

The Adoption Home Study Process



The laws of every State and the District of Columbia require all prospective adoptive parents (no matter how they intend to adopt) to participate in a home study. This process has three purposes:

- Educate and prepare the adoptive family for adoption
- Evaluate the fitness of the adoptive family

What's Inside:

- Elements of the home study process
- The home study report
- Common concerns about the home study

- Gather information about the prospective parents that will help a social worker connect the family with a child whose needs they can meet

With accurate information about the process, prospective parents can face the home study experience with confidence and the excitement that should accompany the prospect of welcoming a child into the family. It may be helpful to remember that agencies are not looking for perfect parents. Rather, they are looking for a good match between a child's needs and a family's ability to meet those needs.

Specific home study requirements and processes vary greatly from agency to agency, State to State, and (in the case of intercountry adoption) by the child's country of origin. They are also subject to change. This factsheet discusses the common elements of the home study process and addresses some concerns prospective adoptive parents may have about the process.

If you are just beginning your journey to adoption, you may find useful information in Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Adoption: Where Do I Start?* www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_start.cfm

Information Gateway also offers the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, a searchable database listing public and licensed private agencies, attorney referral services, support groups, State adoption specialists, and more, for each State, Territory, and the District of Columbia: www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad

These resources, as well as factsheets with specific information about various

types of adoption (such as foster care or intercountry), can be found on the Information Gateway website: www.childwelfare.gov

Elements of the Home Study Process

There is no single format that adoption agencies use to conduct home studies. Many agencies include the following steps in their home study process, although the specific details and order will vary. For more information, talk with the agencies you are considering.

Orientation

Many agencies offer an initial informational session or orientation that provides an overview of the process and their agency. These generally are free, do not carry any obligation, and are a good way to find out about the agency, their process, the children available, and if the agency would be a good fit for you and your family.

Training

Many agencies require trainings for prospective adoptive parents prior to or during the home study process. These trainings help prospective parents better understand the needs of children waiting for families, adoption issues, and agency requirements. They can help families decide what type of child or children they could parent most effectively.

Interviews

You will probably be interviewed several times by a social worker. These interviews help you develop a relationship with your social worker that will enable him or her to better understand your family and assist you with an appropriate placement. You will discuss the topics to be covered in the home study report (see below). You will likely be asked to give examples of your experiences with children, your important relationships, your approach to parenting, and how you handle stress and past experiences of crisis or loss, including discussions about infertility, which is a topic of concern for many adoptive families. You and your social worker will discuss what age of child would best fit in your family, whether a sibling group would work well, and other important characteristics you would be willing to accept in a child. Again, this should be both a self-reflective process and a time to educate yourself about issues with which you may not yet be familiar. With couples, some agency workers conduct all of the interviews with both prospective parents together. Others will conduct both joint and individual interviews. If families have adult children living outside the home, they also may be interviewed during this process. It is important to be honest with the social worker and yourself about your own strengths and limitations.

Home Visit

Home visits primarily serve to ensure that your home offers a safe environment for a child and meets State licensing standards (e.g., working smoke alarms, safe storage of firearms, safe water, pools covered/fenced, and adequate space for each child). Your

home should be free from hazards and offer a child-friendly environment for the age range for which you are being licensed. For example, poisons and household cleaners should be in cupboards with childproof locks, window drape cords should not hang within reach, firearms should be inaccessible to children, etc. Some States require an inspection from local health and fire departments in addition to the visit by the social worker.

Generally, agencies will require the social worker to view all areas of the house or apartment, including where the children will sleep, the basement, and the backyard. He or she will be looking for how you plan to accommodate a new family member (or members, if you are planning to adopt a sibling group). Social workers are not typically inspecting your housekeeping standards. A certain level of order is necessary, but some family clutter is expected. A comfortable, child-friendly environment is what is being sought.

If you are planning to adopt a child from another country (intercountry adoption), 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 Intercountry Adoption. If it is, your home study will be subject to Hague Convention requirements. These requirements mandate which agencies or service providers may conduct your home study, what statements must be included about your parent training and eligibility, and how the home study must be submitted to the Central Authority for adoption in the country from which you plan to adopt.

- Find a list of countries that are parties to the Hague Convention on the U.S. Department of State website: www.adoption.state.gov/hague/overview/countries.html
- Read Information Gateway's factsheet *Intercountry Adoption From Hague Convention and Non-Hague Convention Countries*: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/hague.cfm

Health Statements

Most agencies require prospective adoptive parents to have a recent physical exam and a statement from a physician confirming that they are essentially healthy, have a normal life expectancy, and are physically

and mentally able to handle the care of a child.

If you have a medical condition that is under control (for instance, high blood pressure or diabetes that is controlled by diet and medication), you may still be approved as an adoptive family. A serious health problem that affects life expectancy may prevent approval. If your family has sought counseling or treatment for a mental health condition in the past, you may be asked to provide information or reports from those visits. Many agencies view seeking help as a sign of strength; the fact that your family obtained such help should not, in and of itself, preclude you from adopting. However, each family's situation is unique, so check with the agencies or social workers you are considering if you have concerns.

Income Statements

You do not have to be rich to adopt. You do have to show you can manage your finances responsibly and adequately. Some countries may have specific income requirements for intercountry adoption. Usually, prospective parents are asked to verify their income by providing copies of paycheck stubs, W-4 forms, or income tax forms. Many agencies also ask about savings, insurance policies (including health coverage for the adopted child)¹, investments, and debts.

¹ The booklet *Protections for Newborns, Adopted Children, and New Parents* from the Employee Benefits Security Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, notes that parents should enroll their child in their insurance policy within 30 days of their placement or adoption to ensure coverage (www.dol.gov/ebsa/pdf/newborns.pdf). The Employee Benefits Security Administration (www.dol.gov/ebsa/aboutebsa) has oversight over employer-offered insurance benefits and may be able to answer families' questions.

Background Checks

All States require criminal and child abuse record checks for adoptive and foster parent applicants. In many States, local, State, and Federal clearances are required. Fingerprints may be taken as well.

Public and private agencies must comply with State and Federal laws and policies regarding licensing requirements and how the findings of background checks affect eligibility for adoptive parents. However, do not hesitate to talk to social workers and agencies you are considering about specific situations that might disqualify you from adopting. Agencies will consider your past experiences as well as how you dealt with them, what you've learned from them, and how you would use that knowledge in parenting a child. Some agencies may be able to work with your family, depending on the specific incident and its resolution. If the social worker finds you to be deceptive or dishonest, however, or if the documents collected during the home study process expose inconsistencies, the agency may not approve your home study.

Autobiographical Statement

Many adoption agencies ask prospective adoptive parents to write an autobiographical statement or story. This is, essentially, the story of your life. It helps the social worker understand your family better and assists him or her in writing the home study report (see below). If you are working with an agency that practices openness in adoption, you also may be asked to write a letter or create an album or scrapbook about your family to be shared with expectant parents who are considering placing their

child for adoption, to help them choose an adoptive family. You may also be asked to prepare a similar album for children, if you are considering adopting children older than infants.

While writing about yourself may seem difficult, the exercise is intended to provide information about you to the agency, as well as to help you explore issues related to parenting and adoption. Some agencies have workers available to assist you with the writing. Most have a set of questions to guide you through writing your autobiography.

References

The agency will probably ask you for names, addresses, and telephone numbers of three or four people who will serve as references for you. References help the social worker form a more complete picture of your family and support network.

If possible, references should be people who have known you for years, who have seen you in many situations, and who have visited your home and know of your interest in and involvement with children. Most agencies require that references be people who are not related to you. Good choices might include close friends, an employer, a former teacher, a coworker, a neighbor, or your pastor, minister, rabbi, or leader of your faith community (if applicable).

Approval would rarely be denied on the grounds of a single negative reference. However, if it were one of several negative factors, or if several references were negative, the agency might be unable to approve the adoption.

The Home Study Report

Typically, the above steps conclude with the writing of a home study report that reflects the social worker's findings. Home study reports often are used to introduce your family to other agencies or adoption exchanges (services that list children waiting for families) to assist in matching your family with a waiting child.

In addition to the above-mentioned health and income statements, background checks, and references, home study reports also include the following types of information:

- **Family background:** descriptions of the applicants' childhoods, how they were parented, past and current relationships with parents and siblings, key events and losses and what was learned from them
- **Education/employment:** applicants' current educational levels, satisfaction with their educational achievements, any plans to further their education, as well as their employment status, history, plans, and satisfaction with their current jobs
- **Relationships:** If applicants are a couple, the report may cover their history together as well as their current relationship (for example, how they make decisions, solve problems, communicate, and show affection). Single applicants will be asked about their social life and how they anticipate integrating a child into it, as well as about their network of relatives and friends.
- **Daily life:** routines, such as a typical weekday or weekend, plans for child care (if applicants work outside the home), hobbies, and interests
- **Parenting:** applicants' past experiences with children (for example, their own, relatives' children, neighbors, volunteer work, babysitting, teaching, or coaching), in addition to their plans regarding discipline and other parenting issues
- **Neighborhood:** descriptions of the applicants' neighborhood, including safety and proximity to community resources
- **Religion/belief system:** information about the applicants' religion, level of religious practice (if applicable), and the kind of religious upbringing, if any, they plan to provide for the child
- **Feelings about/readiness for adoption:** There may be a section on specific adoption issues, including why the applicants want to adopt, feelings about infertility (if this is an issue), what kind of child they might best parent and why, and how they plan to talk to their children about adoption issues. There will likely be questions about how the applicants feel about birth families and the level of openness with the birth family that would work best, depending on the type of adoption. (Note: It is very typical for families' feelings about openness to change throughout the home study process, as they learn more and become more comfortable with the issues involved.) For more information, read *Information Gateway's Openness in Adoption: A Factsheet for Families*: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm

- **Approval/recommendation:** The home study report will conclude with a summary and the social worker's recommendation. This often includes the age range and number of children for which the family is recommended.

Technology is changing how some agencies conduct home studies. Many records are now kept electronically. Families may choose to create an electronic album or Facebook page to share with potential birth parents in an infant adoption or to introduce their family to children or youth waiting for families in the foster care system.

Applicants also will be asked to provide copies of birth certificates, marriage licenses or certificates, and divorce decrees, if applicable. Some agencies share the home study with prospective parents; others do not. You may want to ask the agency about the confidentiality of the home study report and how extensively your information will be shared. Agency policies vary greatly, depending on the type of agency and type of adoption. In many cases, the information will be shared with other agencies to help unite your family with the child you are best able to parent. In some cases, the information may be shared with birth parents or others.

Common Concerns About the Home Study

How Long Will the Home Study Take?

The time it takes to conduct the home study will vary from agency to agency, depending on factors such as how many social workers are assigned to conduct home studies, what other duties they have, how many other people applied to the agency at the same time, and when any required trainings are offered. On average, a home study process takes 3 to 6 months to complete. The time will depend on you as well. You can help speed the process by filling out your paperwork, scheduling your medical appointments, and gathering the required documents without delay.

How Much Does a Home Study Cost?

The cost of the home study depends on the kind of adoption you are pursuing. Agencies conducting domestic adoptions of children from foster care (such as your local department of social services) may not charge a fee for the home study. If these agencies do charge a fee, they often are modest (\$300 to \$500), and once you adopt a child from foster care the fee is usually reimbursed.

A private agency or certified social worker in private practice might charge from \$1,000 to \$3,000 for the home study. Other services (such as an application fee and preplacement services) may be included

in this fee. Be sure to discuss any fees thoroughly and ask for this information in writing to avoid any misunderstandings.

For more information about costs of adoption and resources to help defray those costs, see the Adoption Expenses section of the Information Gateway website:

www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/expenses.cfm

What Might Disqualify Our Family From Adopting?

Aside from a criminal record or overriding safety concerns that would preclude agencies from approving your home study, the decision to qualify or disqualify a family is made on a case-by-case basis. Remember, agencies are not looking for perfect families. The home study process is a way for a social worker to learn more about your *real* family, as a potential home for *real* children. It is also an opportunity for you to explore adoption issues and what types of children you can best parent, with the social worker's help.

Who may adopt varies from agency to agency, State to State, and by the child's country of origin. Adoptions in the United States are governed by Federal, State, and local laws, regulations, and policies. Child Welfare Information Gateway has compiled States' laws regarding who may adopt in *Who May Adopt, Be Adopted, or Place a Child for Adoption?* www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/parties.cfm

Within State guidelines, many agencies are looking for ways to rule families *in* rather than rule them *out*, in order to meet the needs of children in the U.S. foster care system waiting for adoptive families. Many States also have their policies posted online. Information Gateway's *State Child Welfare Agency Websites* has links to each State's online adoption information: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E

How Will the Children in Our Family Be Involved in the Home Study?

Your children (whether they joined your family through birth, foster care, adoption, or marriage) will be included in the home study in some way. Older children may be invited to participate in age-appropriate groups during one or more of the educational sessions. They also might be asked to write a statement describing their feelings and preferences about having a new brother or sister.

The social worker will likely want to know how the children do in school, what their interests and hobbies are, what their friends are like, and how their behavior is rewarded or disciplined. However, the emphasis will more likely be on how the children see a new sibling (or siblings) fitting into the family and whether they are prepared to share your time and attention. Children's input is usually quite important in the overall assessment of a family's readiness to adopt a child. The social worker will want to be sure that an adopted child or children will be welcomed and loved by all family members.

Conclusion

Although the adoption home study process may seem invasive or lengthy, it is conducted to help you decide whether adoption is right for your family, to prepare your family for adoption, and to help your family determine the type of child you could best parent. The process also serves to ensure that children are matched with families who can meet their needs in loving, caring, healthy, and safe environments so that there is a good match between the child's needs and the family's capacity.

Flexibility and a sense of humor are vital characteristics when raising children, and they can be useful during the home study process as well. With perseverance and a positive outlook, you will be able to team with the social worker to make this a valuable learning experience—one that will help you do the best possible job in parenting the child who will eventually join your family.

Thousands of children in the U.S. foster care system are waiting for families. The **AdoptUsKids** website (www.adoptuskids.org) provides a national photolisting of children in foster care (En Español: www.adopte1.org). Information Gateway offers a complete listing of *State Child Welfare Agency Websites*: http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp_website.cfm?rs_ID=16&rate_chno=AZ-0004E