

Getting Started: The Homestudy

Once prospective adoptive parents apply to adopt a child (whether they apply to an agency, an attorney or facilitator, or directly to the court in an independent adoption), the laws of all 50 States and the District of Columbia require that the applicants undergo a "home study." This process involves education and preparation as well as the gathering of information about the prospective parents. Ideally, the home study helps to build a partnership between the adoption social worker and the applicants.

Individuals who seek to adopt may face the entire process with tender egos and mounting anxiety that they will not be "approved." Armed with accurate information, however, 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.

The Nuts and Bolts of an Adoption Home Study

There is no set format that adoption agencies use to conduct home studies. They must follow the general regulations of their State, but they have the freedom to develop their own application packet, policies, and procedures within those regulations. Some agencies will have prospective parents attend one or several group orientation sessions or a series of training classes before they complete an application. Others will have their social worker start by meeting with family members individually and then ask that they attend educational meetings later on. Usually agency staff members are glad to answer any questions and to guide applicants through the process.

The home study itself is a written report of the findings of the social worker who has met with the applicants on several occasions, both individually and together, usually at the social worker's office. At least one meeting will occur in the applicant's home. If there are other people living in the home, they also will be interviewed by the social worker.

On average the home study process takes three to six months to complete, but it can take longer through public agencies or less time through non-licensed facilitators. The home study process, the contents of the written home study report, and the time it will take to complete vary from State to State and from agency to agency. In general, the following information is included in the home study:

- Personal and family background-including upbringing, siblings, key events, and what was learned from them
- Significant people in the lives of the applicants
- Marriage and family relationships
- Motivation to adopt
- Expectations for the child
- Feelings about infertility (if this is an issue)

- Parenting and integration of the child into the family
- Family environment
- Physical and health history of the applicants
- Education, employment and finances-including insurance coverage and child care plans if needed
- References and criminal background clearances
- Summary and social worker's recommendation.

The following sections will describe typical information or activities that will be required of families who want to adopt.

Autobiographical Statement

The autobiographical statement can be intimidating, but it is essentially the story of your life. Most agencies have a set of guidelines that detail the kind of information they require to assist you in writing the autobiography, and others have the worker assist you directly. You may be asked to describe who reared you and their style of child rearing, how many brothers and sisters you have, and where you are in the birth order.

Your statement may answer many questions. Were you close to your parents and siblings when you were a child; are you close now; how much contact do you have with them? What are some successes or failures that you have had? What educational level have you reached; do you plan to further your education; are you happy with your educational attainments; what do you think about education for a child? What is your employment status; your employment history; do you have plans to change employment; do you like your current job?

If you are married, there will be questions about your marriage. These may cover how you met, how long you dated before you married, how long you have been married, what attracted you to each other, what your spouse's strengths and weaknesses are, and the issues on which you agree and disagree in your marriage. Others may ask how you make decisions, solve problems, settle arguments, communicate, express feelings, and show affection. If you were married before, there will be questions about that marriage. If you are single, there will be questions about your social life and how you anticipate integrating a child into it, as well as questions about your network of supportive relatives and friends.

In your statement, you will probably describe your ordinary routines, such as your typical weekday or weekend, your hobbies and interests, and your leisure time activities. You may also describe your plans for childcare if you work outside the home. There will be questions that cover your experiences with children, relatives' children, neighbors, volunteer work, babysitting, teaching, or coaching. You might be asked some "what if" questions regarding discipline or other parenting issues.

You will probably be asked about your neighborhood: How friendly are you with your neighbors? What kind of people live nearby? Is it a safe area? Why did you pick this neighborhood? Are you located conveniently to community resources, such as medical facilities, recreational facilities,

shopping areas, and religious facilities? And you will be asked about religion, your level of religious practice, and what kind of religious upbringing (if any) you will give the child.

There may also be a section on specific adoption-related issues, including questions about why you want to adopt, what kind of child you feel you can best parent and why, how you will tell the child he or she is adopted and when, what you think of birth parents who make an adoption plan for their child, how you will handle relatives' and friends' questions about adoption, and whether you can bond to a child not genetically related to you.

You may not know all these answers right away! A home study is supposed to help you think through these issues. Hopefully, the social worker guiding you through the home study process will offer advice on describing these topics.

You will be asked to provide a copy of your birth certificate, your marriage license or certificate, and your divorce decree, if applicable.

Health Statements

Most agencies require a physical exam of prospective adoptive parents, or at least a current tuberculosis test (X-ray or scratch test). Some agencies that only place infants with infertile couples require that the physician verify the infertility. Others just want to know that you are essentially healthy, have a normal life expectancy, and are able to physically and emotionally handle the care of a child. If you have a medical condition, but are under a doctor's care and it is under control (for instance, high blood pressure or diabetes that is controlled by diet and medication), you can probably still be approved as an adoptive family. A serious health problem that affects life expectancy may prevent approval.

Income Statement

Usually, you are asked to verify your income by providing a copy of your paycheck stub(s), a copy of a W-4 form, or an income tax form (1040 or 1040 EZ). You will be asked about your savings, insurance policies, and other investments and debts, including your monthly mortgage or rent payment, car and charge account payments, etc. This helps determine your general financial stability. You do not have to be rich to adopt; you just have to show that you can manage your finances responsibly and adequately.

Child Abuse and Criminal Clearances

Most States require by law that criminal record and child abuse record clearances be conducted on all adoptive and foster parent applicants. This usually involves filling out a form with your name (in a woman's case, it would include her maiden name and former married names, if applicable), date of birth, and Social Security number; possibly getting the form notarized; and sending it to the State child welfare and police agencies for clearance. In some States it might involve being fingerprinted. The authorities will check to see if you have a child abuse or criminal charge on file.

Misdemeanors committed long ago for which there is a believable explanation (for example, "I was young and foolish and did what the guys expected me to...") usually are not held against you. A felony conviction, or any charge involving children or illegal substances, would most likely not be tolerated.

References

The agency will probably ask you for the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of three or four individuals to serve as references for you. These might be close personal friends, an employer, a former teacher, a co-worker, a neighbor, or your pastor. The social worker will either write a letter to or talk to your references on the telephone, asking questions about you that you have already answered yourself. These would address such areas as your experience with children, the stability of your marriage, if applicable, and your motivation to adopt.

References generally are used to get a complete picture of a family's application and an idea of their support network. Approval would rarely be denied on the grounds of one negative reference alone. However, if it were one of several negative factors, such as ill health, a questionable criminal record, and a poor work history, or if several of the references were negative, the agency may not approve the application.

You should pick as references people who know you the best. If possible, they should be individuals who have known you for several years, who have seen you in various kinds of situations, who have visited in your home and know of your interest in children, and who are also able to comment on your lifestyle. For instance, they should know what some of your hobbies and interests are. These kinds of references are the most useful and compelling to the social worker completing the home study.

Interviews

There probably will be several interviews, perhaps one or two in the agency office and at least one in your home. You will discuss the topics addressed in your autobiographical statement, and the social worker will ask any questions necessary to clarify what you have written. In the case of couples, some agency workers conduct all the interviews jointly, with husband and wife together. Others will conduct both joint and individual interviews.

An important point: the worker is not visiting your home to conduct a white glove inspection! He or she simply needs to verify that the child will be entering into a safe and healthy environment and whether you have thought ahead as to how you are going to accommodate the new family member. There may be a requirement that you have a working smoke alarm (which is a good idea anyway) and an evacuation plan in case of an emergency. The latter is not something many people have, so you might want to develop one ahead of time. The worker may want to see the child's bedroom and all the other areas of the house or apartment, including the basement or back yard.

Some tips for the home visit: Do not clean the whole place from top to bottom, unless that is the level of housekeeping you always maintain. A certain level of cleanliness is necessary, but "lived-in" family clutter is expected. Most social workers would worry that people living in a "picture perfect" home would have a difficult time adjusting to the clutter that a child brings to a household. Instead, use this visit as one more time to build on the open and honest relationship you are developing with the worker.

It is natural to be nervous! But most often the worker wants to work with you and approve you if you have gotten to this point of the home study. You are not expected to reveal every intimate detail of your life, nor are you expected to be perfect! In fact, perfection would probably raise eyebrows. It is much more important to be honest, be yourself, and present a true picture of your family history and family functioning. Social workers know that everyone is a combination of strengths and

weaknesses which makes each person unique. If you had a difficult childhood, experienced financial problems, quit a job in anger, or have some other "skeleton" in your closet that you think might disqualify you, chances are, if you discuss it openly with the social worker, it will not present a problem.

It would not be wise to be deceptive or dishonest or for the documents collected in the home study to expose an inconsistency in what you have presented about your family. This would betray the social worker's trust, which would harm your chances and may even cause the termination of your home study.

If You Already Have Children

If you already have children, either birth children, adopted children, or both, they will be included in the home study in some way. Older children may be invited to one or more of the educational sessions. They might also be asked to write a statement describing their feelings and preferences about having a new brother or sister. Younger children might be asked to draw a picture showing their thoughts on the subject. Children of all ages will probably be met and/or interviewed by the social worker at least once.

The social worker may ask the children (and you too) how they do in school, what their interests and hobbies are, what their friends are like, and how they get rewarded or disciplined for good or not-so-good behavior. But the emphasis will more likely be on how they see a new child fitting into the family and whether they are prepared to share you with a new sibling. A new sibling means sharing time, attention, television channel selection, the bathroom, the prized seat at the kitchen table, and the many other elements of family life on a daily basis.

Children's input is usually quite important in the overall assessment of a family's readiness to adopt a child. Their feelings need to be considered, and their reaction to the adoption needs to be generally positive. The social worker will want to make sure that a newly adopted child will be wanted and loved by everyone in the family from the start.

Some Final Notes

Flexibility and a sense of humor are vital characteristics when raising children and they can come in handy during the home study as well. For instance, if you have the flexibility in your job and are willing to take off an hour early to meet with the social worker or to modify your schedule in some other way to make the meeting arrangements flow smoothly, that effort will be appreciated by the worker. As a parent to be, many more of these accommodations are in your future; therefore the social worker often believes you might as well start getting used to them!

The duration of the home study will vary from agency to agency, depending on various factors, such as how many social workers are assigned to conduct home studies, what other duties they have, and how many other people applied to the agency at the same time as you. You can do a lot to expedite the process by filling out your paperwork, scheduling your medical appointments, and gathering the required documents.

The cost of the home study depends on which kind of agency or practitioner is conducting the study. A public agency (often your local Department of Social Services) does not usually charge a fee for a home study, since it is supported by government funds. However, occasionally a public agency may

charge a modest home study fee-once you adopt one of the agency's children, you can usually obtain a reimbursement for this fee.

A private agency might charge from \$1,000 to \$3,000 for the home study, although it may charge no fees or charge lesser fees for home studies for children with special needs. For a non-special-needs child, the fee may cover an application fee and preplacement services, but be sure to confirm this. For locating a specific child and providing follow-up or postplacement services, you will usually be charged a separate fee. These services could possibly be performed by a second agency. Fees for these additional services could range from \$2,500 to \$25,000. Many agencies allow the fees to be paid in installments. Again, be sure to discuss this thoroughly so that there are no misunderstandings.

A certified social worker in private practice often conducts home studies for independent adoptions. Fees for these are probably in the same range as those for private agencies. Independent adoptions are not legal in all States.

Remember, even though an adoption home study may seem invasive or lengthy, it is conducted to prepare you for adoption and help you decide whether adoption is really for you. The regulations serve to protect the best interest of the child and to ensure he or she is placed in a loving, caring, healthy, and safe environment. Once you accept that premise, it often becomes a lot easier to complete what is required of you. After all, the reward of withstanding a short period of inconvenience is great: many years of happiness and fulfillment raising a child to maturity.

Good luck to you in your pursuit of a child through adoption and with your adoption home study. With perseverance and a good attitude, you will be able to team with the adoption social worker to make this a valuable learning experience-one which will help you to do the best possible job in parenting the child who will join your family. After all, the adoption worker wants you to accomplish your goal of adopting, especially if one more child gets a loving, permanent, safe family.

For a free list of adoption resources in your State, contact the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse or visit the NAIC web site at <http://www.calib.com/naic/database/nadd/naddsearch.cfm> for State-specific lists of public and private adoption agencies as well as adoptive parent support groups in your state.

Bibliography

Adoptive Families of America. "1993 Agency Update: Choosing an Adoption Agency," *Ours*, vol. 25 no. 6, Nov-Dec 1992, pp. 47.

Allen, Robin. "One Social Worker's View of the Homestudy," *Roots and Wings*, vol. 7, no. 1, Sum 1995, pp. 10-12.

Ayers, C.. *Relative and Foster Parent Adoptions: A Guide to Completing Adoption Home Studies*. Salem, OR: Oregon State Dept. of Human Resources, State Office for Services to Children and Families, 1997.

Beauvai-Godwin, Laura. *The Complete Adoption Book*. Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corporation, 1997.

Brown, Henlen, Cosis. "Gender, Sex, and Sexuality in the Assessment of Prospective Careers," *Adoption and Fostering*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1992, pp. 31-34.

Gilman, Lois. *The Adoption Resource Book (Fourth Edition)*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1998.

Goldwater, Janice, LCSW. "What is a Home Study?" *RESOLVE of the Washington Metropolitan Area, Inc.*, vol. 14, no. 4, Mar/Apr 1993.

McCurdy, D. "Adoption Agencies and How They Work," *Ours*, vol. 20, no. 1, Jan-Feb 1988, pp. 20-22.

Schulz, Karen M. "The What, Why, and How of a Homestudy," *NEWS for Single Adoptive Parents*, vol. 1, no. 1, Oct 1995, pp. 6.

Shandler, M.A. "The Adoption Home Study: An Interactive Process," *Resolve*, vol. 18, no. 1, Sept-Oct 1996, pp. 6, 12, 14.

Tremitiere, B. *The Magic of Adoption Success: It's All in the Preparation*. York, PA: Barbara Tremitiere, 1993.

Revised by NAIC, 2000.

This material may be reproduced and distributed without permission; however, appropriate citation must be given to the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse