

1. Overview of Adoption

Adoption is a lifelong, life-changing journey for all members of the adoption triad: birth parents, adopted people, and adoptive parents. Adoption, the legal transfer of parental rights from one parent to another, provides children with love, nurturance, and stability and promotes their well-being and their opportunity to become healthy, productive adults.

In the United States adoption is governed by State law, although State law must comply with overarching [Federal legislation](#).

Adoption is essential for the permanency of many children, including:

- Children and youth in foster care who will not be reunited with their birth parents. In many cases these children are adopted by other birth relatives.
- Other U.S. infants and children whose birth parents make adoption plans for them. Birth mothers or fathers may or may not have ongoing contact with the adoptive family or child.
- Children in other countries who need families. In intercountry adoptions, little or no information may be known about a child's birth family at the time of adoption.

Public agencies place foster children for adoption. Private agencies sometimes contract with the public child welfare agency to place foster children; they also may place U.S. infants, or children from other countries. In some States, facilitators (attorneys, physicians, or other intermediaries) may coordinate adoptions without an agency's involvement.

Research demonstrates that most children who are adopted thrive. With training and support, the most ordinary people have grown into their roles as adoptive parents with amazing results. These parents clearly show that adoption is one path to the love, stability, and nurturing all children need.

2. Types of Adoption

Most adoptions in the United States fall into one of three main categories, each of which requires somewhat different services and skills from the adoption worker:

- The adoption of children from the public foster care system by foster caregivers, kin, or adoptive parents chosen by the agency for the child
- The domestic adoption of infants who reside in the United States and are adopted through private adoption agencies or independently (depending on State law)
- Intercountry adoption of infants and children from other countries by U.S. citizens

Much of the discussion that follows applies to all three types of adoption. In some cases, especially those involving intercountry adoption, there will be less opportunity for the adoption worker to receive and provide information and services to the birth family, the adoptive family, or the child.

3. Family Assessment

Assessment of the family is one of the earliest steps in the adoption process for the worker and the family. Often, this process is called the "home study." It is a mutual process by which the worker and a prospective adoptive family determine the family's appropriateness and readiness for adoption. The assessment process is strengths-based, with the intent to *screen in* applicants. It often includes:

- The relationship-building between the family and the worker or agency
- The adoption education and development of families
- The exploration of values, expectations, and motivations
- The family self-assessment of strengths and limitations
- The preparation of the family for placement
- The agency's and worker's determination of the safety and well-being of the prospective family placement for the children (Rycus and Hughes, 1998)

Agencies use a variety of assessment tools and opportunities, including individual and family interviews; preservice training and other group sessions; written autobiographies; and collateral contacts through references, credit reports, physical and mental health evaluations, driving records, and criminal record checks. The assessment will vary depending on the jurisdiction and the type of adoption, but its components will be similar. Often, the final assessment or home study is shared with the family.

Prospective families should be assessed within their cultural context. Thus, adoption workers should strive to be culturally competent, so that they can relate to persons from diverse cultures in a sensitive, respectful, and productive way. To reduce the chance of misassessment, workers must consider different communication and interaction styles, nonverbal behaviors, differences in the use and meaning of specific words and phrases, family roles and relationships, and home environments.

What areas are assessed? Unlike home studies of the past (where the actual home was the focus), assessments consider personal and family characteristics that have been correlated with successful parenting of adopted children. Those include:

- The ability to provide safety and permanency for the child
- The motivation for and expectations of adoption
- The personal and emotional maturity
- The stability and quality of interpersonal relationships
- The resilience, coping skills, and history of stress management
- The ability to adapt
- Parenting skills and abilities
- Empathy
- The belief that adoptive parents have full rights and responsibilities to parent a child not born to them
- The ability to provide "hands-on" parenting
- The willingness to make a lifelong commitment
- **What are the outcomes of a family assessment?** The final phase of the family assessment is to formalize the assessment's conclusions and plan next steps. Because the family assessment is a collaborative process, the formal approval should evolve as part of the discussions between the worker and family and will, in most cases, be mutually determined by the family and agency.

The possible outcomes from a family assessment include:

- **The family is approved for adoption.** This approval should include the age, sex, number, and type of child(ren) for which the prospective parent(s) is most suited. The family should be notified in writing and given information regarding their next steps. Families need to understand that receiving approval for adoption in general does not necessarily mean they are approved to adopt a specific child.
- **The family is deferred.** The family is not ready for adoption at this time. This decision may be made by either the family or the worker. It may be due to current circumstances (e.g., an unexpected pregnancy, health problem, or job change), unresolved issues from the past, or unclear or unrealistic expectations. If the worker makes the decision, the worker should provide the family with written documentation and offer concrete suggestions and referral sources to help rectify the situation. An open invitation may be left for the family to return to the agency when they are ready to move forward.
- **The family is inappropriate to adopt.** The worker has determined that the family is ineligible to adopt because they cannot provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment for an adopted child. This may include such factors as a felony record, active substance abuse, chronic mental instability or pathology, sexual disorders, or a substantiated history of abusing or neglecting children. The worker should provide the family with written documentation of this decision, citing specific examples.

Deciding not to approve families is often difficult for most workers, so it is important to provide concrete, documented reasons why they are not being approved. These reasons should be linked directly to the parenting of an adopted child. Remember, denying or deferring a prospective family may prevent an adoption disruption or dissolution for a child in the future.

4. Matching Families and Children

The goal of a careful matching process is to ensure the most appropriate fit between the needs of the child and the strengths of the family. In the case of domestic infant adoption or placement of children from foster care, matching is the task of reviewing the assessments of prospective families along with those of available children to determine the best family to provide safety, permanency, and well being for a specific child or sibling group.

The selection of a potential adoptive family should be a collaborative effort between the child's social worker, foster parents or current caretakers, the adoptive family's assessment worker, adoptive parents, other professionals, and, in some instances, the birth family and the child. In seeking families for children, workers should first explore families to which the child already has some attachment (e.g., relatives or current or previous foster caregivers). This may be particularly important for older youth. If no appropriate resources for the child exist within the child's current network, "matched" families (nonrelative families unknown to the child) should be considered to meet the child's needs for adoptive placement.

In intercountry adoption, there may be fewer opportunities for matching by the adoption worker. In some cases, the selection and matching may be done in the child's birth country rather than by the U.S. agency. Some agencies provide referrals so that the U.S. agency selects the child to be offered to a family. The family then accepts the referral or waits for another referral.

What makes a good match? Consider the following factors:

- Does the family have the skills, abilities, knowledge, and desire to parent the child?
- Does the family possess the emotional and financial resources to meet the child's needs? Do they know how to access them?
- Is the family's lifestyle compatible with that of the child?
- Does the family have specific experience with needs similar to those of the child?
- Are the parents willing to learn more about caring for this child's needs?
- Does the family feel that this is the right child for them and that their existing structure can grow and adapt to meet the child's needs?
- Does the family have a network of family, friends, and professionals to provide emotional support for the adoption?

There is a range of possibilities between a good and poor match. In most matches, the family is a good match for some of the child's issues, a minimal match for some, and a poor match for others. It is imperative that the family be a good match for the child's *most critical needs or issues*. Additionally, prospective parents should be highly motivated to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to meet all the child's needs.

5. Birth Parent Involvement

Regardless of the circumstances that led to the placement of a child for adoption, many birth parents desire to be involved in the adoptive planning for their children. Traditionally, birth parents involved in voluntary placements have been allowed more active participation and decision-making responsibility than in nonvoluntary placements. These parents are often involved in preplacement counseling and planning, the provision of medical and social history, the selection of an adoptive family (a relatively new development), the determination of the level of ongoing contact with the adoptive family, and activities to help children understand the transition to adoption.

Current adoption practice may include similar kinds of birth family involvement, even in cases of nonvoluntary placement. Nonadversarial adoption planning is in the best interests of the child and the birth family. If appropriate, birth parents who did not voluntarily place their children may still have an important role in the provision of medical and social history, the placement process, providing necessary closure for the child, decision-making about future contact, and beginning their own grieving process.

Birth parent services. Most birth parents grieve the loss of their role as the child's primary parents. In many types of adoption, there are services to help birth parents. Depending on the adoption worker's role and the type of agency, services to birth parents may be integral to the adoption process (as with many private agencies), may be conducted by child welfare workers (as with some public and private agencies), or may be essentially nonexistent (as with many intercountry placements or private adoptions completed without the involvement of a social services agency). The goals of these services are to:

- Empower birth parents to have as much input as possible in plans for their child
- Assist the birth parents in maintaining their dignity and self-worth throughout the adoption process
- Ensure that the main focus is the child and his or her best interests
- Help birth parents make responsible decisions throughout pregnancy, parenting, or adoption planning

- Acknowledge the parental role in cases of involuntary placement and to garner their assistance in gathering pertinent information, preparing the child, and assisting the agency in adoption planning for the child
- Facilitate communication (and mediation, if necessary) among members of the birth parents' extended families and between birth and adoptive families, as appropriate
- Help the birth parent understand, accept, and manage the pain of an adoption decision, whether that decision is made by the parent or by the court.