

The Adoption Home Study Process

Every State, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico require all prospective adoptive parents (with the possible exception of stepparents) to participate in a home study prior to being considered as an adoptive placement for a child or youth. The process is subject to change and varies considerably from State to State, depending on laws and policies for approving prospective families. The process involves an assessment of the adoptive parent or parents. Although the home study can seem intimidating at first, by completing the process, parents gain personal insight and understanding of the adoption process while adoption agencies gather important information about the family. The home study process has three main purposes:

1. Educate and prepare the prospective parent or family for adoption
2. Help agencies evaluate the capability and suitability of the prospective parent or family to adopt

3. Help social workers or home study specialists gather information about the prospective parent or family to help ensure that each child or youth is placed with the family that can best meet their needs

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Adoption agencies do not look for perfect parents. Rather, they seek a good match between the needs of an infant, child, or youth and a family's ability to meet those needs. The home study is a valuable assessment tool, but it also provides accurate information about the adoption process that will help you face the experience with more confidence and less apprehension. This factsheet discusses common elements of the home study process and addresses questions you may have about this important adoption requirement.

If you are planning to adopt a child from another country (intercountry adoption), see Child Welfare Information Gateway's factsheet for families [Intercountry Adoption: What Do I Need to Know?](#) and the webpage [Home Study Requirements](#) from the U.S. Department of State.

If you are just beginning your journey to adoption, you can find useful information on Information Gateway's [Adoption](#) web section. Some other resources include the following:

- The factsheet for families [Adoption Options: Where Do I Start?](#) outlines basic information about adoption.
- The State Statute publication [Home Study Requirements for Prospective Parents in Domestic Adoption](#), presents home study laws, policies, and regulations by State.
- The [Home Study](#) webpage offers resources about the home study process for different types of adoption.
- The [National Foster Care & Adoption Directory](#) provides a list of public and licensed private agencies, attorney referral services, support groups, State adoption specialists, and more about each State, territory, and the District of Columbia.

Common Terms Associated With the Home Study Process

In this publication, "agency" and "agencies" refer to private and public agencies involved with private and public adoptions. **Private adoption agencies** are licensed child-placing agencies that focus primarily on domestic or intercountry infant adoption. Private adoptions that do not involve an adoption agency include independent adoptions, which are usually arranged between birth and adoptive parents and their attorneys.

Public child welfare agencies are county and State agencies that promote the well-being, permanency, and safety of children and families. In terms of adoption, public child welfare agencies focus primarily on children who are adopted from foster care. Public agencies may also assist kinship caregivers (relatives who wish to adopt family members they have been fostering).

Some agencies address both private and public adoptions. In this publication, if not otherwise distinguished, "agency" and "agencies" refer to both public and private agencies.

ELEMENTS OF THE HOME STUDY PROCESS

Agencies use different formats to conduct home studies. Many include the same steps, although the specific details and order may vary. For more information about the specific home study process you will go through, ask the professionals at the agencies with which you're thinking of working.

If you are a foster parent or kinship caregiver, you have already completed a home study. Your State will likely require an updated home study if you plan to adopt the child in your care. All States require a completed home study with a criminal background check, even if you are pursuing a private adoption that does not involve an adoption agency. In these cases, your adoption attorney may refer you to a licensed home study specialist or an agency that can provide a home study specialist 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 an 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 whether 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 and 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 and

State requirements. They can help families understand the characteristics of the child or children they could parent most effectively. Different kinds of adoption often require different types and amounts of preadoption training for prospective parents. For more information on training, see Information Gateway's [Preadoption Training](#) and [Resources on Trauma for Caregivers and Families](#) web sections.

Training for Parents Adopting Children From Foster Care

To provide foster and adoptive parents the training, knowledge, and ongoing skills they need to effectively parent children and youth they foster and/or adopt, the Children's Bureau awarded a grant to Spaulding for Children to develop the [National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#). Several of the skills addressed in the training are discussed throughout this factsheet. The curriculum is in development and will be pilot tested and evaluated in various States and a Tribal community. The final curriculum will be available for free across the United States in 2022.

Meanwhile, you can [explore the curriculum](#), visit AdoptUSKids' [Training to Become a Foster Parent or to Adopt](#) webpage, and ask about the training provided by agencies you are considering working with.

INTERVIEWS

Whether you are single or a couple, you will be interviewed by a home study specialist several times. These interviews help you develop a relationship that enables the specialist to better understand you and your family. You will discuss the topics to be covered in the home study report (see page 5). 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. You may also be asked about your experiences of grief and loss, crisis, or infertility, which are topics of relevance for many adoptive families.

If you are adopting from a public agency, you and your home study specialist will discuss which age ranges of adoptive children best fit your family, if a sibling group would be a good fit, and other important considerations when adopting a child. Whether you are pursuing a public or private adoption, this should be both a self-reflective process and a time to educate yourself about important issues common in the adoption experience, such as trust, attachment, childhood trauma, the developmental life cycle, and family dynamics. Every child involved in adoption has experienced separation and loss, and many also have experienced trauma that may impact their development. Families need to make informed decisions about how they can effectively parent a child considering that trauma. You need to be honest with the home study specialist and yourself about your family's strengths and limitations.

If you are part of a couple, a home study specialist may interview both of you together or conduct joint and individual interviews,

depending on agency policy. If you have other children in the family, or adult children living outside the home, the home study specialist may include them during this process. Some States require that all adults in the household, or even all household members regardless of age, be included in the home study.

HOME VISIT

Home visits primarily ensure that your family 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, and firearms should be inaccessible to children. Some States require an inspection from local health and fire departments in addition to the visit by the home study specialist.

For State-specific resources on licensing requirements for adoption from foster care, visit Information Gateway's [State Guides and Manuals Search](#) webpage. Under Select Topics, select both Adoption and Licensing. Under Select All Audiences, select Parents.

Generally, agencies require the home study specialist to view all areas of your house or apartment, including where the children will sleep, the basement, and the backyard. They will look 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). Home study specialists do not typically inspect your

housekeeping standards. A certain level of order is necessary, but some family clutter is expected. A comfortable, child-friendly environment is what they look for.

HEALTH STATEMENTS

Most agencies require that you provide evidence of a recent physical exam and a statement from a doctor confirming that you are essentially healthy, have a normal life expectancy, and are physically and mentally able to handle the care of a child.

A medical condition that is under control (for instance, high blood pressure or diabetes that is controlled by diet and medication), is unlikely to concern your home study specialist. A serious health problem that affects life expectancy, however, may affect your home study specialist's recommendation. Typically, physical and mental health are considered in determining competency to care for a child or children and the ages of children that may be a good match. The recommended ages of children are a particularly important point for older caregivers.

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 home study specialists 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. 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 Information Gateway's [Adoption Assistance](#) web section. For more information on health care for children adopted from foster care, see [Health-Care Coverage for Youth in Foster Care—and After](#).

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. Your State may require that you submit your fingerprints as well. Your home study specialist may advise you on how to complete these requirements, but they are not responsible for completing them for you. For more information on the requirements in your State, read Information Gateway's publication [Background Checks for Prospective Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Caregivers](#).

¹ [Protections for Newborns, Adopted Children, and New Parents...The Newborns' and Mothers' Health Protection Act of 1996](#), from the U.S. Department of Labor's Employee Benefits Security Administration, notes that parents should enroll their child in their health insurance policy within 30 days of their placement or adoption to ensure coverage. The [Employee Benefits Security Administration](#) has oversight over employer-offered insurance benefits and may be able to answer families' questions.

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 home study specialists and staff of 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 a history of criminal activity, some agencies may be able to work with your family, depending on the specific incident and its resolution. If the home study specialist 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

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 home study specialist understand your family better and assists them in writing the home study report. You may be asked to write a letter or create an album, scrapbook (electronic or hardcopy), Facebook page, or other social media page about your family to be shared with 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 to help you explore issues related to parenting and adoption. Some agencies have people available to assist you with writing. Most have a set of questions to guide you through the writing process.

YOUR REFERENCES

The agency may ask you for the names and contact information of several people who will serve as references for you. References help the home study specialist form a more complete picture of your family and support network.

If possible, references should be people who have known you for years, seen you in many situations, 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 home study specialist writing a home study report that reflects their findings. Home study reports are often used to introduce your family to other agencies or adoption exchanges (services that list children who are hoping for adoptive families) to assist them in matching your family with a child who is waiting for adoption.

In addition to health and income statements, background checks, and references, home study reports also include the following types of information for each prospective adoptive parent:

- **Family background**—This can include information about your childhood, how you were parented, past and current relationships with parents and siblings, key events and losses, and what your family learned from them.
- **Education/employment**—This report contains information about your current educational level, satisfaction with your educational achievements or plans to further your education, employment status, work history, plans for the future, and satisfaction with your current job(s).
- **Relationships**—If you are part of a couple pursuing adoption, the report may cover your relationship history as well as your current relationship (for example, how you make decisions, solve problems, communicate, and show affection). If you are a single applicant, you will be asked about your social life and how you anticipate integrating a child into it as well as about your network of relatives and friends.
- **Daily life**—This report can include information about your routines during a typical weekday, how you intend to arrange for child care during the weekends (if you work outside the home), and your hobbies and interests.
- **Parenting**—This report can contain information about your experiences with children (for example, your own children, relatives' children, and children known through neighbors, volunteer work, babysitting, teaching, or coaching) and your plans regarding discipline and other parenting approaches and issues.
- **Neighborhood**—This section of the report describes your neighborhood, including safety and proximity to community resources.
- **Religion/belief system**—This section of the report can contain information about your religion, level of religious practice (if applicable), and the kind of religious upbringing, if any, you plan to provide for the child.
- **Feelings about/readiness for adoption**—There may be a section on specific adoption issues, including why you want to adopt; feelings about infertility (if this is an issue); the characteristics or needs of a child or youth you might best parent, and why; and how you plan to talk to your children about adoption-related topics. Questions regarding how you feel about the level of ongoing contact with the birth family that would work best are likely, depending on the type of adoption you seek. (Note: Families' feelings about supporting birth family relationships typically change throughout the home study process as they learn more and become more comfortable with the process.) For more information, read Information Gateway's [Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family](#).
- **Support system**—When individuals or families face difficult times, having support systems in place or positive responses to difficult circumstances can help build resilience. A home study specialist may ask who you reach out to or what supports you rely on during stressful situations.

- **Approval/recommendation**—The home study report will conclude with a summary and the home study specialist's recommendations. If you are adopting from a public agency, the summary often includes the age range and number of children the home study specialist recommends for your family. Most home studies usually identify who will be the child's guardian and what the plan is for the child if something happens to the parent(s). A section is also included on other people in the home (family or friends) and training the family has completed.

Adoption in the time of coronavirus has required changes to the home study process. Many agencies now allow virtual home studies in which potential adoptive parents meet and speak with home study specialists over web meeting platforms. Some feel that this method prevents parents from presenting their family and home life as thoroughly as they could in an in-person home study. [Others](#) feel that agencies may not learn as much about the parents as they would in a face-to-face conversation. Although it may not be ideal, this flexibility allows the home study process to move forward, despite the complications of the pandemic. Some [modifications](#) allow prospective parents to provide PDFs of their financial statements, paychecks, and medical and educational records. Sometimes, parents can also be granted temporary approval without fingerprinting once background checks have been completed.

Some agencies share the final home study with prospective parents; others do not. Since you will provide copies of personal documents (e.g., marriage licenses and divorce decrees), you may want to ask the home study specialist about the confidentiality of the home study report and how extensively your information will be shared. Agency policies vary greatly, depending on the kind 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, relevant parts of the home study may be shared with birth parents.

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HOME STUDY

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?

On average, a home study process takes 3 to 6 months to complete, though the time it takes to conduct the home study varies 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. Home studies for adoptions from foster or kinship care usually take less time than other types of adoption. The time it takes 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 CASE COST?

The cost of the home study depends on the kind of adoption you pursue. Agencies conducting domestic adoptions of children from foster care may not charge a fee for the home study. According to [AdoptUSKids](#), if these agencies do charge a fee, it is often very low, and after you adopt a child from foster care, the fee is usually reimbursed by the child welfare agency. A private agency or certified home study specialist 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 fees thoroughly with your agency or home study specialist and ask for this information in writing to avoid 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 expire, although the time period varies from State to State (usually 6 to 24 months), so you need to keep your home study current. Your home study specialist can advise you about expiration dates.

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 Information Gateway website. For information on the Federal adoption credit and adoption assistance programs, visit the website of the [Internal Revenue Service](#).

WHAT MIGHT DISQUALIFY MY 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. Most adoption agencies respect culture and diversity in families seeking to adopt, including single-parent families and same-sex couples. The home study process is a way for a home study specialist to learn more about your family and a potential home for waiting children. It is also an opportunity for you to explore adoption and consider, with the help of an adoption agency or home study specialist, the child or youth you will be best able to parent. Although agencies are not looking for perfect parents or families, all families need to be thoroughly vetted 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, in intercountry adoptions, by the child's country of origin. Adoptions in the United States are governed by Federal, State, and local laws, regulations, and policies. Information Gateway has compiled States' laws regarding this topic in [Who May Adopt, Be Adopted, or Place a Child for Adoption?](#)

Within State guidelines, many public agencies are looking for ways to rule families in, rather than rule them out, to meet the needs of children in the U.S. foster care system waiting for adoptive families. Many States also post their policies online. Information Gateway has links to every State's online adoption information at [State Child Welfare Agency Websites](#).

For a collection of questions and answers designed to address some of the concerns that prospective adoptive parents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender may encounter when deciding to adopt a child or navigating the adoption process, see the Information Gateway publication [Frequently Asked Questions From Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning \(LGBTQ\) Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parents](#). 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](#).

HOW WILL THE CHILDREN IN OUR FAMILY BE INVOLVED IN THE HOME STUDY?

Your children (whether they were born into your family or joined through foster care, adoption, or marriage) will be included in the home study. 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 home study specialist 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 home study specialist to ask to speak with a child's teacher or have the teacher provide 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 home study specialist will look for verification 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 provides a national photolisting of some of the children who are waiting to be adopted ([en Español](#)).

CONCLUSION

Although the adoption home study process may seem invasive or lengthy, it is conducted to find a match that will best meet the specific needs of an infant, child, or youth. It is structured to ensure that children are matched with families who can provide homes that are loving, healthy, and safe. The process also serves to help you to prepare your family for adoption and to help you consider the child or youth you can best parent. Adoption is a lifelong decision, and the home study process ensures that your family will have the capacity to provide the care your adoptive child needs over time. The home study is not just about the final report. Providing a safe home is important, but the family makes the miracles, not the building they live in.

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