

# family building

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**Manage your  
treatment**

**Create your  
adoption plan**

**Understand  
insurance  
coverage for  
infertility**



developing a  
strategy

 **resolve**  
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# BEGINNING YOUR ADOPTION PLAN

By Elizabeth Swire Falker, Esq.

**THINKING ABOUT ADOPTING?** Congratulations! As you consider the types of adoption that might be right for your family, you may feel overwhelmed. *Should I adopt internationally or domestically?* (For an explanation of the different types of adoption, see the sidebar on p. 7.) *An infant or a toddler? Could I adopt a five year old?* Not everyone knows what type of adoption is right for them and their lifestyle when they embark on the adoption journey. Exploring the following issues may help you formulate your adoption plan.

## Age of Child

One of the most common reasons people choose to adopt domestically is because they want to parent from the first days of a baby's life. Most infants available internationally are close to one year or older; the youngest are usually about four months old.

How do you envision yourself as a new parent? Are you strolling with a newborn in a carriage or climbing slides with a toddler in a playground? Trust your feelings, but recognize that most parents can fall in love with a toddler as easily as a newborn. If the baby's age is not extremely important to you, then you have many options with both domestic and international adoption.

## Birth Family Contact

A major difference between domestic and international adoption is access to information about, and contact with, your child's birth family. This is a surprisingly overlooked and underestimated aspect of adoption planning. I encourage you to think about how birth family contact, or lack thereof, may influence your family for years to come.

Although several countries now provide information about birth families and the circumstances surrounding a baby's placement in the care of an orphanage or foster family, you have far greater access to this type of information when you adopt in the U.S. In many cases in international adoptions, the birth parents are unknown because the child may have been left anonymously at an orphanage or police station with no records at all.

Some people feel very strongly that this information is important to their child's adjustment and establishment of identity. With domestic adoption, you have a greater range of options for gathering information from—and establishing a relationship with—your child's birth family.

Consider how you will help your teen through emotionally complex identity issues if you have little or no information about his/her birth family. Over a quarter of a million children have been adopted internationally in the U.S. in the past 30 years and as a result, many books and resources including support groups for children and parents are available to help children work through their identity issues without knowing who their birth parents are.

## Estimated Time to Parenthood

Whether you choose domestic or international adoption, no one can tell you exactly how long your adoption process will take. Most reliable statistics indicate that the average wait for a domestic adoption is 12 to 18 months; international adoption is 9 to 18 months.

One of the defining characteristics of domestic adoption is that there is no set timeline. Your baby could come home six months or two years after you complete your home study. One of the hardest parts of domestic adoption is the powerlessness that adoptive parents feel while

waiting for a birth family to select them from a catalog of "waiting" families, which is the process for most adoption agencies.

Indeed, one of the advantages of international adoption is its predictability. The international adoption process has pre-determined milestones to help you tick off the time until you travel to get your child. Those who adopt internationally generally have no fear about a birth mother changing her mind at the last minute, or wishing to become involved in the child's life (as is sometimes the case with domestic adoptions), as your baby will have already been designated as an "orphan."

Do you think you could better handle the wait if you had specific tasks to do and an established time frame of an international adoption or are you okay with "going with the flow" of a domestic adoption?

## Financing Your Adoption

Money is another major factor in adoption planning. Whether you pursue a domestic or international adoption, you should expect to budget approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000 in adoption-related expenses. Certain international programs may be more expensive; domestic foster care or special needs adoptions through States Department of Social Services (DSS) and other social service agencies will be less costly.

While international adoptions tend to be more expensive than domestic adoptions (largely due to travel expenses), the fees are usually clearly established. Most domestic adoption agencies have fee structures to help you anticipate cost; these fees can also help you absorb some of the risk if an adoption details, (e.g., if a biological parent changes her or his mind about relinquishing a baby), in that the agency has several options.

If you're concerned about your budget and want to adopt domestically, domestic independent adoptions may

## Types of Adoption

- **Foster care adoption:** adoption of a child from the state foster care agencies.
- **Domestic licensed private agency adoption:** adoption arranged and facilitated through a licensed private adoption agency.
- **Domestic independent (private) adoption:** adoption arranged between a birth mother and a prospective adoptive parent often with the assistance of an attorney.
- **Domestic facilitated/unlicensed agency adoption:** a facilitator links a birth mother and a prospective adoptive parent for a fee.
- **International (or inter-country) adoption:** adoption of a child in another country.



be less expensive than agency adoptions. Foster care and special needs adoptions are also most affordable options for adopting domestically, and often fulfill the same emotional and intellectual needs that many parents have—to provide a loving home to a child who needs one.

And don't forget Uncle Sam! If you qualify for all (or part of) the Federal Adoption Tax Credit, you'll receive a dollar-for-dollar tax refund of up to \$10,630 (as of 2005) for your qualified adoption expenses. Additionally, inquire about adoption benefits from your employer, and applicable grant and loan programs.

### Your Lifestyle

You should not overlook a few seemingly superficial factors when making your adoption plan, including your age, sexual orientation and health status. Some adoption agencies and foreign countries have certain age cutoff policies and/or do not accept applicants who are gay or lesbian. Most agencies provide these guidelines up front so you should shop around. Celebrities Rosie O'Donnell, Sharon Stone and Meg Ryan are great examples of gay or single parents who've adopted!

It also can be harder to adopt if you are recovering from a serious or long-term illness or have a disability. You may have to network a little and do some research to find the right adoption professionals to help you.

### Your Neediness Number

Do not underestimate your or your partner's emotional state right now. On a scale of 1 to 10, with a "10" being most stressed as in *I work 70 hours a week and don't even have time to get lunch*, and a "1" being least stressed as in *I can probably handle just about anything by myself*, where do you fall? How much emotional energy and time do you have to devote to this process without help? This is your "neediness number."

The higher your neediness number, the more help and support you will need in the adoption process. A "10" pursuing international adoption may not be able to provide the attention-to-detail required to get all the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and dossier paperwork completed in the very precise way required without professional assistance. Some people hire adoption professionals to help them through the maze. Make sure the adoption professional(s) you hire will accommodate your neediness number.

Choosing the type of adoption that is right for you and your family takes time and effort. Think about what you've read here and what it means to you to be a family. Spend some time fantasizing! Don't let your finances, age or anything else deter you. Be proactive and make smart choices and you'll be a parent before you know it! ☺

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She is the author of *The Ultimate Insider's Guide to Adoption* (Warner Books, 2006), from which this article is adapted, and *The Infertility Survival Handbook* (Riverhead, 2004). Danielle Bifulci, JD, assisted in the preparation of this article.

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### Resources

Adoption.com, [www.adoption.com](http://www.adoption.com); resources for adoptive parents and birth parents.

Child Welfare Information Gateway, [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov); resources on all aspects of domestic and international adoption.

Dave Thomas Foundation, [www.davethomasfoundation.org](http://www.davethomasfoundation.org); resources including foster care adoption information.

Internal Revenue Service, [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov); under "Publications" search for "Pub 968" on the Adoption Tax Credit.

National Adoption Center, [www.adopt.org](http://www.adopt.org); information on waiting children in the U.S.

U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, <http://travel.state.gov>; click on "Children & Family" then "International Adoption"; details on the international adoption process and country-specific information.