

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Adoption: Where Do I Start?

This is an introduction to the many paths to building your family through adoption. It will give you an understanding of the basics in any adoption process and guide you to resources at each step.

Step 1: Educate Yourself

Many resources exist to help prospective adoptive parents educate themselves about adoption.

Local community colleges, adoption exchanges, adoption agencies, hospitals, religious groups, and other organizations may offer adoption preparation programs.

Adoptive parent support groups often are willing to assist people considering adoption. In addition, regional adoption exchanges, local agencies, and State Adoption Program Managers can send you information to help get you started.

There are also many books, magazines, and websites on this topic; some are listed at the end of this factsheet.

Some Places to Go

The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory allows users to search for adoption resources in every State, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands to assist families in their pursuit of adoption.

Step 2: Understand the Law

State laws and regulations govern U.S. adoptions. Learning about the adoption laws in your State, or any States involved with your adoption, can smooth the process and help you avoid frustrating situations.

Some Places to Go

The State Statutes Search on the Information Gateway website highlights adoption topics and provides a brief overview and summaries of State laws on each topic. Information regarding who may adopt, timeframes for consent and revocation of consent to adoption, termination of parental rights laws, and more are provided in the database and can be searched by State, Territory, or region.

In many States, the process to adopt a stepchild is different from other kinds of adoption.

Step 3: Explore Your Options/Select an Agency

Families wishing to adopt have many options. The following is one way to think about how choices in adoption may flow from one another:

Where will our family's child come from? (Domestic or inter-country adoption?)

If we adopt domestically, what type of adoption is best for our family? (Public agency, licensed private agency, independent, or facilitated/unlicensed agency adoption?)

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If we choose inter-country adoption, what country will our child come from? (Hague Convention or non-Hague Convention country? See box below.)

The way you choose to adopt will depend on the characteristics of the child you wish to adopt, how long you are willing to wait for your child, and other concerns.

Some Places to Go

If you choose to adopt a child from another country, you will need to know whether the country from which you plan to adopt is a party to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption. Countries that are parties to the Hague Convention have specific requirements for the adoption process, including the home study, parent training and eligibility, applicable forms, and more. The mission of the Hague Convention is to safeguard the children and parents involved in the adoption process.

Step 4: Complete a Home Study

No matter which type of adoption you choose to pursue, all prospective adoptive parents must have a home study or family study. A home study involves education, preparation, and gathering information about the prospective adoptive parents. This process can take from 2 to 10 months to complete, depending on agency waiting lists and training requirements. States vary regarding home study requirements, so you should check with your State Adoption Program to learn the specific regulations in your State. Inter-country adoption may carry special home study requirements, depending on the country and agency involved.

Step 5: Engage in the Placement Process

Once your home study is completed, you are ready to begin the placement process—the time when a specific child is identified for your family. Depending on the type of adoption you are pursuing, the characteristics of the child or children you are seeking, and a variety of other factors, this process and the time involved in waiting for your child can vary greatly.

If you are pursuing a foster care adoption, you may review information about a number of children who are waiting for families. Your agency may have adoption events, a photo-listing service, TV or video segments describing waiting children, or other ways to let you know about available children waiting for families. You can also view waiting children at the national photo-listing website. You will often have the opportunity for pre-placement visits to get to know a child before he or she moves into your home. Your family may also be able to serve as a resource, foster, or concurrent planning family, working with the agency to support the child's return to his or her birth family as well as being considered as a potential permanent family for the child if reunification does not occur.

If you are pursuing adoption through a licensed private agency, the expectant parents may select your family from among several prospective adoptive families.

If you are pursuing an independent adoption, an attorney or facilitator may help you identify expectant parents, or you may locate them on your own if allowed by State law.

If you are pursuing inter-country adoption, you may review information about your prospective child and may have the opportunity to meet your child in his or her placement setting (foster home or orphanage).

Most adoptions of children from foster care are handled by public child welfare agencies. The national online photo-listing at AdoptUSKids.org provides pictures and general descriptions of children in foster care around the country who are waiting for families.

Step 6: File Necessary Legal Documents

All domestic adoptions need to be finalized in court. The process varies from State to State. Generally a child must have lived with the adoptive family for at least 6 months before the adoption can be legally finalized. During this time, a social worker may visit several times to ensure the child is well cared for and to write up the required court reports. After this period, the agency (or attorney in an independent adoption) will submit a written recommendation of approval of the adoption to the court. You or your attorney can then file with the court to complete the adoption.

For inter-country adoptions, the actual adoption procedure is just one of a series of required legal processes. In addition to the laws of your State, you must also follow the laws of the child's country of origin and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services requirements. If you adopt from a country that participates in the Hague Convention, the process carries further requirements to safeguard the parties involved. The process to finalize the adoption depends on the type of inter-country adoption, the type of visa the child has, and the laws in your State.

Some Places to Go

The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory provides an attorney referral service for each State.

Step 7: Parent Your Child

The final, and most important, step in the adoption process is to be a parent to your adopted child. Adoption is a lifelong process. Your family, like many families, may need support adjusting to life with your new child. Your family and your child may have additional questions at different developmental stages.