed private agencies, attorney referral services, support groups, State adoption specialists, and more for each State, territory, and the District of Columbia, search the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>.

Elements of the Home Study Process

There is no single format that all 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 about the specific process you will go through, talk with the agencies you are considering.

If you are a foster parent or kinship caregiver, you have already completed a home study and your State will likely require an updated home study if you plan to adopt the child in your care. Even if you are pursuing a private adoption that does not involve an adoption agency, all States require that you have a completed home study with a criminal background check. In these cases, your adoption attorney may be able to refer you to a licensed social worker or agency to conduct your home study.

Orientation

Many agencies offer an initial informational session or orientation that provides an overview of their agency and the adoption process. These are generally free and do not carry any obligation to work with the agency, complete a home study, or pursue adoption further. These sessions are a good way to find out about the agency, their process, the children and youth waiting for adoption, and if the agency might be a good fit for you and your family. After the orientation, if you decide to move ahead with adoption, you may initiate the home study process.

Training

Most States or agencies require training 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 child or children they could parent most effectively.

Interviews

A social worker will probably interview you several times during the home study process. 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 the adoption. You will discuss the topics to be covered in the home study report (see page 5). It is likely that you will be asked to give examples of your experiences with children, your important relationships, your approach to parenting, and how you handle stress. You may also be asked questions about your experiences of crisis, loss, or infertility, which is a topic of concern for some adoptive families. You and your social worker will

discuss what ages of children would best fit in your family, whether a sibling group would work well, and other important characteristics to consider when adopting a child. Again, this should be both a self-reflective process and a time to educate yourself about important issues common in the adoption experience, such as grief and loss, trust and attachment, childhood trauma, the developmental lifecycle, and family dynamics. Nearly every child involved with foster care has experienced some trauma that may impact his or her life, and families need to make informed decisions about how they can effectively parent a child depending on that trauma. During the interviews, it is important to be honest with the social worker and yourself about your family's strengths and limitations.

For couples who are pursuing adoption, some agencies conduct all of the interviews with both prospective adoptive parents together. Other agencies will conduct both joint and individual interviews. If families have other children in the home, or adult children living outside the home, the social worker may also want to talk with them during this process. Some States require all adults in the household, or even all household members regardless of age, to be included in the home study.

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. For State-specific resources on licensing requirements for adoption from foster care, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway's State Guides and Manuals Search at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/sgm/>. Under topics, select both "adoption" and "licensing." Under audiences, select "parents."

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 more than one child or 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 in your home study report 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 at <http://travel.state.gov/content/adoptionsabroad/en/hague-convention/convention-countries.html>.
- Read Information Gateway's factsheet *Intercountry Adoption From Hague Convention and Non-Hague Convention Countries* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague>.

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 will likely 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 working with if you have concerns.

Income and Health Coverage Statements

Prospective adoptive parents must be able to show they can manage their 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-2 forms, or income tax forms. Many agencies also ask about savings, insurance policies (including health coverage for the adopted child),¹ investments, and debts. For more information on resources to support the costs of adoption, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's Adoption Assistance web section at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/preplacement/adoption-assistance/>. For more information on health care for children adopted from foster care, see *Health-Care Coverage for Youth in Foster Care—and After* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/health-care-foster/>.

¹ 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 health insurance policy within 30 days of their placement or adoption to ensure coverage (<http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/pdf/newborns.pdf>). The Employee Benefits Security Administration (<http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/aboutebsa/>) has oversight over employer-offered insurance benefits and may be able to answer families' questions.

Home Study Timeline: There isn't a lot that prospective parents can do to hurry the home study process; however, this time can be utilized to learn more about the needs of children waiting to be adopted, to develop support networks, and to connect with other prospective and current adoptive parents. In addition, one way to eliminate some delays is to gather your documents early. Have your marriage license and divorce certificate (if applicable), birth certificates for household members, tax returns, completed paperwork, and any other required documents ready for the social worker.

Background Checks

All States require criminal and child abuse record checks for adoptive and foster parent applicants. In most States, the background investigation includes a check of Federal, State, and local criminal records. Fingerprints may be taken as well. For more information on the requirements in your State, read Information Gateway's publication *Criminal Background Checks for Prospective Foster and Adoptive Families* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/background/>.

Public and private agencies must comply with State and Federal laws and policies regarding licensing requirements, if applicable, and how the findings of background checks affect eligibility for adoptive parents. Do not hesitate to talk to the 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 learned from them, and how you would use that knowledge in parenting a child. If you have any history of criminal activity, 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 about your history, or if the documents collected during the home study process expose inconsistencies, the agency may not approve your family to adopt.

Autobiographical Statement

In private/voluntary adoption, 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. If you are working with an agency that practices openness in adoption, you also may be asked to write a letter, create an album, scrapbook (electronic or hardcopy), Facebook page, or other social media page, about your family to be shared with expectant parents who are considering adoption for their child. You may be asked to prepare a similar album for children if you are considering adopting children who are old enough to read or understand pictures.

While writing about yourself may seem difficult, the exercise is intended to provide information about you to the agency, as well as 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.

Your References

The agency will probably ask you for the names and contact information for 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, a former teacher, a neighbor, or a member of your faith community (if applicable).

Your family's approval to adopt would rarely be denied on the grounds of a single negative reference; however, if it were one of several negative factors, the agency might be unable to approve your family to adopt.

The Home Study Report

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

In addition to 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 the family learned from them
- **Education/employment**—Applicants' current educational levels, satisfaction with their educational achievements, or any plans to further their education, as well as their employment status, history, plans, and satisfaction with their current jobs
- **Relationships**—If a couple is pursuing adoption, the report may cover their relationship 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' experiences with children (for example, their own children, relatives' children, neighbors, volunteer work, babysitting, teaching, or coaching), in addition to their plans regarding discipline and other parenting approaches and 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 applicant(s) want to adopt, feelings about infertility (if this is an issue), what characteristics or needs of a child or youth they might best parent and why, and how they plan to talk to their children about adoption-related topics. There will likely be questions about how the applicant feels about birth parents and families and the level of openness with the birth family that would work best, depending on the type of adoption. (Note: It is typical for families' feelings about openness to change throughout the home study process as they learn more and become more comfortable with the process.) For more information, read Information Gateway's *Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-openadopt/>.
- **Support system**—When individuals or families face difficult times, it is important to know that they have support systems in place to help build resiliency. A social worker may ask the applicant who they reach out to or what supports they rely on during stressful situations.
- **Approval/recommendation**—The home study report will conclude with a summary and the social worker's recommendations. This often includes the age range and number of children the social worker recommends for the family.

Technology has changed how 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 a private infant adoption or to introduce their families to children or youth in the foster care system who are waiting for one.

Prospective adoptive parents will be asked to provide copies of birth certificates, marriage licenses or certificates, and divorce decrees, if applicable. Some agencies share the final 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 you are pursuing. In many cases, the information will be shared with other agencies to help connect your family with a child. In some cases, the information may be shared with birth parents or others.

Common Questions About the Home Study

It is understandable that you may have questions about the home study and its impact on the adoption. Some of the most frequently asked questions are addressed below.

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 caseworkers are assigned to conduct home studies, what other duties they have, how many other people applied to the agency at the same time, when required training is offered, and how long it takes to complete your background check and fingerprinting. 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, it is often modest (\$300 to \$500), and once you adopt a child from foster care, the fee is usually reimbursed by the child welfare agency. 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 with your agency or social worker and ask for this information in writing to avoid any misunderstandings.

Updates or modifications of past home studies, conversions of home studies from other agencies, and subsequent home studies (if you previously adopted a child with the same agency) may incur different fees. Home studies do expire, although the time period varies from State to State (usually 6 to 24 months), so you will need to keep your home study current. Your caseworker can advise you about this.

For more information about costs of adoption, adoption tax credits, and other resources to help defray costs, see the Adoption Costs and Sources of Financial Support section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/expenses>. For information on the Federal adoption credit and adoption assistance programs, visit the website for the Internal Revenue Service at <http://www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc607.html>.

What Might Disqualify Our Family From Adopting?

Most adoption agencies respect culture and diversity in families seeking to adopt, including single-parent families and same-sex couples. 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. 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 and consider, with a social worker's help, the child or youth you will be best able to parent. Although agencies are not looking for perfect parents or families, it is critical that all families be thoroughly assessed to ensure they are ready and able to provide a permanent home for a child.

Who is approved to adopt varies from agency to agency, from 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 this topic in *Who May Adopt, Be Adopted, or Place a Child for Adoption?* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/parties>.

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 has links to every State's online adoption information at *State Child Welfare Agency Websites* https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunction=rols:main.dspROL&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=16.

For a collection of questions and answers designed to address some of the concerns that lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) prospective adoptive parents may encounter when deciding to adopt a child or navigating the adoption process, see the Information Gateway publication *Frequently Asked Questions From LGBT Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parents* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/faq-lgbt/>. Information about issues to consider when making the decision to adopt as a single person are available in the publication *Adopting as a Single Parent* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/single-parent/>.

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 conducting your home study 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. It is common for a social worker to ask to speak with a child's teacher or have the teacher provide some information in writing. There will also be an emphasis 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.

Thousands of children in the U.S. foster care system are waiting for families. The AdoptUSKids website (<http://www.adoptuskids.org>) provides a national photolistings of some of the children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted (en Español: <http://www.adoptuskids.org/para-familias>).

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 consider the child or youth you could best parent. The process also serves to ensure that children are matched with families who can meet their needs in loving, healthy, and safe environments. Keep in mind that the home study process is about the process itself and not just the final report. Adoption is a lifelong decision and it is important that the home study process helps match children with families who will have the capacity to meet their needs over time.

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.

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