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Adoption: 5 Steps to Starting Off Right

Adding a child to your family through domestic or international adoption is a weighty decision, worthy of a mix of soul-searching questions, research, patience and, finally, a lesson in faith and fate. Former domestic adoption program director and aide in a Romanian orphanage Chandra Hoffman shares her insights for those considering adoption.

WHY ADOPT? A FEW IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

What are your motivations to adopt? What do you believe are your strengths and limitations as a parent? Are you interested in domestic (adopting a baby or child born in the United States) or international?

How much does the child's age, race, gender or biological family medical history matter to you? Are you open to a child with special needs?

Do you have strong feelings about open, closed or semi-open adoption? In an open adoption there is ongoing contact between birth and adoptive parents; semi-open involves a more limited, legal contract of photos and letters to be shared with the birth family, and closed is where there is no contact between birth parents and child until age 18.

BE INFORMED

Get ready to do your homework. The next step is to use the Internet, online message boards and word of mouth to guide you toward the right avenue. Choose your lawyer, agency or agencies (some will let you submit applications to more than one) carefully. Agencies exist on the spectrum of size, public to private, religious to secular, and vary in the type of adoptions they are looking to facilitate.

Domestic Adoption

The rights of birth and adoptive parents are vastly different state to state. Some states have more favorable laws for adoptive parents; others for birth parents. Important facts to note are the rights of the birth father and lengths of time to finalization. [Click here for more information.](#)

Familiarize yourself with the laws surrounding adoption in your home state, knowing that, with some agencies, you may be adopting a child born elsewhere in the United States. In this case, you will be subject to Interstate Compact, a legal process that regulates the movement of both foster children and adoptive children between states and requires adoptive parents to travel to the state where the child is born and stay there for a period of time, usually around seven to ten days.

International Adoption

When considering international adoption, it is important to understand the circumstances surrounding adoption in the child's home country. What are the factors that have created this child's eligibility, and what impact might they have on a child? What are the cultural attitudes toward childrearing? What are the conditions in the orphanage or foster-care system where children eligible for adoption live? How can you honor this child's culture of origin while raising them in the United States?

BE CREATIVE

There is often a sense of powerlessness inherent in the adoption process. Here is where you can be creative, and use skills or connections you already have.

When I was in college, a professor from Harvard advertised on a social-work student message board. She was seeking a volunteer to travel abroad and work in the Bucharest orphanage where her adoptive daughter was waiting out one of many international red-tape stalls. She wanted eyes and ears there, an extra set of hands to care for her little girl, and I was a college student hungry for life experience. We connected and it worked out well for us both. [\[You can read more about this experience by clicking here.\]](#)

In domestic adoption, you can be creative in the assembling of your portfolio/profile – the folder about you that your agency shows to birthmothers. If you've never been crafty or good at scrapbooking, find a friend who is. Speak from the heart in your letter, then have someone with a knack for words read it aloud – see what they edit. Think of this as your one opportunity to highlight what makes you unique.

BE PATIENT

Whether you are waiting for your first placement or your fifth, there is an understandable ache and anticipation. This is one of the harder parts of the process. As a case manager, the only phone call I dreaded more than the 'sorry, no news' update was letting a couple know their adoption had fallen through. A good case manager wants an active program, wants things to be happening for you. It is your right to call for updates, but rest assured that the moment there is news, your case manager is anxious to share it.

International adoptions can be slow and stall out for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from the political to the bureaucratic to the nonsensical. Russian adoptions came to a screeching halt last spring when an American woman put her challenging adopted son on a flight back to Russia with some cookies and a note saying she was done.

LET GO

This can be the most difficult of all. I am a Virgo, a planner by nature, and having things go outside of my expectations can throw me. Three kids later, I have learned that all parenthood requires a leap of faith and a level of commitment beyond anything imagined. Both pregnancy and adoption have illusions of control: *If I take care of my body, gulp down my prenats and avoid raw fish and alcohol, my baby will be born healthy. If I choose adoption, we can pick the perfect child for our family.*

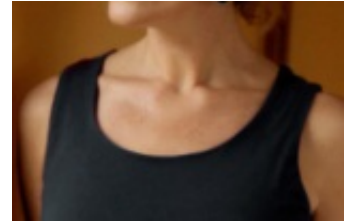
The reality is that there is a huge element of faith and fate involved – the child who comes to you is the right child for your family. Control is an illusion; learning to let go early in the process is good preparation for parenthood in general.

As I write this article my family's SUV is stuck on the Tappan Zee Bridge on the eighth hour of a road trip home that was meant to take three. Our slobbering Newfoundland dog is steaming up the back windows with his seafood breath, the batteries have long since run out on every electronic device, we've read the board books, broken the wooden car games, we're all out of snacks and running low on gas and patience. We've had six squabbles, one biting incident, played the alphabet game in every category I can think of and my husband and I alternate between horrified laughter and snappishness. This was not how I planned the end of our summer vacation – but this is parenthood. If you are considering creating or expanding your family, I can only say, come on in, the water's fine.

Editor's Note: Chandra Hoffman has been an aide in a Romanian orphanage and the director of a U.S. adoption program. Her debut novel, [Chosen: A Novel](#), is a gritty, gripping tale of infertility and infidelity, adoption and extortion. She lives outside Philadelphia with her family where she is at work on her next novel. [Learn more about Chandra by clicking here to visit her website.](#)



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