Tips for families considering adoption

The decision to adopt a child can lead to an overwhelming number of choices. What is the right way to proceed and how do you begin? There are several options to explore.



What route to take?

Before deciding which adoption route will be best for you, it's important to determine your needs, desires and ability to meet the needs of different children. Ask yourself the following questions:

Do you want to adopt an infant or an older child?

Could you cope with a special needs child? Some children may be physically, intellectually or emotionally disabled and others may be healthy, but considered "at risk" due to factors such as the birth mother's alcohol or drug intake.

- Do you want to adopt a child from a similar racial or cultural background to your own or would you prefer a child from a different race, religion or country?
- What are you able to offer a child? You may find it helpful to create a "portrait" of your family and yourself. Describe your life and the life you plan for your child. Include details about your home, pets and extended family. If you choose to pursue an independent or identified adoption, your "portrait" can be a useful tool for adoption sources. If the birth mother is involved in selecting adoptive parents, the portrait can help her see your specific strengths as potential parents.
- Would you prefer a closed or an open adoption?

For many prospective parents, the first step is to join a support group for adoptive parents. There they can talk to people who have navigated the adoption maze and can serve as useful sources of advice and support. This can be extremely helpful, as there are many different options available.

Closed adoptions. In the past, most adoptions were closed with neither birth nor adoptive parents receiving any information about the other—for some, this remains the preferred option. Sealed records may eliminate any risk of the birth mother appearing uninvited in their lives, or they may not feel the need to learn about her beyond the key medical facts.

Open adoptions. Open adoptions vary in their degree of openness. Some provide both birth mother and adoptive parents with full information about each other's lives and backgrounds. Others allow adoptive parents to meet the birth mother, continue contact until the child is born and even be present at the birth. Contact may cease thereafter, but in some instances, may continue throughout the child's life, with the birth mother becoming part of the extended family. These are usually independent or identified adoptions.

Public adoption. These adoptions are government funded and operated by government agencies. The goal is to find appropriate families for children in care who are frequently a little older or in some way qualify as special needs children. These adoptions are usually closed.

Private adoption. Private agencies or adoption professionals arrange for these adoptions, and counselling is often provided for both birth mother and adoptive parents. Private adoption agencies usually organize the required Home Study and coordinate the legal process. Costs may include the birth mother's expenses, plus counselling and legal fees.

Independent or identified adoption. Some people prefer more control over the process and opt to independently seek out a birth mother. These adoptive parents should work through a lawyer who specializes in arranging this kind of adoption, and can put the word out to professionals who come in contact with pregnant women seeking adoptive parents. These contacts may include doctors, clergy or pregnancy support group professionals. Other methods may include personal ads in newspapers or magazines.

Independent or identified adoptions are always open to some degree. It will be up to the adoptive parents to determine how much, if any, personal contact they want with the birth mother. Costs will again include the birth mother's expenses plus legal fees. A private adoption agency or professional may be required to arrange for the required Home Study.

Although counselling for the birth mother and adoptive parents is not mandatory, it can reduce the risk of the birth mother changing her mind. Again, you will probably need to work with a private agency or adoption professional to arrange this.

International adoption. Adoption of children from other countries can be arranged publicly or privately. Publicly, the process is facilitated by the National Adoption Desk in Ottawa, which will put you in touch with international consultants and coordinate information. You will be allowed to pick two potential countries.

Others work through a private adoption agency with connections in the desired country. Still others visit the country and work with an adoption professional there. Once a child has been identified, the adoption process varies according to the country involved and the adoptive parent's needs and availability. Some parents finalize the adoption overseas and personally bring the child to Canada. Others stay in Canada and arrange for their child to be brought over by the organization they are working with.

Whatever the route chosen, an International Home Study report is required, which can take months or even years. The child will also need to be sponsored for a passport for entry into Canada.

The legal process for adoptions in Canada

A Home Study Report is required for all adoptions. This will be undertaken by either a public or private social worker and, depending on your province, may take place before or after a child is placed in the home. Birth and marriage certificates, financial statements and references will need to be submitted, and health checks, police checks and a Child Abuse Register search will be required.

The Home Study consists of a series of interviews over several months, including at least one home visit. The objective is to assess your ability to care for a child and to ensure your home is acceptable for a child to live.

An adoption order, issued by your home province, will legally finalize the adoption. Depending on your province, this is usually issued by a judge after a child has been in your care for about six months. Your child is then officially part of the family!

Wading through all the options for adoption can be a time-consuming process. It can also be a very personal and emotional experience. Consider seeking help and support as you navigate the choices and legalities to ensure you are supported and stay strong through this often lengthy process.