

HOW TO ADOPT IN NEW JERSEY:

A Roadmap to Family Building



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Written by Jacquelyn M. Lowe, MSW, LSW for
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www.njarch.org

LEGACY OF AN ADOPTED CHILD

Once there were two women
Who never knew each other
One you do not remember
The other you call mother.
Two different lives
Shaped to make yours one
One became your guiding star
The other became your sun
The first gave you life
And the second taught you to live it
One gave you a nationality
The other gave you a name
One gave you the seed of talent
The other gave you aim
One gave you emotions
The other calmed your fears
One saw your first sweet smile
The other dried your tears
One gave you up—
It was all she could do
The other prayed for a child
And God led her straight to you
And now you ask me
Through your tears,
The age-old questions
Through the years
Heredity or environment
Which are you the product of?
Neither my darling—neither
Just two kinds of love.

Author Unknown

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I. INTRODUCTION



The purpose of this handbook is to give those who are thinking about adoption a road map to start the process. As a potential adoptive parent, you will have many decisions to make as to the type of adoption you choose to pursue. This handbook will give you information that can assist you and your family in deciding what kind of adoption is best for you.

While we can offer ideas and suggestions, we strongly encourage you to work closely with the adoption agency you have chosen. In addition, we recommend that you join an adoption support group that can also assist in guiding you through the maze of adoption.

It is not possible to cover any of the topics introduced in this booklet in great depth. Our goal is to summarize some of the most common adoption options and to identify support services and resources.

The addition of the New Jersey Adoption Resource Clearing House (NJ•ARCH) to the existing adoption-related services in New Jersey offers further support and guidance to all persons touched by adoption. You can access NJ•ARCH in the following ways:

Warm Line: 1.877. 4ARCHNJ (1.877.427.2465)

Internet: www.njarch.org

Office: 76 South Orange Avenue,
Suite 209
South Orange, New Jersey 07079

Please note: Readers are encouraged to conduct their own investigation of the matters addressed in this handbook, make any conclusions and take any action pertaining to the subject matter of this handbook based upon their research. The information provided is accurate to the best of our knowledge as of the date of publication.

II. WHAT IS ADOPTION?¹



Adoption is the permanent, legal transfer of all parental rights from one person or couple to another person or couple. Adoptive parents have the same rights and responsibilities as parents whose children are born to them. Adoptive parents are real parents and have all the emotional, social, legal and kinship benefits of birth parents.

There are two common types of adoption: One is of the child by a relative (a stepparent, grandparent or other family member); the other is of a child or children who are unrelated to the adopting parents. This handbook primarily addresses the adoption of unrelated children.

Within this category of adoption, several options are available. You can:

- Adopt from the foster care system, by:
 - Adopting an older child or a child with special needs, or
 - If you are a foster parent, you may possibly adopt your foster child if he or she becomes legally available
- Adopt an infant or an older child from the United States, or
- Adopt a child from another country.

There are several ways in which you can pursue adoption. You can:

- Use a public agency,
- Use a private agency, or
- Use an attorney. The latter is called an “independent” or “private” adoption.

¹ A Child is Waiting—A Beginner’s Guide to Adoption. Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.
<http://www.davethomasfoundation.org/>

III. MAKING THE DECISION TO ADOPT



Many couples come to the decision to adopt after being diagnosed with infertility. Since medical treatment to achieve pregnancy is fraught with emotional ups and downs, it is usually best to take some time to grieve for the biological child who will not be. Often one partner may feel more ready to pursue adoption than the other. This can cause tension in the relationship. Participating in a support group such as “Resolve” (1-888-RNJ-2810) is often helpful in working through feelings of anger, sadness and loss. Some couples may require professional counseling to resolve these feelings and to reach a mutual decision about building a family. Only when these feelings are understood and faced is it appropriate to move on. Some families may decide to no longer pursue becoming parents. Others may wish to pursue additional fertility treatment. Many will embrace adoption because they feel parenting, not giving birth, is their true goal.

Some families consider adoption for other reasons. These include families who want to provide a home for a child who is already waiting for a family, single persons who want to become parents, older couples who have already raised biological children, and gay and lesbian couples who wish to parent a child together.

Whatever the reasons may be, it is critical to fully explore them. Adoption is a life-long commitment and will greatly impact every member of the family. If you want to adopt in order to provide care, love, and a permanent family for a child, you are moving in the right direction. If you believe that adoption will help you resolve relationship problems with your partner or if your primary motivation is to provide a sibling for your child, then you should reconsider; adoption may or may not be right for your family.

Once you have made the decision to pursue adoption, the next question is what type of adoption: domestic or international, infant or waiting child, agency or private. This handbook explores these options.

IV. KINDS OF ADOPTION²



DOMESTIC INFANT ADOPTION

Domestic infant adoption can be done through a private non-profit adoption agency, through an attorney, or through the state child welfare agency, if you are flexible enough to consider infants with a variety of birth histories. All methods require a home study completed by an agency licensed in New Jersey.

Very few healthy infants are available for adoption, and the wait for one can be lengthy. Some agencies open for applications only during limited periods to avoid long waiting lists. If you are only interested in a healthy Caucasian infant, you will have to be persistent: you can repeatedly call various private agencies until they are accepting new applicants, or you can pursue adoption through an attorney. Although there may be somewhat less of a wait for African American, Latino, or bi-racial infants, you may experience long waits for any healthy infant. If you are open to broadening your required characteristics of the infant and the infant's medical history, you may be able to adopt an infant whose birth history poses some potential medical or developmental risks.

To identify an agency, obtain a list of licensed agencies from the Department of Children and Families, Office of Licensing or from NJ•ARCH (see page 18 for more information on selecting an agency). Check with your local adoption support group to find out what other families' experiences were with these agencies.

As you narrow your search, you may want to ask each prospective agency for the names of families who have previously worked with the agency and who may be comfortable discussing their adoption experience with you.

Part of the application process includes participating in a home study and attending training. You will also have to provide references, undergo background checks for criminal history and child abuse, and provide reports of physical exams for each member of the family. (See page 20 for more information about the home study process.)

² This section was developed in conjunction with "A Child is Waiting" from the Dave Thomas Foundation. For more information on the Dave Thomas Foundation, visit their website at: <http://www.davethomasfoundation.org/>

Under certain circumstances your agency may ask you to create a presentation book and/or write a “Dear Birthmother” letter. This means that the birth mother is working with a social worker to make an adoption plan and will be involved in choosing prospective parents for her child. In this case, the applicants wait until they are chosen.

Another route using an agency, identified adoption, is to locate a potential birth mother on your own through word of mouth or advertising. Once you have located the biological mother, you must connect her with an adoption agency licensed in New Jersey. Using an agency allows the surrender of parental rights to be effective as soon as 72 hours after the birth, provided the birth mother has had adequate counseling. It may take longer if the mother had no prenatal counseling. The state requires a minimum of three counseling sessions although the birth mother can waive them. Most reputable agencies will encourage the mother to fully participate in counseling and to identify the birthfather. Once the birth father is identified, the agency should obtain health information and a legal surrender of parental rights from him.

Another way to adopt an infant is a private adoption through an attorney. When using an attorney to identify a birthmother, there is typically a certain amount of openness between the birth mother and the potential adoptive parents. Once a birth mother is identified, the attorney interviews the birth mother and completes the required paperwork. The adoptive parent or parents request a home study from a licensed agency. The surrender of parental rights is taken before a judge. This can be a quicker, less costly route, but the surrender usually does not become final until the court date, which is typically 30 to 60 days after the child’s birth. In this situation, there is a real risk that the birthparents may change their minds about their surrender. For a family that has the child in its home prior to the legal surrender, the time prior to the court hearing can be extremely stressful. The American Academy of Adoption Attorneys has members throughout the U.S. and Canada who are experienced in the complexities of adoption law as well as interstate and international regulations surrounding adoption. Their directory can be accessed on-line at <http://www.adoptionattorneys.org>. As mentioned above, in some domestic infant adoptions, the birth parents may request a degree of openness. This can range from a pre-birth meeting, to e-mails, letters and pictures, to agreed upon meetings on holidays and significant life events, or to regular and possibly frequent visits with the adoptive family and the child. Some families arrange contacts between the birth family and the child through a third party, typically the adoption agency or attorney. While some states recognize contracts negotiated between adoptive and birth parents that specify the degree of openness agreed to, New Jersey does not confer any legal status to such contracts. Even in an open adoption, the adoptive parents are the legal parents of the adopted child and therefore make all decisions concerning the child.

One of the goals of the home study is to enable prospective adoptive parents to determine how much openness they are comfortable with. It is unwise to agree to more contact than you will feel comfortable with as the child grows older and asks questions about the birth parents. Making an open adoption work

can be challenging and requires that adoptive parents be flexible and supportive of their child's connection to their biological family. It is also important for all of the adults to understand that the degree and nature of contact may change over time based on the child's needs. The adults must understand that the child's feelings about and reactions to these contacts may vary and that all parties may experience some degree of anxiety about the contacts. While this type of adoption is not right for every family, open adoption can work well if everyone wants it and if there is good communication, flexibility, commitment to the process, respect for all parties involved, and commitment to the child's needs above all.

It is unwise to keep secrets about the child's adoption and/or family history. If this is a concern, there are numerous books and articles on our NJ•ARCH website that can provide more information on this topic.

WAITING OR OLDER CHILD ADOPTION

At the time of printing, there were 104,000 children in the United States available for adoption. Each year, more than 20,000 children age out of foster care without being adopted. Most of the waiting children are in foster care because they have been abused, neglected or abandoned. State child welfare agencies work with families to resolve their problems with the goal of family reunification. If this is not possible, the state agency pursues the termination of parental rights and seeks an adoptive family for the child. In 2011, there were over 1,000 foster children adopted in New Jersey, the majority of whom were between the ages of 1 and 5.³

Waiting children range in age from toddlers to teens. Most wait in foster care but some may reside in group homes or residential treatment programs. The children are from many races, ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds. They have a broad range of cognitive, emotional, and physical disabilities. Some have medical or emotional disabilities due to birth and placement histories. They may be withdrawn, angry, impulsive and/or provocative. They may be academically below grade level. Some have medical challenges such as a heart condition, a developmental disability, or another chronic illness. Some children are part of a sibling group that should be placed together. Most of the children's presenting problems respond well to treatment and to the consistency and structure that a loving family can provide.

³ Administration for Children and Families Child Welfare Information Gateway. Available at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption>

While caring for waiting children may be a challenge, the rewards are enormous. These children need prospective parents who are flexible, patient problem solvers and are adept at accessing community resources.

The issue of openness in the adoption of children from the foster care system requires special consideration. Children in foster care have typically lived with their birth mother or another member of their birth family and most have had ongoing contact with their birth families prior to the termination of parental rights. In some cases, further contact between the child and the birth family would be a risk to the child's healthy development; however, in some cases contact with one or more members of the birth family would be helpful to the child's development. This issue is especially significant when the child has siblings. It is therefore extremely important to discuss the nature and extent of the child's past contact with members of his/her birth family with the agency case worker and to give serious consideration to whether contacts will continue and, if so, how and when the contacts will occur.

If you adopt a waiting child, he or she may be eligible for subsidy or adoption assistance. If so, you will receive payments from the state or federal government to offset the short and long-term costs of special services. Most children adopted from foster care are also eligible for medical assistance through Medicaid. If you adopt a child with special needs from the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P), there are no adoption fees; legal fees within specified guidelines are also paid by DCP&P.

Most agencies placing older children offer and may require adoption and parenting classes as part of the home study process. It is strongly recommended that prospective adoptive parents take these courses or an online preparation course such as the Adoption Road Map Course offered by the National Adoption Center at www.adopt.org.

Older or special needs children can be adopted through the New Jersey Division of Child Protection and Permanency and a number of private agencies in the state including our parent agency, Children's Aid and Family Services.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

Until 2005, United States citizens and residents were adopting children from all over the world with increasing frequency. International adoptions provide safe, loving homes to children in need of parents for a variety of social and political reasons. Prior to 2005, over 20,000 inter-country adoptions took place each year in the United States, adding to the more than 200,000 internationally-adopted children already living in our country. However, there has been a steady and dramatic decline in inter-country adoptions, beginning in 2005. In 2012, there were 8,668 inter-country adoptions in the United States. Overall, China is currently the greatest source for inter-country adoptions, followed in descending order by Ethiopia,

Russia, South Korea, Ukraine, Philippines, India, and Colombia.⁴ In January, 2013, Russia terminated the adoption of Russian children by American citizens for political reasons.

Inter-country adoption may be a viable alternative to domestic adoption for many families, especially those who want to adopt an infant. However, the process can be complex, paperwork intensive, and expensive. Like domestic adoptions, costs and waiting time vary significantly depending on the country and the child chosen. Costs can range from \$15,000 to \$50,000, although most inter-country adoptions cost between \$15,000 and \$25,000 at the time of this publication.³ The waiting time for inter-country adoption, including the home study and the approval process of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services – (USCIS) formerly called Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), can take from one to three years. Adoptions of children with special needs may have lower fees and shorter waiting periods.

International adoption has the same requirements as domestic adoption; however there is additional paperwork that the prospective adoptive parent(s) will need to complete. Prospective adoptive parents are encouraged to familiarize themselves with inter-country adoption processes before they begin filing applications for a particular child.

There are three processes for adopting children from other countries: the Hague Process, the Orphan Process, and through an Immediate Relative Petition. This booklet focuses on the first two methods of international adoption. You may access detailed and extremely helpful information about the adoption of children from other countries from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Department of State web sites, www.uscis.gov and <http://adoption.state.gov>. The USCIS has published two helpful guides to inter-country adoption, “I am a U.S. Citizen: How do I Immigrate an Adopted Child or Help My Adopted Child Become a U.S. Citizen or a U.S. Permanent Resident?” and “The Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption: A Guide for Prospective Adoptive Parents”, both of which are available on the USCIS website. Two other helpful sources are “Inter-country Adoption: Where Do I Start?” and “Inter-country Adoption from Hague Convention and Non-Hague Countries”, both published by the Children’s Bureau Child Welfare Information Gateway. These fact sheets can be accessed at <http://childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheet/hague.cfm> and <http://childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheet/inter/index.cfm>.

The Hague Process: The Hague Adoption Convention (the official name is Hague Adoption Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-Country Adoption) is an international agreement that establishes best practices and provides safeguards which protect the best interests of children, as well as birth parents and adoptive parents involved in inter-country adoptions. This convention took effect in the United States on April 1, 2008 and applies to all adoptions between countries

⁴ United States Department of State. Available at <http://www.adoption.state.gov>

that have signed the Hague Adoption Convention. There are currently more than 75 signatories, although not all of these countries are necessarily allowing adoptions by United States citizens at any given point in time. In addition, the United States may restrict adoptions from specific countries due to political issues or problematic adoption practices. Updates and alerts on individual countries are posted regularly on the Department of State adoption web site (<http://adoption.state.gov/adoption>).

Steps of the Hague Process:

1. Under the Hague Process, potential adoptive parents are required to use an accredited adoption service provider. Accreditation is conferred by the Department of State and an up-to-date list of accredited agencies is listed on their web site. Accredited adoption agencies are required to itemize and disclose in writing the fees and estimated expenses associated with the adoption ahead of time.
2. The accredited service provider (adoption agency) completes a home study, including criminal history and child abuse background checks. Potential parents must complete a minimum of ten hours of parenting training.
3. The adoptive parents then apply to the USCIS for a determination that they are suitable for inter-country adoption. **(Form I-800-A Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country).**
4. Once USCIS approves the application, the adoptive parents work with their adoption agency to identify a child for adoption. Under the Hague Convention, the child's country is required to provide all available health and medical records of the child and the adoptive parents are given a minimum of two weeks to review the records.
5. Once a child has been selected, the potential adoptive parents file a petition with USCIS to determine the child's eligibility to immigrate to the United States **(Form I-800 Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative).**
6. After Form I-800 is approved, the adoptive parents apply for a visa for the child and then may complete the adoption of the child in the child's home country or obtain custody to bring the child to the United States for adoption, once the Department of State advises the adoptive parents to do so. Every child adopted from a Convention country receives a Hague Adoption Certificate or a Hague Custody Declaration. The certificate is issued by a U.S. consular officer after determining that the adoption (or grant of custody) has met the requirements of the Convention and the Inter-country Adoption Act. The process for adopting or gaining legal custody of a child varies from country to country so be sure to familiarize yourself with the specific requirements of the Convention country from which you are adopting, either through your adoption agency or through the USCIS web-site.

7. If the child was adopted in the foreign country, he or she will automatically become a US citizen upon entry into the United States and will be automatically processed to receive a Certificate of Citizenship. If the child's adoption will be processed in the US, the child will receive a Permanent Resident Card upon entry into the US and will automatically become a US citizen when the adoption is finalized, provided that the child is under 18 at the time of finalization. You can then file USCIS Form N-600 to receive a Certificate of Citizenship.

The Orphan Process: This process applies to children being adopted from countries that are not signatories of the Hague Adoption Convention.

Steps of the Orphan Process:

1. Under the Orphan Process, prospective adoptive parents must select an adoption agency that is licensed in their state. The agency does not have to be accredited by the Department of State. Most adoption agencies will disclose in writing the fees and associated expenses of the adoption; ask for a breakdown if it is not offered. The agency will complete criminal history and child abuse background checks and complete a home study.
2. File USCIS Form I-600A (Application for Advance Processing of Orphan Petition) with USCIS. This application determines the potential adoptive parents' eligibility to adopt a child from another country. The application cannot be processed until USCIS receives the home study from your adoption agency. This step can be taken either before or after a child has been identified; although USCIS strongly recommends filing the application first, since it typically is a lengthy process.
3. Once the Application is approved and the child has been identified, the prospective adoptive parents file USCIS Form I-600 (Petition to Classify Orphan as an Immediate Relative)." The purpose of this form is to classify the child who is, or will be, adopted by a U.S. citizen as an immediate relative of that citizen and to allow the child to enter the U.S. If a Form I-600A has not previously been filed, then the U.S. citizen will also be required at this time to submit that form and the home study. USCIS strongly advises that, if you are traveling abroad to adopt or obtain custody of the identified child, that you not do so until Form I-600A has been approved.
4. Once the two applications have been approved, the USCIS notifies the US Embassy or Consulate so they can issue a visa for the child to enter the United States. If the child was adopted in the foreign country, he or she will automatically become a US citizen upon entry into the United States and will be automatically processed to receive a Certificate of Citizenship. If the child's adoption will be processed in the US, the child will receive a Permanent Resident Card upon entry into the US and will automatically become a US citizen when the adoption is finalized, provided that the child is under 18 at the time of finalization. You can then file USCIS Form N-600 to receive a Certificate of Citizenship.

In both Hague and non-Hague countries, the process for adopting or gaining legal custody of a child varies from country to country so be sure to familiarize yourself with the specific requirements of the country from which you are adopting, either through your adoption agency or through the USCIS website. In some countries, travel to the country may be preferable or necessary. Work closely with your adoption agency and refer to the appropriate websites for more information on how to process the required paperwork.

Whether you plan on adopting domestically, internationally, or if you are undecided, we strongly recommend that you join an adoption support group in your area. There, you will meet other families who have already adopted and /or others whose experiences are similar to yours. There is nothing like speaking to someone who has already navigated your path. For a listing of New Jersey adoption support groups, log onto www.njarch.org or call the Warm Line at 877- 4ARCHNJ (877-427-2465).

Child Health Considerations (International Adoptions)

Certain health risks are inherent when adopting children from other countries. Generally, children come into care because of abandonment, poverty, illness or death of parents, or family dysfunction (including alcoholism, drug abuse, child abuse and/or neglect). Children may have experienced poor prenatal and/or postnatal care, early neglect, and a lack of health care services, including immunizations. Specific health problems may include malnutrition, parasites, minor congenital defects, developmental delay, tuberculosis, hepatitis (A, B, or C), HIV/AIDS, fetal alcoholic syndrome, and/or attachment disorder and symptoms.

Children may also be affected by living in institutions during critical developmental periods or over long periods of time. Reputable agencies should provide prospective parents with as much information as possible on a child's background and medical history, however, they cannot guarantee its accuracy or completeness. Medical evaluation (including lab testing) in developing countries does not match U.S. standards. The birth parents' medical and genetic histories are not always known, especially for abandoned children. As indicated earlier, Hague Convention countries are required to provide medical records and to allow a minimum of two weeks for adoptive parents to review these records; however, there may still be significant gaps in the information available.

The International Adoption Simplification Act of 2010 impacts children adopted through the Hague Convention process. Children 10 years of age and younger adopted from a Hague Convention country are not required to be vaccinated against certain vaccine-preventable diseases as a condition of receiving a visa. This allows children who are lacking necessary vaccines to travel to the United States to be with their new families and receive the medical treatment they require without the need to wait additional time overseas for completion of vaccinations. These vaccines include those for measles, mumps, rubella, polio,

tetanus and diphtheria toxoids, pertussis, influenza type B, hepatitis B, varicella, and pneumococcal. Adoptive parents must also show proof that a U.S. doctor has been identified and has agreed to handle the child's vaccinations. The State Department's [Form DS-1981 "Affidavit Concerning Exemption from Immigrant Vaccination Requirements for a Foreign Adopted Child"](#) has been updated to reflect the eligibility of Convention adoptees for this vaccination exemption.

You should educate yourself about the impact that these factors can have on children. They can all affect a child's physical and emotional development. Learn what resources are available in your community should your child need professional help to address early delays. Talk to other families who have adopted from different countries, orphanages and foster care families to see how their children are doing immediately after arrival and several years thereafter.

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If you would like more information about these and/or other disorders or issues, please check the NJ•ARCH website for books and articles relating to these topics. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has extensive information on its website related to intercountry adoption health issues. Prospective adoptive parents are encouraged to visit the website to begin familiarizing themselves with potential health issues they and their child might face www.cdc.gov/immigrantrefugeehealth/adoption.

V. SELECTING AN AGENCY



When seeking to adopt either a child from the U.S. or a child from abroad, we recommend that you use a reputable adoption agency that is experienced with the type of adoption that you are considering. Although service quality can vary, adoption agencies are regulated by state governments and, for children adopted under the Hague Adoption Convention, by the US Department of State.

First, obtain a list of “Adoption Agencies Approved to Provide Adoption Services in New Jersey” from the Department of Children and Families Office of Licensing. To obtain the listing, call 1.877.667.9845 or contact the NJ•ARCH Warm Line. If you are planning to adopt a child from a Hague Convention country, you need to confirm which New Jersey licensed agencies are also certified by the Department of State to process the adoption of children from Hague Convention countries.

Check with the Office of Licensing to see if there are complaints on file and if so, how they have been resolved. If possible, talk to members of adoptive parent support groups local to the agency to check the agency’s reputation. You can also check with the Better Business Bureau local to the adoption agency you are considering. Log onto www.bbb.org to obtain the local Bureau in your area to inquire if complaints have been lodged against the agency. New Jersey agencies are required to provide itemized lists of expenses and fees. Keep in mind that some costs, such as travel costs, cannot be predicted in detail. If you are using an out-of-state agency for placement, ask if they conduct their own home studies and request the same financial information.

If possible, attend orientation meetings at all agencies that interest you, while continuing to ask other adoptive parents about their experiences. Consider not only the range of services the agencies offer, but also the client satisfaction level with the agency, and your level of confidence and comfort with the agency staff. Then choose the agency that best meets your needs. Most agencies do not allow applicants to work with more than one agency at a time. Once you have arranged to work with an agency, the agency will assign a social worker. The social worker will discuss your preferences, provide information on domestic and source countries, and explain the agency's policies and procedures.

At this point, you may be required to pay the first installment of the adoption agency fees. Some agencies will prorate their charges according to your income. You should avoid programs where you are required to pay all the fees in advance. Most programs have a fee payment system, which allows payment as services are rendered. Find out what fees are refundable if you withdraw from the adoption process or the agency withdraws its services after a service agreement is signed.

Non-agency inter-country adoptions are rarely regulated and pose many risks, including involvement in the black market, loss of confidentiality, infringements upon the child's rights to privacy and permanency, failure to meet the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) guidelines required for immigration, inadequate health information, incomplete or flawed legal processing, insufficient counseling, and outright fraud. Regardless of the involvement of an adoption agency or other processing assistance, you are ultimately responsible, financially and legally, for any commitments you make.

There are hundreds of licensed private agencies that arrange both domestic and intercountry adoptions; public social service agencies primarily handle special needs and older child adoptions and do not process intercountry placements. If you are interested in an intercountry adoption, you can shorten the agency selection process by checking out which source countries have stable political situations and well-established adoption processing mechanisms in place with governmental oversight. The U.S. State Department's web site, <http://adoption.state.gov>, can be a starting point for identifying those countries since it provides a country-by-country guide to adoption processing in more than 100 countries.

Once you have narrowed down the countries from which you would like to adopt, you can contact agencies working in the particular country or countries. For example, if you want to adopt a child from China, we would recommend using the New Jersey Office of Licensing list and contacting the agencies that work with China adoptions.

Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of working with a large, national agency (which may have larger numbers of children to place and longer waiting lists of applicants) versus working with a smaller, local agency (which may have fewer children to place but shorter waiting lists). It is vitally important to select an experienced, licensed private agency and/or attorney.

VI. THE HOME STUDY



Most adoptive applicants find the idea of a home study frightening. The reality is that the home-study is a time to learn if adoption is the best plan for you, to prepare you for raising an adopted child or children, and to acquaint you with the specific issues that adoptive families face. For those adoptive applicants who already have children, the home study process provides opportunities for the entire family to consider how the adoption will impact these children and to prepare the children for the changes in family life and relationships that will occur when another child joins the family.

New Jersey has specific regulations for home studies, which can only be performed by licensed adoption agencies. The basic requirements for prospective adoptive parents are that they be 18 years of age or older and at least ten years older than the child to be adopted. They should have the capacity to meet a child's physical and emotional needs. Applicants are asked to disclose any history of child abuse or neglect and any criminal record excluding minor traffic violations. Criminal history and child abuse records will be requested from the appropriate state and federal authorities.

New Jersey requires a minimum of three face-to-face meetings with an agency social worker on separate days to conduct joint and individual interviews. Some of these may be group meetings. At least one interview is held in the candidates' home. All members of the household must be interviewed.

The documentation required includes job and personal references, proof of income, medical reports, and fingerprint and child abuse checks, verification of birth, marriage and divorce, if applicable.

Many agencies ask applicants to prepare autobiographies or personal statements including experiences growing up, relationships with parents and siblings, academic and employment history, a description of the courtship and marriage (or partnership) if applicable, attitudes toward adoption, recognition of racial and ethnic differences, hobbies, personality, strengths and weaknesses. Applicants are also asked to reflect on how their parents handled discipline and their own ideas about acceptable and unacceptable means of discipline. The extended family's and neighbors' attitudes toward adoption are addressed.

Many applicants see the autobiography as a chore, but it is an excellent way to reflect on attitudes and family history as well as to prepare for the changes involved in becoming a family. It forms a basis for discussion with the social worker regarding parenting and adoption issues. It is helpful to be as open as possible during the process.

The last meeting is usually a home visit. The social worker wants to be sure that the home is a safe place to raise a child or children. It is not necessary to own one's home, just to provide a safe environment and adequate space. All homes must have a smoke detector on every level and a fire extinguisher in the kitchen. The social worker will discuss safety issues, child proofing certain areas and overall appearance of the home.

In addition, for parents who will continue to work outside the home, necessary childcare arrangements will be discussed. During the course of the study, the worker will discuss with the applicants the kind of children they can accept including age range, racial or ethnic background, gender, sibling groups, and physical, social, emotional, or developmental disabilities. If this is an international adoption, the home study provider and/or the placing agency will cover issues of travel, country requirements and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) regulations. The home study and approval process is not designed to deny people the opportunity to adopt. Rather, the process is designed for the agency to get to know the applicants and to educate them about adoption so an appropriate placement can be made.

VII. SURVIVING THE WAIT



Whether you are adopting from the U.S. or another country, the time you need to wait for your child to come home can be long and sometimes stressful. Once all your paper work is submitted, there is little you can do to help move the process along; essentially, you have very little control over when your child may arrive, and this can be frustrating.⁵

The following are some constructive tips that may have a beneficial impact in preparing you for your child or children coming home.

For a more detailed listing of ideas, please visit our NJ•ARCH website and search for the “Surviving the Wait: Ideas in How to Prepare for Your Adoptive Child’s Arrival” article.

Read and Network:

- Join a local adoption support group or one within your adoption agency.
- Develop and maintain contacts with other families who are adopting domestically or Internationally.

Make your House Safe:

- Purchase gates, outlet covers, move medicines high and/or store in a locked box, etc..
- If you are planning home renovations or are moving, try to complete these projects before your child comes home.

Papers and Files:

- Organize your personal papers and files. Review your personal finances. If possible, reduce outstanding debts.
- Learn about the IRS Adoption Tax Rebate (www.irs.gov).
- Prepare or update your Will, Health Proxy (Living Will), Power of Attorney, Trust, and name Guardians for your child. Once your child comes home, include your newly adopted child as (a) beneficiary.

⁵ Tips from two adoptive parents who are board members of NJ’s Concerned Persons For Adoption (CPFA) and wisdom from Laura Stevens, M.S.W., Ph.D., Wide Horizons For Children. For more information on CPFA, and/ or Wide Horizons For Children, visit their websites at www.cpfanjer.org and www.whfc.org.

Health Care Preparation:

- Talk to your doctor and tell him/her about your adoption plans. Ask advice about vitamins/ energy and diet for travel.
- If needed, get vaccinations in preparation for overseas travel. Refer to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.
- If you are adopting internationally, research and find a developmental pediatrician who has experience with internationally adopted children. Contact NJ•ARCH to find a pediatrician in your area or contact the Child Welfare Information Gateway Web site at www.childwelfare.gov/adoption to view a list of medical professionals who specialize in developmental evaluations of children adopted from abroad. We recommend that you use a specialist to review any medical information prior to accepting your international referral.
- Find and interview local pediatricians that you might use once your child comes home.
- Research your health insurance plan(s), dental insurance plan(s), and prescription plan(s). Be sure the new pediatrician you select is in your plan.

Employer Preparation:

- Talk to your employer about the time you will need to take off when your child arrives.
- Research the Family and Medical Leave Act, at www.dol.gov/whd/fmla.
- Research child care opportunities if both partners decide to continue working.

Child Development:

- Read about child development. Contact the NJ•ARCH Warm Line or log onto our website to view the books and articles available from the lending library.
- Take advantage of your social or case worker's expertise in adoption and parenting.
- If you are adopting an infant, consider taking a class at your local hospital on infant care.
- If you are adopting a school age or pre-school handicapped child, contact your local school system to learn about the schools and any special services for which your child may be eligible.
- If you are pursuing an international adoption, read about your child's country, watch movies from/about that country, visit museum exhibits. Try to gain an appreciation of your child's heritage.
- Once a child has been selected for your family, find out as much as you can about his/her birth family, medical care, living conditions, and other placements, if applicable.

Baby/ Child's Room:

- If you know the gender, begin to ask your friends what furniture and clothes they have which you might be able to borrow and/or purchase.
- Research and select baby/child products.

- If you are adopting internationally, be prepared to purchase lots of little items/toys from that country.

Misc.:

- Consider purchasing a good camera and camcorder. Learn how to use them. If you have a partner, take advantage of this wait time; take a trip; take time out just for the two of you.
- Think about the design of adoption/arrival announcements.
- Keep a file of significant papers and photos; these could be part of a “Life” or “Adoption” Book.
- Begin to explore your feelings about birth families and their parenting decisions so that you are comfortable talking to your child about issues related to his or her birth family.
- Keep an adoption journal; this can be an excellent vehicle to express your feelings about your wait. If you already have a biological or adopted child or children, we recommend doing the above.

PLUS:

- Spend lots of quality times with your spouse/partner (e.g.: special dinners/ vacations/ time together).
- If you have children, spend lots of time with them.
- If you were planning to move your child(ren)’s room, try to complete the move before the baby/child arrives.
- Communicate openly and frequently about the pending adoption and make sure your children understand that they can ask you questions at any time.
- Read to your child. There are lots of books out there that discuss these topics with your child.
- Talk to your child about how to answer questions other people might ask about the new addition to your family.
- Decide whether you want your child(ren) traveling with you to pick up your new adopted child. Traveling (especially overseas) could be a wonderful experience for your family. On the other hand, if you leave your child(ren) at home with a relative or responsible person, you would have an opportunity to begin your relationship with your new child without interruption. You will need to decide what is best for you and your family.
- There are many excellent resources (people, support groups, books, and websites) available to help you during your journey. Some of these resources are listed on page 28/29. Take advantage of them!

VIII. YOUR CHILD COMES HOME



DOMESTIC ADOPTION

Pregnancy gives prospective parents nearly nine months to plan and prepare for the impending changes in their lives. Adoptive parents may wait many months or even years for a child and then have two weeks or less to welcome a child into their home.

Adoptive parents should choose a pediatrician before their child comes home. Begin with referrals from friends and family. Ask other adoptive parents. Meet with the doctor to ascertain if you can work together. You will be asking many questions about health issues as your child grows. Does the doctor have a “calling hour?” Are your concerns treated with respect? Bring your child in as soon as possible after placement to evaluate development, general health and to ensure that immunizations are on schedule.

Don’t be surprised if you have moments of sadness and/or anxiety. Even adoptive parents can experience “post-partum” blues. The 24-hour responsibility of caring for a young child can be daunting even if it’s something you’ve been waiting for years to do. And, birthparents and adoptive parents alike sometimes wonder what they have gotten themselves into. Allow family members and friends to help you.

Be prepared for intrusive questions. Remember your child’s history is his/hers to share. Some people are truly interested, have a relative who is considering adoption, and would like some information about the process. Other people are just plain nosey, wanting to know about birth parents, your infertility situation, how much you “paid” for your child. Over time you will develop the ability to respond to the sincere questions and pleasantly reject the inappropriate ones. Remember, even before your child can speak, he or she can react to your tone of voice and demeanor. Try not to be too reactive. If your adopted child is beyond infancy, prepare your child for these questions and discuss possible answers to such questions.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

After your child has arrived, make an appointment with your physician for a general evaluation. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that the physical include hemoglobin/hematocrit and red blood cell indices, urinalysis, blood lead level, vision and hearing testing, dental examination, and screening for hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS, syphilis, tuberculosis, and intestinal parasites. For example, the International Adoption Clinic at the University of Minnesota (612.624.1164) has a complete list of recommended screenings for children placed for adoption from abroad.⁶

⁶ National Adoption Information Clearing House, http://www.naic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/r_devev.cfm

SECURING U.S. CITIZENSHIP FOR YOUR CHILD

If your child was adopted in from another country, he or she will automatically become a US citizen upon entry into the United States and will be automatically processed to receive a Certificate of Citizenship. If the child's adoption will be processed in the US, the child will receive a Permanent Resident Card upon entry into the US and will automatically become a US citizen when the adoption is finalized, provided that the child is under 18 at the time of finalization. You can then file USCIS Form N-600 to receive a Certificate of Citizenship.

IX. POST PLACEMENT SERVICES AND FINALIZING YOUR ADOPTION



DOMESTIC ADOPTION

If this is a domestic adoption, your agency is required to provide post-placement services. New Jersey requires a social work home visit within two weeks of your child's placement. Follow up visits are scheduled at 60-day intervals until six months when they change to 90-day intervals until your court date. These visits are designed to ease the transition of the child into your family and to answer questions you may have on child development or adoption issues. Most new parents find them very helpful.

Once the child has been in your home for approximately six months and all has gone well, the adoption most likely will move to finalization. Your agency may recommend an attorney or you can contact the New Jersey State Bar Association for the names of attorneys in your area who specialize in adoption.

In some counties there is no wait for a court date and others have long backlogs. Your attorney can advise you on this. Usually the adoption hearing is held in the judge's chambers where the judge reviews the surrender documents, home study, post placement reports and the agency's recommendation. At that time the judge will issue an adoption decree and a new birth certificate will be ordered. It will show the child's name and your name(s) and the child's actual place of birth. Be sure to bring your camera to get a picture of your new family with the judge.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

If you have adopted internationally, the State of New Jersey permits re-adoption. Each county has different requirements. Most families re-adopt in order to obtain a New Jersey birth certificate and to ensure that the adoption is covered by state law. Contact your County Surrogate's Office or your attorney for more information.

Many adoption agencies, based on requirements of placing countries, mandate post-placement services for client families for a set amount of time ranging from six months to three or more years after the child has been placed. These services provide counseling for the new family, ease the child's adjustment to the new home, and supply parents with information and referrals. Your agency may ask you to furnish photographs, written reports, and medical reports to send to your child's country of origin. As part of post-placement, many agencies have organized support groups for new adoptive parents. If your agency does not have such a group, it may be able to refer you to one in your community.

X. Additional Resources



NJ•ARCH has created another booklet that may be helpful in the next stages of your adoption journey, “Now That You’re a Family: A Guide to Adoption Issues and Services.” Call 877-4-ARCHNJ, or e-mail warmline@njarch.org or visit our website www.njarch.org, to request a copy. You can also access a wide variety of other resources along your journey. Examples of these resources are summarized below.

NJ ARCH services:

Resource Directory: A comprehensive directory of local, regional, and state resources, which is regularly updated and available online at the NJ ARCH web-site. The directory includes adoption agencies, support groups, mental health providers experienced in adoption, medical providers, and camps.

Warm Line: Provides opportunities to talk to a NJ ARCH staff member about adoption questions, obtain referrals for services, or just chat with a helpful and empathetic person. The Warm Line is staffed 40 hours per week. Should you call the Warm Line during an unstaffed time, leave a message and your call will be returned within one business day.

Chat Room: Regularly scheduled chat times on issues related to adoption.

Newsletter: Contains information about NJ ARCH's activities, news and items of interest related to adoption, a featured child waiting to be adopted, an "ask our expert" section, and much more.

Free Lending Library: An extensive library of books, articles, and videos on adoption-related topics, which can be borrowed. A list of the collection is available on the NJ ARCH website.

E-learning Opportunities: An up-to-date listing of on-line educational resources related to adoption, offered by organizations such as Adoption Learning Partners.

Conference Opportunities: An up-to date listing of conferences on adoption issues, as well as related topics, such as mental health, children with special needs, and child welfare. The “Let’s Talk Adoption” conference is an example of a New Jersey based resource that has been providing support and education about adoption for 40 years. It is sponsored by Concerned Persons for Adoption, a volunteer educational and networking organization.

Other resources:

Pre- and Post-Adoption Counseling Services: Counseling services provided FREE of charge by private agencies granted contracts and referrals from the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P). The free Pre-Adoption services are only available for families with children placed through DCP&P. The free Post-Adoption services are available to all New Jersey families who have adopted children up to the age of 18; whether from DCP&P, a private agency or some other means. Available services may differ from county to county.

The American Academy of Adoption Attorneys: A national organization of attorneys throughout the United States and Canada who are experienced in adoption law and interstate and international regulations surrounding adoption. Information and directory available at www.adoptionattorneys.org/.

Helpful websites:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov

Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption

Concerned Persons for Adoption: www.cpfanjan.org

Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption: <http://davethomasfoundation.org/>

Department of State – Intercountry Adoption: <http://adoption.state.gov>

National Adoption Center: <http://www.adopt.org/>

United States Citizen and Immigration Services: www.uscis.gov

State of New Jersey- Department of Children and Families: www.state.nj.us/njfofsteradopt

X. DOWN THE ROAD



Adoption is a life-long journey. While you are joyful that your child has come home, the way your family was formed sometimes presents challenges. As we all pass through various stages in our lives, adoptions can complicate transitions for children, their siblings and parents. Membership in a support group, ongoing contacts with other adoptive families and keeping up to date on adoption issues as well as general child development can be helpful to you as you navigate these times together as a family. Keep in mind that the most meaningful parts of life occur during the journey, not at the destination. Enjoy the trip!