The Center for Child and Family Studies was created in 1986 at the College of Social Work, University of South Carolina, to address issues related to children and families. Since that time The Center has gained a national reputation for its curriculum development, research, conference planning, and student initiatives.

For more information about The Center for Child and Family Studies, contact The Center at (803)777-9408 or visit the website at www.sc.edu/cosw/center.


This handbook was produced under contract with The South Carolina Department of Social Services Columbia, South Carolina.

**Table of Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction To Adoption</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Adoption</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas and Goals of Adoption</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Child Who Is Placed for Adoption</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Adoptive Parent</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How To Become an Adoptive Parent</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More About Adoption</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are many reasons that you may want to adopt a child. Maybe you can’t have biological children. Maybe you chose not to have biological children because of a medical condition or hereditary disease. Maybe you know that there are children who need families, and you want to add to your family. Whatever your reason, we’re glad you came to us about adopting.

Even though you are interested in adopting, you may not be sure that it is what you want. Deciding to adopt is a big step, and you want to understand adoption and how it can impact your life before you commit yourself. Good!

The better informed you are, the more you know about what to expect and the better able you’ll be to make the right decision for your family.

You may decide that adopting isn’t for you. You may decide to wait and give it a little more thought. You may decide you are ready to go ahead with adoption. Whatever you decide, you’ll feel more confident if you learn all you can now about adopting.
We hope you will learn several things from this guide, things that will help you decide whether you want to adopt.

**OBJECTIVES**

By the time you have finished the guide, you will

- know what adoption is;
- understand how adoption is similar to and different from foster care;
- understand the goals of adoption;
- know the reasons children need adoptive families;
- know the reasons children enter and leave foster care;
- understand how children become adopted;
- begin to understand what it will be like to be an adoptive parent;
- know the steps involved in becoming an adoptive parent; and
- have answers to some of your questions about adoption.
HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The seven chapters of this guide introduce you to adoption. Since the chapters build on each other, you should complete them in order.

Relax. Take your time. Though it is important for you to read this guide, it is just as important that you take time to think about it. Think about what it means to you. Think about what you agree with or don’t agree with. Are there parts that don’t make sense to you? Do you want more information on some things?

Did you know that adopting is a family affair? Everyone in your family is affected if you become an adoptive parent. So start involving your family now. Read, talk about, and think about the material together. Each of you should think about how adopting will affect you. Let each person talk about concerns and ask questions.

If there are issues that you and your family want to discuss with your caseworker, the space provided at the end of each chapter entitled What I Want To Know More About is a good place to keep a record of any ideas and questions you have.

So read, think, write notes, and talk with your family. That way you’ll be sure you get as much as you can from this guide. Then you can make an informed decision about you, your family, and adoption.
In this chapter you will get a general idea of what adoption is.

**Objectives**

By the end of this chapter, you will

- know how the agency defines adoption;
- know how the agency’s definition of adoption is like or different from your own definition; and
- know how adoption is different from foster care.
WHAT IS ADOPTION?

You probably know something about adoption already. Maybe you know someone who is an adoptive parent, or you may have seen something on television about children who need permanent homes. Before we tell you how we define adoption, write down what you think it is. Get your family to help!

Adoption is: ___________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
The agency defines adoption as the method provided by law of establishing the legal relationship of parent and child between persons who are not so related by birth, with the same mutual rights and obligations that exist between children and their birth parents.

So children who are unable to grow up in their birth families legally become part of other families. These new families are a permanent part of the children’s lives, and the children share the same legal rights and duties that are shared by birth families.

Now look at your definition of adoption. Is it like the agency definition? Are there differences? Do you have questions about the agency definition? Write those differences or questions here:

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

HOW IS ADOPTION DIFFERENT FROM FOSTER CARE?

Sometimes people are confused about the difference between adoption and foster care. They may not be sure if they want to be foster or adoptive parents. There are two big differences.

Do you still think you’re interested in adopting? Is foster care what you really want? If you aren’t sure, talk to your caseworker.

First—Adoption is permanent. Foster care is temporary.

Second—Your legal relationship to foster children is not the same as to adopted children.

This means that if you adopt children, you can expect them to stay with you until they are grown. And even then, the children are still yours! But if you take foster children into your home, you can expect them to leave you soon.

You have some legal rights and duties to foster children, but you don’t have legal custody of them. The agency usually has custody. In adoption it’s different.

With adopted children, you have the same legal rights and duties that you have with children who were born to you.

If you’re not sure what this means, write your questions in the space provided.
What I want to know more about
In the previous chapter we looked at what adoption means, including the idea that it creates a permanent legal tie between children and the adoptive parents. In this chapter we’ll look at some of the ideas behind adoption and what we hope adoption gives to children.

Objectives

By the end of this chapter you will

- know some of the main ideas behind adoption; and
- understand the goals of adoption.
Ideas Behind Adoption

Adoption is based on certain ideas about children and families. The rules in adoption are all there because of things we believe about what children and families are like or what is good for them. Understanding these ideas is important for understanding the adoption program.

Here are some of those beliefs. As you read them, think about whether you agree or disagree.

The family is the main force in children’s lives.

Babies need a family to survive, but even older children need a family for safety, support, development, and learning.

Children become attached to their families.

The longer children have lived with a family during the first few years of life, the more that family becomes a part of the children’s world.

Usually, children grow and develop best when they stay with their families.

That’s why we don’t move children into foster care or an adoptive home unless it is necessary.

Children need permanent, stable homes and relationships with parents.

That’s why we try so hard to keep children with their birth parents. It’s also why, if we do have to move children, we try to get them back home or into another permanent place, such as an adoptive home, as soon as possible.

Children’s sense of time is different from an adult’s.

A week, even a month, might seem like a short time to you. But for children, it can be a very long time. That’s another reason we want to get children back with their birth parents or to another permanent place as soon as possible.

Families, not just children, need services.

First, we want to keep children safe. One way to do that is to help their families. When children are in foster care, we usually work with the birth families to help them provide a better place for children to grow and develop. We also help foster and adoptive families when children are placed with them.

What do you think about these ideas?
How would you feel if a child you adopt wants to know more about abusive or neglectful birth parents?

The first goal of adoption is to get children into permanent, stable homes as soon as possible.

**Goals of Adoption**

Because of what we believe about children and families, the first goal of adoption is to get children into permanent, stable homes as soon as possible.

As soon as it is clear that children cannot return to their birth parents, where ties and attachments already exist, we want to get those children into other homes. Then the children’s needs for love and security can be met and new ties can be formed.

We believe that adoption is for the children. The needs and desires of adoptive parents are also very important, but the agency’s first duty is to the children.

You will understand the most important thing about adoption if you remember that the main reason for adoption is to meet the needs of children, to give them permanent families that can meet basic needs for belonging, security, and safety.

**Other goals for the adoption agency include**

- giving children a family that can understand their needs;
- providing a healthy family setting in which children can grow;
- placing children with new (adoptive) families as quickly as possible;
- helping children accept the adoptive family; and
- helping the adoptive family accept the child and continue to be a healthy, happy family with its new member.
WHAT I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________
By now you may be wondering about the children who become adopted. Why do they have to leave their birth families, and why can’t they return to them? How do they get to be adopted? This chapter will answer these questions.

**OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this chapter you will

- know something about the backgrounds of most children who are placed for adoption;
- know the main reasons children must leave their birth parents and come into foster care;
- know how children come into foster care;
- know the main reasons children leave foster care; and
- know how children move from foster care into adoption.
UNDERSTANDING THE CHILD WHO IS PLACED FOR ADOPTION

Did you ever wonder why children need adoption, where they came from, or what happened to their birth parents? You may think that the children who need adoption are mostly babies whose parents decide they can’t keep them, maybe because the mother is young and unmarried.

This may be true in some cases, but not very often! Most of the children waiting to be adopted come through the foster care system. Most of them are not babies. And many of these children have special needs. Maybe they have already been emotionally or physically hurt by living with parents who didn’t know how to care for them, or they may have been born with conditions that are hard to cope with for even the most loving parents.

To help you understand better what these children are like, we will look at why they had to leave their birth parents, how they got into foster care, and why they eventually moved out of foster care into adoption.

WHY CHILDREN ENTER FOSTER CARE

Children come into foster care when, for some reason, they cannot be safely cared for in their birth families. Some of those reasons are discussed here.

Some parents are not able to give the care or supervision that children need to be safe and secure.

Because of problems in their own lives, they are not able to do a good job as parents. For example, a woman is left with four children and no income when her husband leaves her. If she has no family who can help, she may lose her home and have no means of caring for her children. Foster care may be her only choice.

Some parents have abused their children emotionally, physically, or sexually.

Because of their own problems, they hurt their children, and the children need to be protected from them. A woman, who was perhaps abused herself as a child, may marry a man who beats her and their children. She may have very low self-esteem. She may not know how to protect herself and her children. The children may have to go into foster care for safety until the parents can control their problems and it is safe for the children to return home.
Sometimes parents and children just can’t get along.

All families argue, but if the children’s safety is threatened, foster care may be necessary. This may be a particular problem with teenagers. Fighting about rules, clothes, dating, and grades may be constant. Parents and children may physically fight, or children may run away from home time after time. Foster care may give the family time to work on finding a way they can live together.

So there are several reasons that children enter foster care. But you need to know that most of the children we place into foster homes have been abused or neglected. This means that there are special things for you to know and understand so you can help if you decide to adopt such children.

How do you think you would feel about parenting children who have been sexually abused?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

How do you think it would affect how you treat the children?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

How Children Enter Foster Care

To move children from their homes and into foster care, the agency must get legal custody.

Remember, this is different from adoption, when the parents no longer have legal rights to children.

Children may enter foster care after parents voluntarily surrender them.

Sometimes parents may love their children very much but realize that they cannot, for whatever reasons, rear them. Maybe the mother is very young and unmarried, her parents can’t help her, and she and the father don’t really see how they can provide a home for a child. They choose to place the child for adoption. The baby is then placed into foster care until placed with an adoptive family.

Sometimes a crisis in a family may result in foster care for children.

For example, a single mom may have to go to the hospital for surgery and then need six weeks to recover. If she has no friends or family to help her (she may have moved recently and not know anyone in her town), she may need foster care for her children until she is well enough to care for them.

Custody gives the agency legal power to care for children while the parents keep their legal rights as parents.
There are two main ways the agency gets custody of children.

1. Parents voluntarily give the agency custody.

In a voluntary placement, the parent agrees for the children to be placed and gives the agency the authority to provide foster care for them.

Very few placements are voluntary.

2. The agency is granted custody by family court.

In a court-ordered placement, the family court decides to place children in foster care to protect them. This happens when abuse or neglect is involved, and it is the most common method.

**Why Children Leave Foster Care**

We have said that foster care is temporary. That means that children who are removed from their homes probably won’t be in foster care for very long. But where do children go when they leave foster care?

Most children leaving foster care do so for one of the following reasons:

**They return to their birth parents.**

The first goal of foster care is to return children to their birth parents. If we are successful, that’s exactly what will happen. We have helped the parents improve enough that their children can safely return home.

**They are placed permanently with relatives.**

If the parents can’t change enough to make their home safe for their children, we see if there is a relative who can parent them. If so, the children leave foster care and go to live with this relative. Sometimes the relatives adopt the children, so this can turn into an adoptive placement.

**They are placed for adoption.**

Sometimes the court decides that it is unlikely that parents will ever be able to provide a safe home for their children. Then the children are legally freed for adoption and go to an adoptive home.

Though there are other ways children may leave foster homes, these are the main ones.

**Plans for After Foster Care**

The agency tries to return children to the birth parents if it believes the parents won’t abuse or neglect them any more.

It’s only when we’re sure that the birth parents will not be able to care for the children in a reasonable period of time that the agency looks for another plan, which may be adoption.

When children go into foster care, the agency makes plans for them. Here are the kinds of plans the agency makes most often.
Reunification

Sometimes the plan is for children to go back to the birth parents when they are better able to care for them.

Kinship Care

Sometimes the plan is for the children to be cared for or adopted by a relative.

Adoption

Sometimes the plan is to find an adoptive home for the children.

Concurrent Planning

Sometimes, if the agency is not sure whether the birth parents will be able to care for the children again, we make two plans at the same time. The first plan is for children to reunite with the birth family. But in case that can’t happen, the agency may also plan for the children to be adopted. The foster parents may be the family who adopts the children if the first plan doesn’t work out.

You may have heard that sometimes foster parents adopt the foster children placed with them. That is true, but you can’t count on it. If you take foster children into your home, expecting to adopt them later, you must always be prepared for the possibility of the children being placed elsewhere.

FROM FOSTER CARE TO ADOPTION

If the agency decides that adoption is the best plan for children, there are two things we must do for them.

1. We must start the process for legally freeing children for adoption.

Usually birth parents do not voluntarily place their children for adoption, so the agency asks the courts to legally free them for adoption. The court process can take a long time, and this may mean that children stay in foster care, waiting to be legally freed, longer than we would like.

2. We must start preparing children for adoption.

We must get children emotionally ready for adoption. Have you ever considered the thoughts and feelings of children who are leaving a family they know for a new one? Maybe these children have even lived in several foster homes in between.

Pretend for a minute that you are an eight-year-old child. You have been in a foster home for five months, but you hoped you would be going home to your own parents soon. Then you find that you will never return to them.

What might you think and feel?

By “preparing children for adoption” we mean

- helping children to recognize some of their thoughts and feelings and to deal with them;
- helping children understand why their birth parents cannot care for them; and
- helping children understand what happened in the past and why adoption is necessary.
As you can see, the child you may be adopting probably won’t be a baby who has been well-treated, just waiting for your love and care. The child is more likely to be one who is older and may have been abused or neglected, who has been in one or more foster homes, and who has special problems. This may be different from what you thought an adopted child would be like.

Describe what you are feeling about adoption.

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

You may be having some positive and negative feelings. Your feelings are neither good nor bad, but they are important. Recognizing them helps you understand yourself better and helps you sort out many of the issues in adoption. Your feelings tell you something about your thoughts, your values, and your needs as a prospective adoptive parent.
So far in this guide you have read and thought about what adoption is, what it tries to do for children, and how and why children become adopted. Now you are ready to look at the part you may play in the life of a child and how you can help adoption reach its goals for children.

**OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this chapter you will

- be familiar with the adoption triad;
- know some of the things you need to think about before you adopt; and
- know what you need to do after you adopt.
THE ADOPTION TRIAD

You will talk to a worker about things that you might never have talked about with anyone else. You may even ask yourself questions about yourself and your family that you never thought about before. The agency and the adoption worker will help you decide whether you want to adopt and, if so, which characteristics (in children) you can best parent or want to parent.

In the process of arranging an adoption, the agency works with

- children, who are free or will soon be free for adoption;
- birth parents, who are giving up their children for adoption; and
- you, the adoptive parent, who wants to adopt a child.

We’ve already looked at the children. In the last chapter you began to look at what children might have gone through in the past and what adoption might mean to them.

You also need to understand the birth parents and their meaning to children. You may know something about their problems as parents, and you might have a lot of feelings about how they treated their children. But you cannot pretend they don’t exist. You have to understand that children have relationships with them and may someday want to renew those relationships. Even though you may never meet the birth parents, they will be alive to you through your adoptive children. Therefore, it is essential for you to avoid resentments toward birth parents for whatever reasons or beliefs you might have (e.g., resentments for “upsetting” the child, for possessing “undesirable” moral traits that conflict with yours, or for being addicted to alcohol or drugs). Making a decision to find positive qualities about birth parents can assist children, birth parents, and yourself with transitioning into this life-changing event.

The third member of the triad is you, the adoptive parent. Let’s look more closely now at your responsibilities and what you can do to help adoption reach its goals for children.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ADOPTIVE PARENT

As an adoptive parent, you acquire a lot of responsibility. You think about your family and let it be looked at in a way that most families never go through. You take care of a child who may have many special needs. You are parenting a child not born to you.

Let’s look at some of these responsibilities more closely. Here’s a sample of what is expected of you.
Understand and deal with your reasons for wanting to adopt.

The main reasons people choose to adopt are

- infertility;
- medical problems;
- wanting to adopt children they cared for as foster parents; and
- wanting to help children who need a family.

Whatever your reason, it is important for you to understand it. If the reason is infertility, you must deal with this first instead of adopting a child as a solution. Once you accept the infertility, you may decide you want to adopt.

Understand your family as it is now, and understand what it will mean to your family to add a new member.

Adopting a child affects the whole family. Family resources—money, space, time, and attention—must be shared. Interactions among family members change. As much as you can, all family members need to plan for how adopting will affect them and how they will cope with the changes it brings.

Decide how good your family is for a particular child.

Families are different and children are different. It is important for your family to think about its abilities, to decide what you want, and to decide whether you can meet the needs of a particular child.

Before the adoption is final, let the agency know about any problems, concerns, or emergencies regarding the child and of any changes in the lives of your family or the child.

Before an adoption is finalized, the agency still has legal custody of the child.

Care for the child as you would a birth child by tending to physical, emotional, educational, and medical needs.

The child you adopt needs all the daily care that any child would need and, because of the child’s history, may need even more care and attention.

Understand that children may require professional help to meet their special needs; see that this help is provided.

Most of the children who are free for adoption have special needs. They may require help from professionals. They may need special medical care, therapy, or educational resources. The adopting family must understand what meeting these needs will take and agree to provide the necessary therapeutic resources. Accept the fact that there are special issues and concerns to be dealt with in adoption.

An important factor in the success of an adoption is the family’s ability to accept that adoption is different from birth parenting. Denying the difference ignores the child’s ties to the birth family. Adopted children will be interested in or attached to people who were in their lives before the adoption. The adoptive family needs to understand that and deal with those special issues.
Help children understand the past and the present, including why they had to leave their birth parents.

Adoptive parents need to accept children’s pasts so they can more easily help the children accept them.

Children may need help in dealing with

• losing the birth or foster family;
• losing friends and a familiar setting;
• adjusting to the adoptive family;
• adjusting to a new school; and
• overcoming low self-esteem.

Support children’s ties to the birth family.

No matter how hard life was with the birth parents, children identify with them and will miss them. Adoption does not wipe out memories or feelings. It is important for adoptive parents to help children cope with this loss and support their bond with the birth parents.

Adoptive parents may even help children find their birth parents, restore the relationship, and understand the situation of having two sets of parents—birth parents and adoptive parents. (This usually happens after children are older.)

Commit to permanent parenting of the child, including legally finalizing the adoption (obtaining the final decree of adoption from the court).

For children to feel secure and accepted with the adoptive family, it is important for the adoption to be finalized. Putting this step off makes children unsure of where they belong.

This list of responsibilities is not complete, but it is enough to give you some idea of what is expected of adoptive parents.

Describe your feelings about these responsibilities as we have explained them in this chapter.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Now that you’ve thought about these responsibilities, how do you feel about adoption? We hope you recognize that it isn’t always easy but you still want to share in the rewards.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Check three things you believe will be challenging for you.</th>
<th>Check three things you believe are most comfortable for you.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding your reasons for wanting to adopt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding how your family will be changed by the adoption.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding whether you can care for particular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting the agency know about issues before the adoption is final.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of children every day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sure that the children's special needs are met.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding that adoption is different from having a birth child.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping the children understand why they were adopted.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting a child's ties to the birth family.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committing to being a child's permanent family.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHAT I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT

_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
How To Become an Adoptive Parent

Adopting a child is a big and very important responsibility. Because it is so important, we want to be sure you really understand what it involves. We also want to be sure that your family can provide for the needs of an adopted child.

Objectives

By the end of this chapter you will

- know the steps in becoming an adoptive parent; and
- understand the family assessment process.
There are several steps to become an adoptive parent. You took the first one by contacting the agency. Beginning with that, let’s look now at the whole process.

**Step 1: Application**

Your application begins when you call the agency and let us know you would like to be an adoptive parent. We send you an application form, which asks for information about your personal history, finances, medical history, and references. Upon receipt, you are contacted by the agency to set up an interview. You get this guide at your interview. You and your family finish it at your own pace.

**Step 2: Preparation**

Preparation begins as you complete this guide. You decide if you are really interested in becoming an adoptive parent. Get some of your questions answered with your caseworker.

If you are still interested, you begin the family assessment process.

The agency

- conducts a family home study;
- may ask you to attend group sessions with other people who are interested in adoption; and
- may ask you to have several interviews with your caseworker or a combination of group and individual interviews.

Your caseworker uses information from group or individual interviews to write a family assessment.

**Step 3: Approval**

The agency decides if it should approve your application to adopt based on the family assessment and the other application information.

If you are approved as an adoptive parent, the agency mails you a written notice. Your caseworker updates your family study with you periodically after you’ve been approved and until a child is placed with you.

**More About the Family Assessment**

It may seem to take a lot of time, and you may wonder why we ask so many questions. The family assessment is very important. Here are some of the reasons.

**It’s the law!**

All states have laws giving certain agencies the authority and responsibility to complete the family assessment. These laws say what information must be in that assessment.

**The agency has the responsibility to protect children.**

We want to be sure that the families in which we place our adoptive children can give them the protection and care they need.

We have to be sure the families we use are safe ones.
You need to decide whether you want to be an adoptive parent.

Not only do we get information about you, but you get information about adoptive parenting. This helps you decide if this is really what you want for yourself and your family.

You and the agency need to know the temperaments, behaviors, and backgrounds you can best parent or what, if any, you can’t handle.

All children are different. All families are different. Not every adoptive parent relates well to every child. So it is important to find out as much as possible about what characteristics would fit best with your family, which child you are best able to care for. Finding this “best fit” helps ensure that you and your child are successful together.

Remember that the family assessment process is a mutual process. That means that while we look at your potential as an adoptive parent, you are deciding whether you want to adopt. You and the agency both give and receive information. Each asks questions of the other. We believe that you can assess yourself very well, given enough information. The more open you are about your fears and concerns, as well as about your strengths, the better able we both are to make the right decision about you as an adoptive parent.

Here are some questions to help you think about what it will be like to adopt. Write your responses.

What are your hopes about adoptive parenting?

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

What are your fears about adoptive parenting?

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

What changes do you expect to occur for you, your family, and the adoptive child?

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

How do you think parenting an adopted child will be different from parenting children born to you?

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

In the last chapter you read about the role and responsibilities of the adoptive parent. In this chapter you read about the process for becoming one. Now you may be wondering what it takes to be an adoptive parent. There are no rules — there are many kinds of adoptive parents for many kinds of children. But we do have some guidelines, which are listed in the appendix.
WHAT I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________
In this chapter we look more closely at some special issues a family should consider before deciding to adopt.

**OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this chapter you will

- know more about the children who are free for adoption and what their special needs are;
- understand the importance of preserving a child’s racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage;
- know what financial help is available for adoption of special needs children;
- understand the legal risks involved in adoption; and
- understand why adopted children sometimes search for their birth families and how this might involve you.
When you read this chapter you may have questions that you want to talk more about with your caseworker. If so, write your questions in the space provided at the end of this chapter.

**SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN**

Over the past few years there has been a big change in the backgrounds of children waiting to be adopted. Most of them are not healthy babies. They are what we call special needs children. These are children for whom it is not easy to find homes.

**Age**

Other children are hard to place because of their age. Families usually think of adopting a baby. But there are children of all ages — even teenagers — who need new homes.

**Sibling Groups**

Often several children from the same family need adoptive placement. The agency wants to help all children keep whatever family ties they can, so we try to place brothers and sisters together in the same home. Most people think about adopting one child rather than a group of brothers and sisters, so these children are hard to place.

**Special Conditions**

Many children are considered as special needs because of medical or emotional conditions that they have had since birth. Sometimes these conditions are a result of poor parenting, including abuse and neglect. Some of these conditions are:

- blindness;
- cerebral palsy;
- cleft palate;
- deafness;
- juvenile diabetes;
- mental retardation;
- spina bifida;
- hyperactivity; and
- other behavioral, emotional, or learning problems.

A special needs child requires particular coping skills on the part of the family (birth or adoptive). Most families don't know exactly what adopting children with special needs will mean to them, and they may be unsure about adopting such children. But there are rewards to adopting special needs children. The family must look beyond the challenges to see the child's many strengths and potentials.

**Why are some children hard to place?**

**Race**

Some children are hard to place simply because of race. We have more minority children available for adoption than we have families who are ready for them. Minority children may have to wait longer for placement, perhaps living in a foster home or series of foster homes until a family is found.
RACIAL, ETHNIC, AND CULTURAL ISSUES

The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA) as amended by the Interethnic Adoption Provisions of 1996 (IEP) is a national policy designed to eliminate barriers to permanent placement for children in the child protection system. One specific policy objective is to abolish discrimination with regard to the child’s or potential parent’s race, color, or national origin. Neither children in foster care or adoptive placements nor potential parents can be denied or delayed placement based upon race, color, or national origin; such action is legally prohibited!

Federal initiatives MEPA-IEP also assist in assuring “best interests” for children in the child protection system by

• lessening the time children must wait for adoption; and
• helping obtain and keep foster and adoptive parents able to meet the unique needs of children waiting for permanent placement.

MEPA-IEP acts to balance the importance of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) where each child’s health and safety is the vital theme for decisions regarding child well-being.

FINANCIAL HELP

Adopting a special needs child may be expensive. There are special subsidies to help families meet the financial need. Most agencies have two kinds of subsidies: medical and financial.

1. Medical subsidy—A medical subsidy pays for some services needed to treat medical problems of adopted children. The problems had to exist before the placement or could be expected to happen because of the child’s medical or psychological history.

2. Financial subsidy—Financial benefits are monetary payments made to adoptive parents to help them meet the child’s living expenses. The payments may include legal and court costs of adoption and monthly payments for the child’s daily care.

If you have questions about subsidies, ask your adoption worker about them.

LEGAL RISK PLACEMENTS

Legal risk or pre-adopt placements are adoptive placements in which children are placed before they are legally freed for adoption.

As you read before, children may be freed for adoption when the legal parents (usually the birth parents) agree to terminate their rights or when the court terminates parental rights.
OPEN ADOPTION

Adoption used to be very secret. Birth parents never knew where their children went, and adoptive families did not know anything about the birth families. Now we know that children need to keep ties with their birth families. This has led to new ways of handling adoption. One of these new ways is **open adoption**. In an open adoption there may be some contact between the birth and adoptive families. The contact may be only before the adoption takes place, or it may continue for as long as the families want.

**Contact between the families might include**
- sending cards or letters,
- trading pictures,
- exchanging phone calls, or
- visiting.

You can choose to have an open adoption, or you can choose to keep the adoption closed. In a **closed adoption** there is no contact between the families or between the child and the birth family. If you have questions about closed and open adoptions, write them at the end of this chapter and ask your adoption worker.

Sometimes, though, children are freed by both methods. For instance, the child’s mother may agree to termination of her parental rights, but the father cannot be located. In such a case, the agency tries to terminate the father’s rights through the court.

Since it is important to children to be in permanent homes as soon as possible, the agency may ask prospective adoptive parents if they will take the children before they are legally freed for adoption. Because there is some risk for the adoptive family that the courts may not terminate the parent’s rights to a child, this is called a **legal risk placement**. The intent is that the child will be legally freed and the placement will be permanent, but there is a risk that this won’t happen.

Prospective parents may really want to parent a particular child who might not be legally freed. They may pretend that nothing could go wrong with the plan. It is very rare for the termination to fail to take place or for adoptions to be challenged by birth parents, but it is possible.

Your decision about whether to accept a legal risk placement is a very personal one. Your adoption worker will talk with you at length about any situations that involve legal risk placements; you may also find your family attorney or other adoptive parents to be helpful in this decision.
SEARCHING FOR THE BIRTH FAMILY

Some adopted children who do not have open adoptions may want to find their birth families at some time. If this happens, you will be involved. You will have strong feelings about the search, and you may be asked to help the child (who will usually be grown up) to help in the search.

After you have parented a child for a number of years, even though you may know that birth parents or siblings exist and have told the child about them, you will still think of your family as the child’s family. A child’s (or adult’s) wish to find a birth family can be a real threat to you. You may wonder if it means you weren’t enough “family” for the child, that you were never accepted as a parent, or that the child is being disloyal.

Although not all adoptees will want to search for their birth families, it is very normal for some to want to do so. It does not mean that anything is wrong with you, your family, or the way you brought up the child. It simply means that the adoptees recognize the birth family as part of their history and want to know more to “round out” the picture of the past.

When adoptees find their birth families, they may be happy that the missing piece of history has been filled in and not want to keep seeing the birth family. Or the adoptee may carry on a very good and meaningful relationship with the birth family and still keep the relationship with you and the rest of your family. Whatever the case, remember that your place in the adoptee’s life is different from anyone else’s and is very important. You cannot be replaced by anyone else.

The best way you can help is to be confident in your relationship and help children find their pasts in the way they choose.

A FINAL WORD

You have now finished Understanding Adoption: A Guide for Prospective Parents. You may be ready to decide to become an adoptive parent, or you may still want to know more about adoption.

If you want to know more, there are two ways the agency can help you.

Your Caseworker

Your caseworker can arrange a time with you to meet with your family and give you a chance to talk over your concerns and questions.

The Family Assessment Process

A second source of information is the Family Assessment Process. If you take part in the group, you can expect to learn a lot from your group leader and other members of the group, who are also interested in adopting.

The time you spend with your caseworker and in group enables you to be sure you are making the right decision.

If you decide that you want to adopt, you will work with the agency as you go through the next steps toward adoption.

If, on the other hand, you and your family decide not to adopt, we hope you have learned more about yourselves as a result of finishing this guide.

Whatever you choose, we wish you well!
WHAT I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT

_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX

WHAT WE’re LOOKING FOR IN ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Age
An adoptive parent must be an adult. Young people usually aren’t mature enough to cope with the special issues of adopting.

Older adults can adopt if the agency believes they have the physical energy, flexibility, and ability to care for an adopted child.

Marital Status
You don’t have to be married to be an adoptive parent.

If you are married, it is better to have been married long enough (at least a year) to be able to decide if adopting is a good plan. It is important for your marriage to be stable and strong.

Marital History
If either of you has been married before, the agency looks at your current marital relationship as well as your overall marital history. Most important is your current marriage and what makes it work.

We expect to see proof that your previous marriage ended and your current marriage is legal. If you have children from another marriage, we want to see that you are interested in and responsible for them.
Income
You don’t have to be rich to adopt, but you must have enough income to meet your needs and to take care of your family. It is also important to be able to manage money well. We ask for proof of your family income and expenses.

Working Parents
You can adopt if both parents work outside the home. Single parents who work can also adopt. You need to make a plan for child care during the time you are at work.

Health
You must be healthy enough to take on the responsibilities of adopting. All members of your family must have physical exams.

You can adopt if you have a disability or health problems as long as you can still take care of a child. Your doctor should make a report to the agency. The agency makes the final decision on whether to approve you for adoption.

If you have a history of mental illness or addiction, we may ask a specialist to help us in making the decision.

Education
You don’t have to have any particular level of education. It is important that you be able to give stimulation and support in school to make sure that your child can develop natural abilities.

Criminal Record
We check criminal records and child abuse or neglect reports on all applicants. You may be able to adopt if you have a criminal record but not if you have been convicted of a felony for child abuse or neglect; spouse abuse; certain crimes against a child such as pornography, rape, or sexual assault; or homicide.

Extended Family and Friends
You should have supports and relationships with friends and family outside the home.

Recreational
Your family should have activities you do together to relax and have fun.

Community Resources
Your family should know about and be able to use services in your community.

Religion
If birth parents have a religious preference, the agency will honor it if possible.

For older children with strong religious values, we prefer placement in homes that are tolerant of or have values similar to those of the child. You don’t have to go to church to adopt a child.

Family Composition
The agency considers the following factors in selecting an adoptive family.

Two Parents—Two-parent families may be approved.

Single Parents—Single-parent families (unmarried, widowed, or divorced) may be approved to adopt when they can meet the needs of a particular child. Because single parenting often involves special stresses, we look closely at

• age;
• supports available;
• sexual identification;
• health;
• maturity;
• financial security; and
• motivation.
Other Children—We consider the possible effects that any other children or adults in the home might have on the adopted child.

Family Relationships

The following relationships in your family are considered.

Marital Relationship—A healthy marriage is one of mutual acceptance, respect, affection, and sensitivity. Marital partners support one another, communicate well, take pride in one another’s accomplishments, and are sexually compatible. They participate as a family in the community. The marital relationship should not depend on the presence of children for its survival and satisfaction. Adopted children don’t require a perfect couple. All couples have problems. But it is important that a couple know how to work on and solve their problems.

Parental Role—You should be able to love and enjoy children and have feelings of satisfaction from helping children grow and develop in their own special ways. You should also be flexible in your expectations of children and be able to deal with children with problems.

Sibling Relationships—If there are children in the home, they should get along well together and be willing and able to share their space, their time, and their parents with an adopted child.

Family Communication—Family members should be able to talk together about their joys, problems, and concerns. They should be able to make decisions together as a family in a way that shows respect for one another’s feelings, needs, and ideas.

Emotional Maturity

You should be able to show that you

- can give and receive love;

- can be responsible for the care, guidance, and protection of another person;

- can be flexible and change in relation to the needs of others;

- can have and enjoy relationships;

- have a sense of your own identity;

- can cope with reality, including disappointments, frustrations, and normal hazards of life; and

- have an established sense of values and the ability to live by generally accepted moral standards.

Coping Skills Within the Family

Your family must show that it can cope with change and crisis such as loss of significant people, employment, health, money, etc.

Motivation

The desire to be an adoptive parent should be based upon healthy needs, such as the desire

- to accept parental responsibilities,

- to help children,

- to contribute to the growth and development of a child, and

- to love and be loved.

You may be aware of some of your motives and unaware of others. You should not adopt as a way to strengthen a failing marriage, promote some social cause, or deal with grief over the death of a child.

Ability To Work Within the Adoption Program

You must be able to work within the limits of the agency’s adoption program. You should be able to show that you can

- identify with the program’s goals;

- share responsibility with the agency;

- use help and training as needed; and

- accept the child’s heritage and lifelong bond with the birth parents.