

The How You Can Adopt a Child Handbook



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Myths about adoption

MYTH 1: ALL ADOPTIONS ARE EXPENSIVE

Costs vary by agency and may be related to how the agency is funded, where their children come from, and what services they provide to birth parents and adoptive families.

Adoptions of healthy infants in the United States and of children from abroad typically cost between \$5,000 and \$25,000, and could possibly be higher in some circumstances. The adoption of a child waiting in foster care can be virtually without cost if the family works directly with a public social services agency. In fact, many public agencies provide adoption subsidies for children who are waiting for a family. (Subsidies are discussed later in this book.) If the family works through a private adoption agency, the costs are likely to be higher, but rarely as high as they would be for adopting an infant. Finally, some private agencies may adjust their fees based on family income or other criteria.

MYTH 2: PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE FAMILIES MUST BE "RICH"

Many people with modest incomes adopt every year. Adoption professionals who make decisions about placing children generally are more concerned about the family's financial stability and how well they manage the financial resources they do have than about the actual income.

MYTH 3: FAMILIES MUST OWN THEIR OWN HOME

Families who rent homes or live in apartments adopt children all the time.

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MYTH 4: ADOPTIVE PARENTS MUST BE MARRIED AND WITHOUT CHILDREN

Single people, couples without children, and families who already have children by birth or by prior adoption can adopt. However, many private agencies and many foreign countries have specific requirements for the marital status, age, number of children, or religion of people who adopt their children.

MYTH 5: ADOPTIVE FAMILIES MUST PAY FOR EVERYTHING

There are a variety of resources for financial assistance to help families cover some of the costs of adoption. For example:

Many agencies charge fees on a sliding scale.

Adoption subsidies are available for many children adopted from foster care.

Increasing numbers of employers are offering adoption benefits to their employees.

MYTH 6: LEGAL FEES ARE HIGH

Legal fees usually are a small portion of the adoption costs, except for independent adoptions handled by an attorney. The legal fees may be included in the agency's fees or may be an additional cost to the adopting family.

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Adoption Terminology

PUBLIC ADOPTION AGENCIES

State and county agencies (known variously as departments of social services, human services, children and family services, and so on) that are responsible for placing waiting children from foster care or institutional settings with adoptive families.

PRIVATE ADOPTION AGENCIES

Non-profit or for-profit agencies licensed by the state that depend on fees and donations, rather than tax dollars, to operate. Some are private agencies that place infants or children born locally or from other countries, though some work with public agencies to place children who are in foster care.

WAITING CHILDREN

These children also are referred to as children with "special needs." (NOTE: Internal Revenue Service [IRS] publications use the term "special needs.") The large majority of children adopted through state or county adoption agencies are considered waiting children. They come into the public welfare system (foster care) because of parental abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Many of these children have emotional and behavioral difficulties as a result of their experiences. Some also have physical and developmental disabilities. The majority of these children are school aged, some are brothers and sisters who need to be adopted together, and more than 50 percent are children of color.

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SPECIAL NEEDS

Same as the above definition for "waiting children." This book uses the term "waiting children"; however, the IRS and some state agencies use the term "special needs" in their publications.

OPEN, SEMI-OPEN, AND CLOSED ADOPTION

Different agencies or organizations may have varying interpretations of the following terms. The definitions here are meant only to provide a general overview and may not match completely how a particular agency uses a specific term.

An OPEN ADOPTION is one in which last names, addresses, and telephone numbers typically are exchanged and the birth parent/s, the adoptive family, and, in some cases, the child may visit on a regular basis. In a fully open adoption, the birth parent/s and the adoptive family know each other and have ongoing communication about the child.

In a SEMI-OPEN ADOPTION, communication is more limited. Last names, addresses, and telephone numbers usually are not exchanged, sharing of photos or other information is less frequent, and all communication takes place through a third party, usually the adoption agency.

In a CLOSED ADOPTION, no identifying information about the birth family or the adoptive family is shared, and the families do not communicate. The adoptive family usually receives non-identifying background information about the child and the birth family before placement. After adoption, the records are sealed and typically are not available to the

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adopted child. For more information about the availability of adoption records, refer to the "Birth Parent Search" section under Planning for Your Child's Future later in this book.

IDENTIFIED ADOPTION

In this type of adoption, the birth mother has identified the family whom she wishes to adopt her child.

INDEPENDENT ADOPTIONS

These adoptions are arranged through an intermediary, such as a lawyer or a physician, rather than through a licensed adoption agency. The intermediary may find the birth mother, who plans to place her child for adoption, or may help the birth mother locate a family interested in adopting her child. NOTE: Independent adoptions are not legal in all states; check with your state department of social services.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTIONS

These are adoptions of children who were born in or are nationals of other countries.

HOME OR ADOPTION STUDY

A home study, also called an adoption study, is a written description of you and your family prepared by an adoption agency or private adoption professional. It is used to determine which child would best fit into your home. The home study process should be an educational and enlightening experience for the prospective adoptive family.

Having a study performed by an adoption agency or licensed social worker often is the best way to proceed. The type of

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adoption likely will influence who should perform the home study. It is important to choose the appropriate adoption agency or licensed social worker to do your study so it will be accepted by the court. Check with your state or county department of social services for guidance in this area. You

can expect some or all of the following to be part of the process.

- interviews with the parent/s individually and together (if a couple)
- group meetings involving several applicant families (many agencies do this)
- autobiographies written by each parent
- a home visit
- medical reports from your physician
- references from friends and associates
- proof of employment
- investigations into any criminal record, including the state's child abuse registry
- participation in adoption information training classes
- personal finance information
- copies of tax returns

In the course of the home study process, you will have the opportunity to talk with your social worker about the following topics:

- why you want to adopt
- your readiness to parent
- your family's values
- your hopes and expectations for the adoptive child
- your family's strengths and weaknesses
- how your family handles crises and change

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- where you'll get support or professional help, if needed

It's quite possible that, as you move through the adoption process, you'll be working with more than one social worker.

PRE-PLACEMENT

This is the period of time after your home study is completed and before your child comes home.

PLACEMENT

Placement occurs when the child you plan to adopt moves into your home.

FOSTER/ADOPT PLACEMENT

A child is placed with the foster/adopt family before the birth parents' rights have been legally terminated so there is still a possibility that the child may be reunited with his or her birth family. If the birth family's parental rights are terminated, the foster/adopt family will be considered the adoptive family for the child.

POST-PLACEMENT

This is the time after the child has been placed in your home and before finalization. The social worker doing post-placement supervision will visit your home several times during the 6 to 12 months between placement and finalization to provide support for you and your child and to help you get other professional assistance, if needed, to

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make the placement successful. A certain number of visits are required by the courts before the adoption can be finalized.

FINALIZATION

This is when the court takes the necessary action to make the child a legal member of your family. Usually, your whole family will go to court with your adoption worker or lawyer.

POST-ADOPTION

This is not a specific period of time; instead, it is the active, rewarding, and challenging process of living as a family after the adoption has been legally finalized.

ADOPTION EXCHANGES

These organizations are designed to provide connections between prospective adoptive parents and adoption agencies that place children. Many states have their own state-operated exchange that keeps a listing of adoptable children waiting in their foster care system, as well as families who have completed their adoption home study with a state agency. Many states publish a photo listing book of the children waiting in their state.

Regional, national, and international exchanges are non-profit organizations that serve waiting children and families in more than one state. They often publish in print or on the Internet a photo listing of waiting children, provide other services to help recruit adoptive families, make connections between prospective adoptive families and the agencies that have custody of the waiting children, and provide adoption information to prospective families. Some exchanges also

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