

Navigating the Adoption Process

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There are many more decisions to make once you've decided to adopt. Here's a guide to getting through most of them.

Types of Adoption

Whether you hope to adopt from a foreign land or from the other side of town, a lack of information can cost you a lot of money and break your heart. But you're not on your own; American families adopt tens of thousands of babies and young children every year. Here's what you need to know to find the child who's waiting for you.

In 1998, an estimated 70,000 children were adopted in the United States from American birth mothers by nonrelatives. Roughly half were infants, and most of the rest were adopted from foster homes.



But there are more prospective adoptive families than there are healthy babies needing parents -- the increasing acceptance of single motherhood is one factor in this -- so international adoptions are rising. In 1998, about 16,000 children were adopted in the U. S. from other nations; one-quarter of them were from Russia, and another quarter were from mainland China. As many as 60 percent of the children adopted internationally are under 1 year of age, and another 30 percent are between 1 and 4 years old.

Methods of Adoption

If you decide to adopt, you'll have to choose between domestic and international adoption and also among these methods of adoption:

Public. State and county agencies find homes for children who are in foster care or institutions, so this is a good place to start if you're interested in an older child. They're funded by taxpayer money and often can place a child at little or no expense to the adoptive parents.

Private. Nonprofit organizations -- many of them affiliated with churches -- place American and foreign-born children with adoptive families; some work with public agencies to find homes for foster children, but many also place infants. Contact one of those organizations if your heart is set on a baby. They operate on fees and donations.

Independent. An adoption attorney or other intermediary arranges the adoption. To find

a good attorney, join an adoptive-parents group -- or more than one -- and ask them lots of questions. Contact Adoptive Families (800-372-3300) and ask for a copy of the latest Guide to Adoption, which lists support groups. Keep these cautions in mind: Independent adoptions are illegal in some states, and if a child adopted independently has emotional or physical problems, government assistance may not be available.

Other Options

Another factor to consider: Adoptions can be open, semi-open, or closed. In an open adoption, the birth parents and the adoptive family exchange names and addresses and maintain contact. Less information is shared and communication takes place through a third party in a semi-open adoption. In a closed adoption, no identifying information is exchanged, and the records are sealed.

Making Your Choice

Always check with the adoption specialists in your state government. You'll usually find them in the human-services or social services office. Ask if people have complained about the agency you're considering and if it's been penalized for improper actions. Also ask for information about state programs pertaining to adoption subsidies, medical benefits, and reimbursements for expenses. These policies vary from state to state.

International Matters

Finding a reliable agency isn't always easy. You can find agencies on the Internet or in the Yellow Pages of a city phone book, or call Adoptive Families for a thorough list. Also call the attorney general's office in the state where the agency operates and ask if any complaints are on file.

"Anyone going into an international adoption had better hang on and be ready," says U.S. adoption lawyer Candace O'Brien of Florida, who specializes in Bulgarian and Polish adoptions and spends much of her time in Munich, Germany. None of her cases have gone without a hitch. Potential hang-ups include uncertainty about a child's health, "shakedowns" from bureaucrats who want more money, and shifting policies in foreign countries.

Call the ones that seem to match your needs and ask for references; then call those references and quiz them. Improve your chances for a smooth international adoption by asking these questions:

What costs are included in the basic fee?

Will that fee cover your travel costs to the other country? What about travel within that country? Does it pay for translators, accommodations, Immigration and Naturalization Service processing fees, and notarizations?

What if our adoption falls through?

Find out what will happen if someone changes their mind on the other side of the world. If the foreign government temporarily shuts its adoption doors, then what? Get everything in writing that you can, including a description of what other programs will be available through the agency and whether the money you've paid will apply to such programs.

Will we be told about a child's health problems?

Some countries don't allow the adoption of healthy children by foreigners, so the agencies there exaggerate minor health problems. However, it also happens that serious problems are glossed over; once you bring the child to the United States, you are responsible for his health-care expenses from then on. Ask for a complete health history before adopting, and try to get a report on the parents' health, too. If the family has genetic problems, you need to know.

Finally, if you're adopting a child from an orphanage overseas, remember Candace O'Brien's words: "This is not a fairy tale. These children are not coming out of good circumstances; they're coming out of extremely disadvantaged backgrounds. That's why they're in the orphanages."

Fortunately, she has some reassuring news to report, too: "The vast majority of adoptive families are very happy. It usually works out very well."

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