



## **CHOOSING TO ADOPT**

### **Dr. Sarah Springer**

The decision to add a child to the family is always one full of joy and anticipation, mixed with a healthy dose of anxiety. When planning to add that child through adoption, there are many more decisions that need to be made before a child is actually on the way. Prospective parents are wise to do their homework carefully, so that the child they eventually bring home will be exactly the one meant for their family.

Families considering adopting need to first decide what kind of adoption they want to pursue, considering both the adoption process involved, and the needs that different children present. Three decisions are a good starting place – whether to adopt a newborn or older infant or child, from this country or another country, and of the same race as the parents, or of a different race. *All* adopted children will need help from their parents with issues related to identity and birth family questions, but additional issues will be determined by which combination of these three variables a family chooses, and the individual life experiences of the child. Adoption process issues (such as overall cost, length of process, travel, certainty of a placement, timing of birthparent parental rights terminations, etc) are also different for the different types of adoptions. Issues that are acceptable to one family may not be to the next, so it is important to consider these carefully before going any further with an adoption.

Many families want to adopt a healthy newborn, for the obvious benefit of getting to parent the child right from birth. In the US, however, there are far fewer healthy newborns available for adoption than there are families hoping to adopt them. Prospective parents can work with a licensed agency or adopt privately, but in most cases, birthparents choose the adoptive parents for their children, so parents may be chosen to adopt a child after a very short time, or may search for years for a child to adopt, but never find one. Most domestic newborn adoptions now involve some degree of openness (meaning that birthparents and adoptive parents share identifying information, and birthparents are involved in some way in the child's life over time). Many prospective parents initially fear this option, but it is well worth learning more, and many families find that the benefits for the child far outweigh any initial reservations. Adoption laws vary from state to state, so adopting across state lines requires very careful attention to compliance with interstate laws, and should always be done by a competent adoption attorney. Birthparent relinquishment and rights termination times also vary from state to state, so adopting parents need to know how long the possibility of a changed decision looms for a child from a particular state.

Children adopted outside of the newborn period come with a history, which may be happy, or terribly unhappy. Children who have experienced adversity of any sort will not simply leave their baggage at the door of the new adoptive home, and will need help from their adoptive parents to deal with past experiences. Older infants and children available in the US have usually experienced abuse, neglect, and/or multiple changes in living circumstances. Most children available for adoption outside of the US are older infants and children, and most have experienced malnutrition, institutional living, and neglect, and sometimes abuses as well.

These children can and do become happy thriving members of their new families, but helping them to reach that point can require extra work on the part of the adopting parents, sometimes with professional help.

Children who are of a different race than their adoptive parents, or who come from another country and culture, also require special parenting attention. Adopting parents need to carefully explore their own understanding of race and racism, and recognize that adopting a child of a different race or culture will make them an inter-racial and intercultural family. Prospective parents need to think carefully about the racial diversity of their community, and how the child will be accepted in their community and in their extended families. Parents will need to bring their child's culture into their family life, developing friendships and finding role models with people of their child's background. There are many more minority and mixed-race infants available for adoption in the US than Caucasian infants, so parents who are able to accept the challenges of transracial parenting may find this to be a good option.

Finally, many adoptions involve some travel. Almost all international adoptions involve one or more trips to the child's birth country. This not only adds expense to the process, but can involve some rigorous travel to less developed parts of the world, including accommodations and travel arrangements that don't always happen as planned, and risks for infections not commonly seen here in the US. Parents traveling internationally to adopt a child need to be able to "go with the flow." They should also consult a physician regarding appropriate immunizations and other precautions, according to the part of the world where they will be traveling; this is best started many months before the actual travel. This travel can be a wonderful opportunity to learn more about the child's country and culture, but may not be the right choice for parents who are afraid to fly, who can't deal with unexpected changes or different food and lodging conditions than they are used to, or who have significant health problems. Different countries have different specifications as to who can adopt their children, so families will also need to research from which countries they are eligible to adopt.

Once these decisions have been made, then a family can begin looking for an agency or attorney. It is always best to work with an attorney who specializes in adoptions, not a friend who has never done an adoption before. When looking for an agency, look for a licensed agency, with good references from families who have used them in the past. (*See list at end of document.*) Families can use an agency based in any state, as long as they have a homestudy done by a social worker licensed in their state. Specific homestudy requirements vary between states, but must at the minimum document that prospective parents have adequate personal and financial resources to raise a child, and don't have criminal or child abuse records (minor past criminal offenses will be okay, and families don't have to be wealthy – just not on the verge of bankruptcy!). A good homestudy will, however, also include lots of education for the prospective parents, on basic adoption issues, and on the specific issues for the type of adoption a family is pursuing. The more required reading and learning, the better, because families will be far better prepared to meet the unique needs of the child they adopt.

Once a family has a referral of a specific child, they can consult with an adoption medical specialist to review the information, learn what it all means for the child's future, what additional information needs to be gathered, and what short and long-term care will be needed to meet the child's needs. A solid understanding of these issues is essential before a family makes a decision to adopt a particular child. There are a growing number of adoption medical specialists around the country, who can be located through the American Academy of

Pediatrics Section on Adoption and Foster Care, at [www.aap.org/sections/adoption](http://www.aap.org/sections/adoption). Many of these physician consults will also include availability by phone while the family is traveling, which can be a comfort for nervous new parents. Once a child arrives home, a medical evaluation will be needed, with attention to the child's unique needs, based on the prior circumstances and risks. This can be done through the family's regular pediatrician or family doctor, or with the same pediatrician who provided the pre-adoption medical review. Ongoing medical care for all adopted children needs to address the unique issues of adoption, in addition to routine care.

Armed with knowledge and careful planning, families should find the adoption process to be an exciting adventure, and the gateway to a very happy family life.

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## **Good information Resources for Prospective Adoptive Families**

### Books and publications:

Adoptive Families Magazine: [www.adoptivefamilies.com](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com)

Tapestry Books: [www.tapestrybooks.com](http://www.tapestrybooks.com)

EMK Press: [www.emkpress.com](http://www.emkpress.com)

### Adoption organizations:

North American Council on Adoptable Children: [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org)

Joint Council on International Children's Services: [www.jcics.org](http://www.jcics.org)

Adoption Learning Partners: [www.adoptionlearningpartners.org](http://www.adoptionlearningpartners.org)

### Medical resources:

U. of Minnesota International Adoption Clinic: [www.peds.umn.edu/iac/](http://www.peds.umn.edu/iac/)

Dr. Jane Aronson: [www.orpahndoctor.com](http://www.orpahndoctor.com)

Center for Disease Control Traveler's information: [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)

### Family/culture groups:

Families with Children from China: [www.fwcc.org](http://www.fwcc.org)

Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoptions: [www.frua.org](http://www.frua.org)