

Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adopted Child



Making the decision to adopt a child can be a wonderful, yet complicated process. In any type of adoption, it is important to obtain as much thorough and accurate medical, genetic, and social history information as you can about your prospective child. This important background information is useful for several reasons:

What's Inside:

- Questions to ask your adoption agency or organization
- Reasons some information may not be available
- Where to find more information



Use your smartphone to
access this factsheet online.



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<http://www.childwelfare.gov>

- It helps you consider whether you have the emotional and financial resources to meet your child or youth's special needs. For some parents, there can never be enough information to make this decision with absolute certainty. Your adoption professional can help you process the information in light of your family's needs and priorities.
- It may enable you to access Federal or State adoption subsidies available for children with special needs.
- It provides an opportunity for your child to develop an accurate sense of his or her own history.
- It provides an opportunity for early diagnosis, treatment, and intervention for developmental or medical conditions.

Questions to Ask Your Adoption Agency or Organization

Asking questions and listening carefully to the responses, and reviewing written information will help you better understand what it would be like to live with your prospective child. The questions you ask and the information you receive will depend to some degree on the child's age. With an infant, the birth parents' health history, particularly the birth mother's prenatal history, will be most important. With an older child, seek more comprehensive information (including social, placement, trauma, developmental, educational, and mental health histories). If the child has been in foster care, the questions you

ask may be much more complex. For intercountry adoptions, receiving answers to many of these questions is unlikely because much of the information is unknown.

During the adoption process, it's important to be aware of your family's decision-making style and how much information you'll need to make a confident adoption decision. Keeping the following questions in mind when learning about a child's background information may be helpful:

- What would a child with this history believe about him/herself?
- What would a child with this history believe about parents/caretakers/the world?
- What types of behaviors should I expect from a child with this history?
- How will this child fit in with the rest of our family?
- What special skills, abilities, or resources might be necessary to parent this particular child (e.g., medical knowledge or skills, accessible housing, special cultural or parenting training)? Do I have those skills, or can I learn them?

The Minnesota Department of Health and Human Services published factsheets to help prepare adoptive parents for their child's future by understanding his or her social and medical history.

Understanding Your Child's Social and Medical History provides information about what to expect from adoption service providers and tips for inquiring about information that may be missing:

<http://www.mnadopt.org/Factsheets/Understanding%20Child%20Social%20&%20Medical%20History.pdf>

Questions to Ask Former Care Providers in Special Needs Adoption lists potential questions prospective adoptive parents may want to ask former care providers and tips for parents and children who have experienced adoption disruption:

<http://www.mnadopt.org/Factsheets/Questions%20to%20Ask%20Former%20Caregiver.pdf>

Laws pertaining to the disclosure of information about adopted persons vary from State to State. Child Welfare Information Gateway's State Statute series provides more information on State-specific disclosure requirements. *Collection of Family Information About Adopted Persons and Their Birth Families* is available on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website: http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/collection.cfm

To find statute information for a particular State, visit: http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/index.cfm

Questions About the Child's Medical and Family History

- How complete is the social/medical history on the birth family, including extended family? What is missing? Is it possible to get more information?
- What is the birth family's racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious background?
- Is the family of American Indian or Alaska Native heritage?
- What is the general physical description of the child's birth parents, siblings, and other close relatives? Are there pictures? (Attempt to get pictures of a child's birth parents and relatives whenever possible, because this will enable you to answer the questions frequently asked by adopted children: "What did my birth parents look like?")
- Who does the child look like in the birth family?
- Is there a family history of drug or alcohol abuse? If yes, explain.
- Is there a family history of mental illness or other genetic conditions, or predispositions to diseases such as diabetes or heart disease? If yes, what conditions?
- What was the age and cause of death of close relatives in the birth family?
- What is known about the birth parents' developmental history—physically, emotionally, cognitively, including language development?
- What is known about the educational background of the birth parents and the child's siblings?
- What are the special skills, abilities, talents, or interests of birth parents and family members?
- Are there letters, pictures, videotapes, or gifts from the birth family? If so, may we have them?
- What was the birth mother's health like during pregnancy, and what was the health of each parent at the time of the child's birth?

- What prenatal care did the child receive, and what was his or her condition at birth?
- When did he or she achieve developmental milestones, and have there been any developmental assessments reflecting deviation from typical development?
- Are there prior medical, dental, psychological, or psychiatric examinations and/or diagnoses for this child? What were the results?
- Are there records of any immunizations and/or health care received while the child was in out-of-home care? Please make copies for us.
- What is the child's current need for medical, dental, developmental, psychological, or psychiatric care?
- What is the child's HIV status?
- How many placements did the child experience, where and with whom (e.g., relatives, foster families, residential treatment facilities, hospitals)? What were the reasons for any placement changes? What does the child remember about his or her placement experiences? What does the child believe about why he or she moved from one caregiver to another? (The child's belief may or may not be accurate, but it is important to understand a child's perception of his or her history.)
- Where is the child currently enrolled and what is his or her performance at school?
- What are the results of any educational testing? Does the child have any special educational needs or outstanding abilities?
- Are there significant events (early separations, multiple caretakers, abuse/neglect) in the child's life that could affect his or her capacity to relate to a new family?
- What are the past and existing relationships in the child's life with people he or she has regularly lived with or visited (e.g., siblings, birth parents, foster parents, teachers, therapists, nurses)? How has the child responded to visits with these persons in the past? If future contact is planned with any of them, how often does it occur? Who is

“It is important to be able to access as much information as possible about your child. Knowing about his or her medical history and family background, as well as interests and aptitudes, can prepare you to be a better parent. Adoption is a lifetime decision, and you should have as much information about your child's early life as possible.” —*Adoptive Parent*

Questions About the Child's Social and Placement History

- Why did the birth parents make an adoption plan for the child, or why was the child removed from his or her birth family?
- Did the child suffer any physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect? How old was he or she? How often did these traumas occur? Who were the perpetrators of the abuse?

responsible for seeing that it happens?
How will our adoptive family be involved in these visits?

- What are the child's strengths? What activities does he or she enjoy? What are his or her talents, interests, or hobbies?

Reasons Why Some Information May Not Be Available

While your adoption agency or organization is required to provide you with all the available information on your prospective child, sometimes information is simply unavailable. The reasons some information may not be available are varied and complex.

- **Complex Family Histories.** Children in foster care often have complicated family histories that may be difficult to trace and document.
- **Gaps in Recordkeeping.** Children in foster care may have had multiple foster placements; foster families may no longer work for an agency; recordkeeping may vary, and workers may have moved on.
- **Intercountry Adoptions.** The only source of information in intercountry adoptions may be the agency, orphanage, and/or adoption facilitator in the country of origin. There may be no (or very limited) information about a child's birth family.
- **Limitations in Knowledge.** Children who have been abused may not feel comfortable talking about the abuse until

they are in a safe, stable environment. Indeed, an adoptive parent may be the very first person a child feels comfortable talking to about an incident of abuse. Additionally, many American Indian or Alaska Native children may not be aware of their heritage, membership, or potential membership in a Tribe.

Where to Find More Information

Adopting parents can gain a more complete sense of their prospective child or youth when they have the most complete picture of his or her past experiences. There are several options for obtaining this important background information. In this digital age, many adopting families are turning to Facebook and other forms of social media to learn more about their child. Information found on birth families' Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and other accounts might help you better understand your prospective child's family history. Talk with your adoption services provider about any information you encounter via social media. Some intercountry adoption programs, such as Holt's *Wordless Wednesdays* (<http://holtinternational.org/blog/2012/06/wordless-wednesdays/>), offer blogs with more information about the type of children placed through their programs.

Child Welfare Information Gateway also provides several information-gathering resources:

The National Foster Care and Adoption Directory allows you to search for foster care and adoption resources by State: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>

Find State child welfare agencies in all 50 States and the District of Columbia:

http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004EContains

Access to Adoption Records: Summary of State Laws: http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm

Child Welfare Information Gateway's How To Adopt web section provides an array of information and resources about adoption, including a list of recommended books and journal articles you can find at your local library, bookstore, or download onto your e-reader: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/>

Don't be afraid to ask your adoption agency or organization any and all questions you have, because obtaining the answers to these questions can help you become the best possible parent to your prospective child.

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