

Adoption: Considering Your Options and Making a Plan

If you're an expectant parent experiencing an unplanned pregnancy or if you're wondering if adoption is best for your child, carefully exploring your options can make difficult decisions feel less complicated. If adoption may be the right choice, making an adoption plan can lead you through the process and help clarify your decisions. An adoption plan is not an official document; rather, it is a process developed with the assistance of an adoption professional. Among other decisions, it can help you determine your preferences regarding the adoptive family and the type and level of postadoption contact with the child (for example, letters, emails, phone calls, or personal visits).

WHAT'S INSIDE

Understanding adoption

Considering your options

Making an adoption plan

Taking care of yourself

Conclusion

Resources for more information

This factsheet provides information and guidance for exploring your parenting and adoption options and about making an adoption plan. It points to resources that may help you come to a choice that feels best for you and your child. Others who are affected by adoption decisions, such as your relatives, also may find this factsheet useful for answering some of their important questions. In addition to resources highlighted throughout this factsheet, a list of blogs and websites with more information is provided after the conclusion.

UNDERSTANDING ADOPTION

Adoption is a process—with legal, social, and emotional aspects—in which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become permanent legal members of another family. There is no one right course for adoption. Understanding it—including why others choose adoption or not and its long-term effects—may help you figure out what's best for you and your child.

What is the impact of the adoption decision?

Adoption is more than a one-time legal event. It is a lifelong process with long-term effects for everyone involved. This group—sometimes called the "adoption constellation"—includes your child, you, the other birth parent, and the adoptive family. It also may include aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other extended family members. After an adoption is legally finalized, it is permanent, and it will significantly change your relationship with your child. The adoptive parents will raise your child and have full legal rights and responsibilities as the child's parents. Some

birth parents who choose adoption have positive experiences and are happy with their decision. While experiences differ, many birth parents encounter feelings of loss, grief, and guilt. These feelings are natural and may later affect birth parents' lives and relationships. In either case, being fully informed when making a decision to relinquish or parent your child may result in higher levels of satisfaction with the decision. For more information, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway's Lifelong Impact of Adoption webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-people/impact/>) and see the *Impact of Adoption* factsheet (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets-families-adoptionimpact/>). Although that factsheet is written for members of the adoption constellation, expectant parents or parents exploring their parenting and adoption options also may find some of the information helpful.

Keep in mind: While birth parents and children who have been adopted often struggle with identity issues and lifelong feelings of loss and grief, many learn how to work through these emotions, often with the help of counseling.

Why do some birth parents choose adoption?

Everyone's situation is different, but many birth parents choose adoption because they do not feel ready or able to raise the child. They often believe that the child will have a better life in an adoptive home with parents

who are ready to welcome and care for a child. As such, these parents typically feel that they are putting their child's best interests ahead of their own. Other factors that sometimes play a part in parents' decisions include financial issues, personal goals, and family attitudes.

Why do some expectant parents decide to parent rather than go through with their adoption plan? Expectant parents experiencing an unplanned pregnancy who consider adoption but decide to parent their child themselves may do so because they conclude that they have the commitment, ability, and support necessary to raise the child. Some birth parents who were unsure before their child's birth find they feel ready to be parents after they've held and connected with their babies.

If I choose adoption, will I know what happens to my child? Choosing adoption does not necessarily mean that you won't have future contact with your child. Today, most adoptions involve various levels of contact that may allow birth parents to learn about or communicate with their children who have been adopted.

As an expectant parent, when do I have to make my decision? Most State laws require the final decision to be made after the child is born. Think of it as making the adoption decision twice—once during pregnancy and again after the child is born. After considering your options, you may prepare for adoption by selecting a licensed adoption agency or adoption lawyer and selecting the adoptive parents (or parent). Regardless, the final and legal decision is made by you and the other birth parent after the child's birth.

Keep in mind: It's hard to know exactly how you'll feel after the birth of your child. It's important that you not sign papers that make the adoption final until you are sure of your decision. Until the final papers are signed, you have parental rights to make decisions regarding your child. Many States also have a revocation period that allows birth parents to change their minds within a certain number of days after signing consents. If parents revoke their consent to adoption within that time frame, all parental rights are restored, as covered in Information Gateway's *Consent to Adoption* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/consent/>).

Additionally, birth parents may decide a few years after the birth that they cannot properly care for their child. An adoption plan can also help those parents make informed decisions and maintain a relationship with their children after the adoption.

For more information on your State's laws, including required waiting periods after the birth of a child before consent to an adoption can be finalized, talk to an adoption lawyer or adoption agency representative. You can also review *Consent to Adoption* for more information.

CONSIDERING YOUR OPTIONS

Choosing whether to raise a child or deciding to place a young child for adoption is not easy. Making these decisions requires courage and love. Taking time to gather important information about what adoption may entail can broaden your understanding of the process and give you a better sense of whether that option is right for you. Asking yourself useful questions about the supports you have in place regarding finances and family and whether that support is sufficient for you to raise your child may make the decision more clear and give you confidence that you are basing your choice on the best interests of your child.

GATHERING INFORMATION

As part of the decision-making process, you'll want to gather information, consult with others, and thoughtfully explore your options to help you make a fully informed decision. Reading this publication can get you started. Other sources of information and support are described below.

The internet. If you are just beginning to research your options, the internet can be a helpful way to find and digest information. You can explore available information by using search terms such as "adoption plan," "adoption options," "unplanned pregnancy," and "adoption birth mother" (or "birth father"), to name a few. Try to visit trustworthy websites. You also may want to look at blogs and discussion forums that include first-person accounts and may provide insights into the adoption process and what others have experienced. Recommended books and magazines will likely appear as part of your internet search results.

To get a more complete view of adoption, you can read publications that present different perspectives, including those of parents who made adoption plans, parents who adopted children, children and adults who were adopted, and parents raising children in specific situations (for example, being a single parent or parenting as a teenager).

Keep in mind: Online information can be biased and inaccurate. Try to look at several websites and blogs and note varied points of view as well as common themes. In addition, be aware that some dishonest online persons or groups may try to take advantage of people at vulnerable times. If it feels like someone is pressuring you or trying to gain from your situation, move on.

Trusted friends and family members. It can be helpful to talk through your feelings and options with a trusted family member or friend. Try to find someone who will listen and won't pressure you into making a decision. In some States, a minor parent must have consent from his or her parents to finalize an adoption. See Information Gateway's [Consent to Adoption](#) for more information.

Keep in mind: While it's good to talk things through with friends and family, ultimately, the decision is yours to make.

Counselors. A trained counselor can help you not only to understand your options and their long-term implications but also to explore your feelings about those options. You can find professional counselors—including therapists and social workers—at adoption agencies, public departments of social services, local health or mental health centers and hospitals, and religious institutions. Additionally, your doctor, friends, or family members may be able to refer you to a professional counselor, or you can try calling 211 or visiting <http://211.org/>. No matter where you go, look for a counselor who is experienced in working with those in your position and who treats you with sensitivity and respect.

Keep in mind: It's important to find a counselor who can answer your questions and provide guidance in an unbiased way and counsel you without gaining personally from the decision you make. Some counselors may be predisposed toward one option, or they may have other people's interests in mind (for example, prospective adoptive parents waiting to find an infant or older child available for adoption).

Adoption agencies and adoption lawyers. If you are leaning toward adoption, talking with someone at a licensed adoption agency or with a lawyer who specializes in adoption may help you learn more about the adoption process.

Keep in mind: Talking to an agency or lawyer does not mean you are committed to an adoption plan. Rather, it serves as another way to collect information. Do not sign any legal papers until you have made up your mind and have a fully developed plan.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Planning for adoption with an adoption professional (including adoption agencies, adoption lawyers, and adoption counselors) can address questions, reduce stress, and help you feel more confident about your decision. Read more on Information Gateway's Considering an Adoption Plan webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/plan/>). The following are some questions you may want to think about as you make your decision.

Have I explored all my options? While you may be leaning in one direction, it's important that you take time to explore all your options. The options that "rise to the top" may vary depending on your circumstances, values, and beliefs. Carefully assess the benefits and challenges of each option as well as potential support to address challenges. Are you thinking about adoption only because you have current financial problems or because your living situation is difficult? If so, there may be additional options. Have you considered asking friends and family if they can help? Have you looked into local programs or called social services agencies to see what they can offer? Social workers may be able to help you find a

way to parent your child by assisting you with finding a place to live, child care, job training, or other types of support. Alternatively, have you considered asking another family member to raise your child (formally or informally)? If you want more time to make your decision, have you asked an adoption agency whether short-term options are available (for example, temporary foster care)?

Have I involved the child's other parent in the decision-making process? There are several reasons for involving the child's other parent, including respecting his or her parental rights and giving consent to adoption. If you have a good relationship with your child's other parent, you may be able to help each other with considering the options and making a decision. Some people considering adoption, however, do not have a good relationship with the other parent. In such circumstances, you can ask an adoption agency or attorney to contact that person rather than talk with him or her directly.

Regardless of your relationship with your child's other parent, it's also important to think about your child's future perspective. At some point, most children who have been adopted ask questions about their birth parents and the circumstances of their adoption. Many will want to develop a

relationship with their birth parents. A parent who is not involved in the adoption decision or planning may not be aware of the child and lose an opportunity to connect with his or her son or daughter from an early age or later if the child seeks information about that parent. Likewise, a child who grows up with no knowledge of the other parent may miss a chance to develop a critical relationship with him or her.

Keep in mind: Under certain circumstances, adoptions can be overturned if the other birth parent's rights were circumvented and consent to adoption was not exercised. Regardless of the laws in your State, if you are exploring adoption it is wise to ask ahead of time what the process is before deciding to move forward with a lawyer or agency who will not protect the integrity of the adoption plan.

For more information, visit Information Gateway's Legal Considerations for Expectant Parents Considering Adoption webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/legal/>).

Fathers' Roles and Responsibilities in Adoption

Laws related to the father's role and responsibilities in adoption differ from State to State. Most States require that the father (or any man that could be the father) be told about the child before the adoption. This is true whether or not the mother and father are married. While laws vary, a State's law may require that a child's father sign legal papers agreeing to the adoption—granting legal consent—before adoption can be a valid possibility. In some cases where agencies and lawyers have pushed through adoptions without the father's consent, the court has later legally overturned the adoption. In some States, if parents are unmarried, the presumed father (or "putative" father) has a certain amount of time to put his name on the State's putative father registry or take other legal action to claim that he is the child's father. Some States require that a notice be published if the father's name or whereabouts are unknown.

For more information specific to birth fathers, see the following Information Gateway resources:

- Fathers' Involvement in Adoption Planning [webpage] (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/father/>)
- *The Rights of Unmarried Fathers* [State Statutes] (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/putative/>)

Have I talked about this decision with my family and the other parent's family? Your family and/or the other parent's family may be sources of support as you consider what to do, even if the pregnancy has put a strain on your relationships. In addition to emotional support, your families may be able to provide money, housing, and other kinds of help. Consider whether someone in your family, the other parent's family, or other extended family members may wish to be the guardian for or adopt your child. Kinship guardianship/adoption can help maintain the child's connections to his or her family members and cultural heritage. For more information, visit Information Gateway's Kinship/Relative Adoption webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/relatives/adoption/>).

How might I feel in 10 or 20 years if I make an adoption plan for my child or I parent my child myself? While it's impossible to know for sure how you will feel many years from now, you should consider the potential long-term effects of any decision you make. For instance, you may want to think about your future both with and without this child. How would raising the child affect what you want from life? What support systems may be needed to achieve your long-term plans under each of your options? How might you feel if you go on to have other children, or if you do not have any other children?

Keep in mind: There are no "right" or "wrong" responses to these questions, and you may not know the answers right now. You may have a mixture of feelings, and that's okay.

MAKING AN ADOPTION PLAN

Once you have considered your options and decided to proceed with adoption, an adoption plan can help you process emotions, think about the type of family you want your child to grow up in, the role you would like to play in his or her life, and other adoption considerations. An adoption plan involves arranging for your biological child to be raised by adoptive parents as a full and permanent legal member of their family and is a process for gathering information and clarifying your decisions. Selecting the type of adoption that works best for you (an agency or independent adoption), choosing adoptive parents for your child, and deciding how to maintain a relationship with your child after adoption are part of making an adoption plan.

SELECTING AN AGENCY OR INDEPENDENT ADOPTION

If you decide to make an adoption plan for your child, you will choose whether you want an agency adoption or an independent (or private) adoption handled by an adoption lawyer. You may not know which type of adoption will work best for you and your child until you have explored these options further. In an independent adoption, the prospective adoptive parents often pay for the expectant mother's medical costs, legal fees, temporary housing expenses, and possibly other expenses. This section describes each type of adoption, including considerations and resources for selecting qualified professionals. See Information Gateway's Finding an Adoption Agency or Lawyer webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/lawyer/>) for additional information.

Agency Adoption. Adoption agencies are organizations that provide counseling services to expectant or birth parents, adoption support and preservation services, assessments of prospective adoptive parents, and/or preparation services for children to live with adoptive families. Agencies work with many families and expectant parents to find the best families for infants; newborns; and, in some cases, young children. Some expectant parents choose an agency adoption rather than an independent adoption because licensed agencies must follow State adoption standards and often provide more services, such as counseling, before, during, and after the adoption. Agencies may be able to assist you even if you would like to explore adoption options and other resources for an older child.

If you choose to work with an agency, look for a licensed agency with a good reputation. You can find contact information for licensed domestic adoption agencies in your State from the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>). To find information on the reputation and licensing of an agency, follow the instructions provided in *How to Assess the Reputation of Licensed, Private Adoption Agencies* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/twenty/>).

After you contact a licensed agency, you will generally work with an adoption counselor. During initial meetings, the adoption counselor typically will do the following:

- Provide you with information about options for you and your child
- Explain the processes for selecting adoptive parents and relinquishing your parental rights

- Collect information about you and the child's other parent to create a medical and social history for the child. (For more information, see *Providing Adoptive Parents With Information About Adoptees and Their Birth Families* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/collection/>.)
- Work with you to develop an adoption plan
- Discuss options for and benefits of ongoing contact after adoption

Private/Independent Adoption. Some birth parents choose to make an adoption plan without the involvement of an agency. In an independent adoption (or private adoption), parents work with a lawyer and the family selected to adopt the child. Some parents feel that this will provide them more control, or perhaps they already have identified a prospective family and want to proceed with the adoption.

To help prevent exploitative practices ("baby selling," for example), each State has strict laws about what prospective parents can and cannot pay for. For more information, see *Regulation of Private Domestic Adoption Expenses* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/expenses/>).

If you choose to work with a lawyer, be sure the lawyer has experience with adoption, is licensed to practice law in your State, and is in good standing with the State bar association. You can find names and contact information for adoption attorneys on the Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys website (<https://adoptionart.org/find-an-attorney/>). Additional legal referral

resources can be found for each State through the American Bar Association's Find Legal Help website (https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_services/flh-home/). This website also can provide information on whether a person is licensed to practice law in your State (click on "Explore Licensing" and select your State).

When selecting a lawyer, find out about the lawyer's qualifications, experience with adoption, services, fees, and processes. Look for a lawyer who won't charge you a fee if you decide not to proceed with your adoption plan.

Keep in mind: You should plan to have your own lawyer represent you and your child, and the adoptive parents should have a different lawyer representing them. It's important that your lawyer is looking out for your interests.

SELECTING ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Whether you work with an agency or adoption lawyer to make an adoption plan, you should have a great deal of choice in selecting the adoptive parents for your child. Spend time thinking about what type of family and home you would prefer for your child. For example, are you looking for parents who share your values and beliefs? Is it important to you that your child be raised by two parents or with other siblings? Do you want a family who feels the same way you do about maintaining a relationship after the adoption? For a list of sample questions to ask prospective parents, see the Adoption Interview Questions: What

Sample Questions to Ask an Adoption Agency Representative or an Adoption Lawyer

If you are considering making an adoption plan, talk to several agencies or lawyers and ask as many questions as you need to feel comfortable. The following are some questions you may want to ask.

- What types of services do you offer, and what are the fees (if any)?
- Will I get counseling? During what time period? Before the birth? After a child has been adopted?
- How will you handle obtaining the consent of the child's other parent?
- If I decide to parent, will I have to pay for services already received? (Note: This is illegal in most States.)
- How do you find and screen prospective adoptive parents?
- What role can I play in getting to know and selecting the family who may adopt my child?
- What services do you provide to help me maintain a relationship with my child after the adoption is complete?
- How would you handle the situation if my child were born with or has a disability?
- Can you provide me with references (names and contact information) of clients who have made adoption plans and have agreed to talk with expectant parents considering adoption?

to Ask Adoptive Families or Birth Parents page on the Considering Adoption website (<https://consideringadoption.com/adopting/open-adoption/adoption-interview-questions>).

In an agency adoption, families interested in adopting will apply to the agency. You may have the opportunity to look through profiles, letters, pictures, and/or videos to select potential parents for your child. If you prefer, many agencies will arrange for you to meet prospective adoptive families before you make a decision.

In an independent adoption, you may find potential adoptive parents in a variety of ways. You may become aware of families interested in adoption through a lawyer, doctor, family members, a friend, or your faith community.

After you make contact with a potential adoptive family, an adoption lawyer can help you follow up, which may involve meeting and getting to know the family.

Keep in mind: While the internet and social media make finding information about prospective adoptive parents quicker and easier, they also can create opportunities for pressure, fraud, and exploitation. If you use the internet to find potential adoptive parents, be sure to ask lots of questions to assess whether the parents and service providers are ethical and the services are in your and your child's best interests.

The Home Study

In both agency adoptions and independent adoptions, prospective adoptive families must complete a home-study process. The purpose of the home study is to ensure that the adoptive home is safe and appropriate for the child. A home study typically includes interviews with prospective parents, visits to the home, and background and criminal records checks. Talk with your counselor or lawyer about getting a copy of a potential adoptive family's profile and/or home study. For more information, read *The Adoption Home Study Process* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-homstu/>).

MAINTAINING A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD AFTER ADOPTION

Today, most domestic adoptions involve some level of ongoing contact between adoptive and birth families. Maintaining a relationship with the child is considered to be in the best interests of the child. After the adoption, you (and possibly other family members), your child, and the adoptive family can communicate in various ways—letters, phone calls, social media, emails, texts, video calls, and/or regular visits. Through direct contact with you and other birth family members, your child benefits by learning more about his

or her personal history, family background, medical information, and why you chose adoption. As a result, your child can develop a stronger sense of identity, self-worth, and connection.

For a summary of research on birth parents maintaining a relationship with the adoptive family, see *Openness in Adoption: From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections* on the Donaldson Adoption Institute website (<https://go.usa.gov/xPSNF>).

Talk to your adoption counselor or adoption lawyer about what kind of relationship you are interested in having with your child and his or her adoptive parents. You and the prospective parents should work out in advance how you will keep in touch and how often, among other considerations. These arrangements can be formalized in a written postadoption contact agreement in most States. Contact agreements are highly recommended because they can help you make sure that everyone has a shared understanding of the expectations for contact between the families.

It's also important that discussions about contact agreements are made apart from making adoption plans. You should not make an adoption plan based only on a promise of contact. For more information, see *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/cooperative/>).

Keep in mind: Postadoption contact agreements can be useful tools in setting common expectations and should be filed before the adoption is finalized. However, such agreements may not be enforceable by law if the adoptive or birth parents change their minds and decide to stop or change communication.

For more information about maintaining a relationship with your child after he or she has been adopted, see *Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets-families-maintainrelationships/>). Although that factsheet is written for adoptive parents, parents who place their children for adoption also may find some of the information helpful.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

During and after an unplanned or crisis pregnancy or when you're considering adoption for an older child, you may feel anxious, stressed, overwhelmed, and many other emotions. Be sure to take care of yourself and get proper health care for your child and yourself. Counseling during the pregnancy—particularly with a neutral, trained professional—may help you cope with your emotions and empower you to make sound decisions for yourself and for the child.

Counseling after the birth; during the decision-making process; and after the adoption, if it occurs, can help you cope with the impacts as they arise over the years.

Some licensed adoption agencies will provide counseling services after the adoption for as long as you need it. In independent adoptions, most States allow, and some States require, adoptive parents to pay for the birth mother's counseling (with various time limits). For more information, see *Regulation of Private Domestic Adoption Expenses* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/expenses/>).

Grief and loss are common reactions for birth parents who make an adoption plan. Some birth parents also experience phases of feeling guilty and angry. Strong feelings of grief and regret may occur many years after the adoption is finalized. It's important to admit these feelings to yourself and to know that they are normal. For more information, see *Impact of Adoption* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets-families-adoptionimpact/>).

If you have not had contact with your child after the adoption, you or your child may try to contact one another years later. The search and reunion process can be an intense emotional experience, and you may benefit from professional support. For more information, visit the Information Gateway Search & Reunion webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/search/>).

Whatever level of ongoing contact you have with your child, counseling can be helpful. One-on-one counseling and/or support groups with other birth parents may help you accept your adoption arrangements, resolve your grief, feel good about yourself and your decision, and plan for your future.

CONCLUSION

Choosing between parenting a child and arranging for him or her to be raised by adoptive parents is a difficult decision, and either choice requires courage and love. Knowing the questions to ask yourself and the resources to consider can enhance your decision-making process and lead to a clear and confident understanding of whether parenting is the best decision for you. Developing an adoption plan moves the process forward, but it does not mean you can't have a change of heart. You should not feel pressured by earlier discussions, payment of expenses, or what the prospective adoptive parents and others hope and want. An ongoing relationship with your child can and should be negotiated before the adoption and reexamined as the child grows. Moving the process forward means that you are ready to accept and integrate the adoption as part of your life. Making an adoption plan can help you more clearly and easily find that acceptance.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

The following resources provide additional general information for expectant or current parents who are considering making an adoption plan.



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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WEBSITES AND BLOGS

Child Welfare Information Gateway

- For Expectant Parents Considering Adoption and Birth Parents, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/>
- Laws Related to Adoption, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/laws/>
- National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>

American Adoption Congress,
<http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org>

American Pregnancy Association,
<http://americanpregnancy.org/adotion/adoptionfaq.html>

Concerned United Birthparents, Inc.,
<http://www.cubirthparents.org>

National Council For Adoption,
IChooseAdoption.org,
<http://ichooseadoption.org/>

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